

THE VIRGINIA TEACHER

VOLUME X

JUNE, 1929

NUMBER 6

INSTRUCTION IN THE ROMANIC LANGUAGES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

WHENEVER we professors of Romanic Languages of the University of Virginia begin to discuss the teaching of these languages as it is being carried out by us, we like to point out that all that we do here is guided by a tradition (it were better said, policy) that was originated by no less a personage than Thomas Jefferson. We understand, of course, that there are good traditions and bad traditions, and we urge our readers to believe that we are not blindly continuing Jefferson's policy without having first subjected it to the test of criticism. We are following it because we believe it is sound, because we believe it is realistic and practical rather than theoretical, and because we believe it is nothing more nor less than plain common sense.

What Jefferson advocated may, for the sake of brevity, be reduced to two propositions:

(a) Modern languages should be placed on an equal footing with the ancient languages.

(b) Modern languages should be regarded as practical instruments for enabling cultivated men to get into first-hand contact with their foreign contemporaries; students of these languages should, therefore, be taught to speak and understand them, not merely to read them.

At the time they were given to the world these ideas of Jefferson's were novel and revolutionary, as far as American education was concerned. The modern languages had, of course, been included in the curric-

ula of American colleges and universities before the University of Virginia was founded. But they had not been placed on an equal footing with the ancient languages—they had been subordinated to them; and they had not been taught in such a way as to enable a student to speak, and to understand them aurally—he was taught only to read them. Jefferson's ideas were really revolutionary, and they have not to this day entirely ceased to seem revolutionary. Here at Virginia, and in the bosom of the School of Romanic Languages that Jefferson established, we believe that both propositions are based on common sense—but we realize that they are not acceptable to many in the United States, and to some in this very Commonwealth of Virginia.

Since we believe that Jefferson was right, however, and that in following him we are right, we obey the copy-book maxim, and go ahead.

Jefferson's first proposition does not often concern us. We seek no rivalry with our friends and ancestors, the Ancient Languages, any more than our colleagues, the professors of English, seek a rivalry with the ancient Teutonic tongues; and we trust that the Ancient Languages will not seek a rivalry with us. Our attitude is that, on logical grounds, at least, there is no more reason that Latin and Spanish (for example) should fight for dominance than there is that tempera painting should fight against water-color painting, or sculpture in wood should fight against sculpture in bronze. In following out Jefferson's first proposition, we seldom have anything to do except to keep an eye open—and that really is not needed, because here at Virginia the Classics regard us with benevolence and—we trust—affection!

In following out Jefferson's second proposition, we have attempted to formulate a scheme that will have the result of providing, in a given time, the maximum of the desired type of instruction at as reasonable a cost of money and energy as possible.

In order to make clear just what we mean by the expression, "the desired type of instruction," a question and answer method is convenient and clear.

What is the primary objective that we seek to gain in our teaching? Every student who receives a baccalaureate degree and who offers a Romanic language for degree credit must be able to speak the language well enough to carry on an ordinary conversation (not speaking as correctly as an academician, of course!), to read a simple specimen of the written language at sight with accuracy and understanding, and to write, with orthographic and idiomatic correctness, a series of ordinary statements. Under present conditions this is all that the usual student receiving a baccalaureate degree can be expected to do, since most of them can study a given language for only two years, and many have opportunity to study it for only one year, beginning their study at the University, it should be understood. We wish to have our students—even those who study with us for only one year in a given language—equipped at least to go ahead "on their own," if they desire, to a further mastery of the spoken tongue, and to explore the literature of the language of their choice.

This is not, we submit, a thing altogether easy to accomplish.

What are our secondary objectives, in the case of undergraduates? Instruction beyond the first year continues to lay emphasis upon the language as spoken. In the third and subsequent years all instruction is carried on in the language that is being taught. In the third year, students are introduced to the study of the literary aspects of the language and continue to study these

more and more intensively as they go on year after year. Beginning with the third year, the emphasis in *instruction* shifts rapidly from the spoken language to the language as an instrument of literature. This is reasonable, because there is no use emphasizing something that everybody takes for granted. After the third year, few students of French, for instance, ever think of addressing a professor in anything but French. Those who do forget, simply get no replies.

Why do we wait so long—until the third year—to begin the study of literature? We do so for the same reason that leads our school superintendents not to introduce the subject of American literature into their curricula until English speech, English grammar, and English syntax have been thoroughly taught. No school superintendent would be at all likely to argue that American literature should be studied *before* or while a pupil struggles to master English. No teacher of music would advocate having his pupils tackle the sonatas of Beethoven three months after beginning the study of music. The probabilities are that the average pupil would not tackle the sonatas of Beethoven for four or five years after the beginning.

How can we, with the prevailing enormous enrollments in elementary courses, teach a student enough of a language in one year to enable him to carry on an ordinary conversation (expressing his own ideas, and understanding what is said to him), to read at sight a simple specimen of the written language, and to write, with orthographic and idiomatic correctness, a series of ordinary statements? We think that whatever success we may attain may be attributed to the following principles upon which our instruction is based, and which we follow as closely as resources will permit:

(1) Concentration upon the *spoken* language, teaching the student to express himself in the language he is studying, and to

understand it when it is spoken to him (the latter gives the American student more trouble than anything else, by the way). It is our theory that if a man can express his ideas in a language fairly well, and can understand it when it is spoken to him, *and also knows how to read*, he will be able to read that language without needing to be taught anything much about the process.

(2) Use of reading texts and composition writing as aids in perfecting the spoken language, rather than as ends in themselves or as devices for teaching formal grammar, literature, history, or anything else.

(3) Permitting only teachers of professorial rank and experience to teach elementary students. It is obvious that teaching a beginner is the language teacher's hardest job. Only the best and most experienced teachers should be entrusted with such a responsibility.

(4) Having our first-year (elementary) classes meet five times a week (one-hour periods), on the theory that a student can not learn to speak a language without a lot of practice, and he can not learn to understand it unless his ear is frequently and attentively listening to it. In view of the objective that we have set for ourselves, we do not believe that five times a week, in the case of beginners, is too much. We regret that conditions are such that elementary classes can not meet ten times a week!

By following these principles as closely as we are able, we believe that we are giving our students what they ought to have at our hands, and that we are living up to Jefferson's reasonable policy in regard to modern language instruction.

What concept have we of the purpose of teaching the Romanic Languages? Any consideration based on historical and cultural grounds that we might put forward to show why these languages ought to be taught to American students would contain little, if anything, new. It may be taken for granted that we agree that such con-

siderations are entirely reasonable and proper.

However, we go further: It is to be expected that university trained men and women will exert some influence on public opinion that men and women not so trained can not exert. One of the fields in which public opinion in this country is in great need of guidance is that of our foreign relationships in the widest sense—political, financial, commercial, cultural. When we look out upon that portion of the entire world that shelters what, for lack of a better name, we call Occidental Civilization, or the civilization of the white-skinned races, we discover that this portion of the world is being dominated today in all decisive matters by two sorts of people—people who speak English (180,000,000 in number), and people who speak the Romanic tongues (French, 60,000,000; Spanish, 55,000,000; Italian, 40,000,000; Portuguese, 30,000,000, making a total of 185,000,000). The future weal or woe of our Occidental Civilization will certainly depend largely upon the sort of relationships that are established and maintained between these two great sections of humanity. On the one hand stand Great Britain, the United States, Canada, Australia, and South Africa; on the other hand, France, Spain, Italy, Portugal, and the Latin American Republics. Only by mutual understanding, mutual tolerance, and mutual esteem based on the first two and fortified by national self-respect, can the relationships between these groups be kept friendly. The creation of such tolerance, understanding, and esteem can not be effected by governments and diplomats; it must be the product of enlightened public opinion in all the nations concerned. If barriers of language exist—especially between intelligent men of good will in the respective countries—it is hard to prevent friction.

It is our belief that university trained men and women should at least be in a

position to learn something more about the people of the Latin nations than they can get from conventional histories and from the newspapers. We submit that even if we were to agree (which, of course, we are not going to do) that there are no cultural or historical advantages whatever to be gained by studying the Romanic languages, the state of the world today—the realities of such things as France's dominant position in the world of thought, Italy's astounding renaissance and equally astounding ambitions, and the growing power of the Latin American nations—give us serious grounds for believing that it is imperative for us to study the languages of these nations. Such, at least, is our opinion. We are doing all we can to act in accordance with it, and we are heartened in our efforts by the knowledge that the far-seeing Jefferson—whom no one can accuse of anti-Americanism, surely—advocated doing the very things that we believe should be done.

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GERMAN AS A FACTOR IN EDUCATION

A DISTINGUISHED leader in the educational world, himself not a language man, has said that a good course in a foreign language is worth more to straight thinking than a good course in logic. He feels that all students should be required to master thoroughly at least one foreign language, because "language is clotted thought, the congealed result of centuries of thinking on each particular object which is represented by a word. The essential part of an education is the mastery of language, of words, of concepts, which are the result of the thinking and discrimination of many generations." If that opinion is correct—and there seems no good reason to question its correctness—we may

well ask what language or languages should have first claim on our consideration. The great English scientist, Thomas Huxley, advised: "If the time given to education permits, add Latin and German. Latin because it is the key to nearly one-half of the English and to all the Romance languages; and German because it is the key to almost all the remainder of the English and helps you to understand a race from whom most of us have sprung, and who have a character and a literature of a fateful force in the history of the world."

The propositions laid down by these two leaders in educational thought challenge our attention and make us seek further reasons for their attitudes.

If "the chief benefit derived from modern foreign language study is its liberating, humanizing influence, the broadening of the student's outlook upon world-problems, the deeper understanding of his obligations to humanity at large, and a more just appraisal of his duties as an American citizen in relationship to mankind in general," it must be regretfully conceded that the vast majority of our modern foreign language students have not received that benefit. We can gain a knowledge of a foreign country and its people only through the ability to understand the language which is used by that people and is colored and limited by the country in which it lives.

Antoine Meillet, a professor of philology in the College of France, recently wrote: "The knowledge of German is a necessity to all who would be men of culture. There is no branch of human knowledge to which the Germans of the nineteenth century have not made an important contribution. German books are indispensable to anyone who studies any branch whatsoever of human knowledge. To be ignorant of German signifies almost invariably to fail to reach the level of the science and the technique of one's time."

To understand the close kinship of the