

SPANISH COMPOSITION

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THOUGH the *bête noire* of students, composition is the most significant work done by beginners. It is the only task which requires concentration, comparison, logic, and pains. It is the only exercise given in the assembling of grammatical notions and in the concrete application of all the theory which the student has absorbed. It is usually the only type of language practice in which the student must make a positive decision which can not immediately be recalled, changed, corrected, or added to,—as is so often possible in translation and in conversational work. As contrasted with other phases in the learning of a language, it may almost be said to be the only aspect worthy of being classified as intellectual effort. In composition alone is the student obliged to use his brain for other than registering, recording, or memorizing purposes. In the translation and conversational work of the first two years the intellect can be said to be truly operative only by some stretch of the imagination. Virtually the sole medium for the development of the active linguistic intellect in these two years is to be found in the composition work.

Composition must, then, necessarily be difficult for the beginner, for it makes heavier and more varied demands on his linguistic fund than any other exercise. Must it, however, prove a dreaded burden? Must it by its very nature arouse distaste on the part of the student? Can it not be made fairly enjoyable as well as useful? Can it not be performed correctly with less superfluous labor than it commonly exacts from both the student and the teacher?

The difficulties which it presents arise from several natural conditions, which can not be altered, and from several artificial conditions, which are susceptible of improvement. Among the natural conditions may be mentioned lack of experience with foreign languages, lack of a linguistic moral sense or intuition,—a sense which acquires consciousness after a moderate amount of familiarity with the language has been secured by the student,—insufficient drill in the basic laws of the language, and inability to dissociate immediately the habits of the mother tongue from the habits

which the foreign language attempts to call into being. The artificial conditions are largely the result of the outworn pedagogy which still predominates in composition, of certain details of theoretical grammar, and of peculiarities in English, the seriousness of which is not clearly grasped by the teachers themselves. In Spanish, the vast majority of errors will be found to be due to a relatively small number of grammatical concepts and to the Protean character of the English vocabulary. In all languages, of course, the repugnance of students for composition may be attributed principally to the uninspired quality of the methods employed, for, in spite of the advancement made in the teaching of grammar, reading, and conversation, little has been done to make composition anything more than the drab routine which it has always been since the good old classical days.

As in reading, so in composition, the number of grammatical rules whose observance is absolutely indispensable from the start is extremely limited. Much of the grammar that is learned in elementary classes demands but slight effort on the part of the student. The articles, adverbs, conjunctions, many of the pronouns, and several other speech elements become easily fixed in the mind of the student after a small amount of practice and need no special emphasis.

On the other hand, there are other elements which are of small moment in reading but vital in composition. These may, for want of a better term, be called "working constants," and their importance is such that they must come under the thorough control of the student from the very beginning and remain under his control as long as he makes practical use of the language. Without a proper regard for them, a species of linguistic insanity or idiocy ensues. The fact that they are practically non-existent in English emphasizes rather than minimizes their prominence in Spanish. They are: (1) position; (2) agreement; (3) gender; (4) mood; and (5) accentuation. A large percentage of the errors in composition committed by students is the consequence of neglect in the handling of these five major factors.

As a preliminary to any work in composition beyond the merest rudiments, and as an accompaniment of all work in composition of whatever kind, drill in the five constants should be unremitting during the first two years. For they correspond, in a way, to the

basic elements on which exercises in free-arm movement in penmanship, finger exercises in touch-typewriting, and scale practice in music are constructed. Until they become a corporate part of the student's linguistic consciousness, anything like free writing or free speech is impossible.

To some teachers it may seem totally unprofitable to devote time to such drill. If, in their opinion, the rules of grammar are clearly stated, the student, provided he is not subnormal, should be perfectly capable of applying the rules as the need arises without squandering precious moments on mental calisthenics. With a student a minute a day,—which is the prevalent classroom condition in this country,—language teaching is sufficiently hurried as it is, and there is no leisure for frills, pretty though they may be. What a race against time we have to make in order to accomplish anything at all, especially since in these happy democratic days it is the average student or, with distressing frequency, the student below average who sets the pace!

Nevertheless, steady drill in what I have termed the five constants is a saving in the long run, just as continual exercise in the fundamentals of any craft or art for the sake of the resultant dexterity or accuracy is an undeniable gain. With standardized exercises in these constants, the teacher might even use time that otherwise goes to waste or obtain a respite from classroom monotony without unduly inconveniencing himself or jeopardizing the interests of his students. That such standardized exercises can be devised in the same way that standardized exercises have been arranged for the teaching of the free-arm movement is scarcely open to question. An occasional review of the rules governing the five constants and persevering practice in illustrative exercises, composed either by the teacher or by the writers of text-books, would no doubt have a powerful effect in eliminating the terrors of composition and,—what is quite as important,—in improving and giving a more careful finish to the composition itself. What a relief it is, for example, to arrive at the point where a whole class uses the written accent with precision! What a world of cautioning and nagging is done away with as soon as that blessed state has been reached! Even the most conservative teacher should welcome any means conducive toward that end

Any well-planned course in composition might, then, with

advantage make these five fundamentals the backbone of the work for at least a semester. It is because they are not systematically attacked and conquered, as a rule, that the same mistakes keep recurring throughout the language course of the average student. The exasperating recurrence of the same errors is, to be sure, inevitable unless the attention of the student is focused on one or two essentials at a time. As constructed at present, composition exercises place before the elementary student three, four, five, and sometimes a dozen different grammatical problems in a single sentence. Naturally, the beginner slights everything, not knowing how to distinguish between the essential and the relatively unimportant. The chances of error would be much lessened if the student's firm grasp of position, agreement, gender, mood, and accentuation were considered a necessary prerequisite to the more technical grammatical problems.

It is held by several prominent educators that the most effective way of teaching correct English is to uproot the vicious habits of speech which children fall into so easily and cling to so tenaciously. The task of improvement, they believe, should not prove arduous, for the number of customary errors is in reality much more limited than teachers or critics suspect. Obviously, nobody need worry about the English which school-children employ perfectly correctly and as a matter of course! The same notion might profitably be pressed into service in the teaching of foreign language composition. By concentrating most of the drill on these features of Spanish which differ from the English modes of expression or are complicated in themselves,—and the latter are not, as a matter of fact, very numerous,—the teacher can accomplish far more than by laying stress on the things that “learn themselves.”

If a general survey were made among Spanish teachers of the common mistakes in composition, some twenty or twenty-five points could unquestionably be picked out as the most prolific trouble-makers. What teacher has not had his own moments of doubt in attempting an authoritative explanation of the uses of *ser* and *estar*? Who among us has come off completely victorious in the battle with *para* and *por* and their overlapping meanings? Who has not discovered that the rules about the omission of the articles or the use of the “personal *a*” are far easier to teach than

their application? Similarly, about a score more of vital verbal functions, without which nobody can hope to use the living language in its multiple manifestations, form the real basis of all composition work and must be at one's command *instantly*. They, and not the usages which are self-evident or, on the contrary, abstruse and of rare practical value, should in one shape or another constitute the chief pabulum of the first two years in composition.

But Spanish rules and Spanish usage are not by any means the sole obstacle in composition. Indeed, because the influence of English on composition is almost never brought to the attention of the student, it is the English of the exercise, and not the Spanish, which often turns out to be the principal stumbling-block.

Prominent among the causes of the misuse of Spanish is the indefiniteness of the general English-Spanish vocabulary given at the back of the grammar or of the composition-book. This vocabulary is in most instances insufficiently analyzed, and the student is more than likely to use one part of speech for another, particularly if he has not been cautioned time and again to make sure that he is choosing the Spanish form corresponding to the English form. The danger of error is so much the greater in that students readily fall into the habit of turning at once to the general vocabulary when in need of a Spanish term and of picking out at random one of the various meanings given for the English expression, irrespective of the requirements of the sentence.

Some discrimination is needed, for example, in the selection of the proper meaning of *to* in all except the most commonplace sentences; yet, what is the beginner to do if, in the general vocabulary, he comes across a list comprising *a, de, en, por, para, hasta, para que*, etc., without any further explanation? The chances are that he will follow his fancy in most cases with regard to the prepositions, that he will not distinguish between prepositions and conjunctions, and that he will be saved from making ludicrous blunders only to the extent to which his intuition has been developed by observation or by unflagging repetition. If, under the title-word *too*, he sees *también, demasiado, además, and igualmente*, is he to be much blamed if he employs *también* where *además* is obligatory, or *demasiado* where *también* alone is suitable? And if, unfortunately, he is early encouraged, before he has attained to any genuine *Sprachgefühl*, to consult a dictionary, what bad

habits may he not be forming because of his inability to weigh the value of each of the numerous meanings presented! Experiments on my own part with the word *so* in a fairly advanced class have convinced me that something ought to be done to direct the growing intuition of the student along the right path in preference to letting it gather wool in its undisciplined meanderings. If the reader will look at the meanings of *so* in any good dictionary, he will see how easy it must be for the average student to misinterpret, especially if he is the least bit in haste,—and what student does not rush through his composition too hurriedly for his own good and for the professional self-esteem of the teacher?

Manifestly, a careful analysis of the precise meanings and uses of words in a dictionary is impracticable. The beginner who might try to make use of a highly detailed dictionary would only find confusion worse confounded. But in elementary grammars and composition-books, where the number of different meanings is necessarily restricted, much can be done to guard against pardonable error by a more exact analysis of meanings than is customary and by the consistent labelling of each meaning with the name of the part of speech to which it belongs.

The possibilities of misuse by even the conscientious student may readily be comprehended by an examination of almost any of the popular grammars, and these possibilities become particularly extensive when the grammar in question deservedly earns in most respects the confidence of both student and teacher. One of the best grammars of recent years, for instance, takes the trouble to analyze the uses of a few common words in a helpful manner, yet leaves others quite as significant untouched. The meanings and uses of the word **before** are thus well distributed: **before**, *prep.* (*position*), *ante*, *delante de*, *en frente de*; (*time*), *antes de*; *conj.* *antes que*. To be sure, the distinction between *ante* and *delante de* might have been made without any great sacrifice of space, but the general desire not to force the student to guess is commendably noticeable. However, the treatment of many other words does not carry out the excellent procedure shown in this instance. A few concrete examples of the kind of deficiency here indicated may not be amiss: **after**, *después de*, *después que*; **at**, *a*, *en*; **about**, *cerca de*, *como*, *cosa de*; **by**, *por*, *de*; **to**, *a*, *hasta*. If the student, with his propensity for taking advantage

of short-cuts, employs the general vocabulary almost exclusively and uses *después de* when he ought to use *después que*, *por* in place of *de*, or, as happens with frequency, *porque de* for *por*, *a causa de*, or *por motivo de*, the fault can hardly be said to be his. Some pains should be taken to supply him at the outset with reasonably necessary help. It is enough that he should be held accountable for the mistakes which are of his own coinage; but there is no point in charging him with the negligence of editors and authors. At night all cats are gray, and so to the beginner are all words in the hazy linguistic dawn.

The objection that hair-splitting differentiation of meanings and uses in vocabularies is wasteful of space and would probably defeat its own ends is legitimate to a certain extent. Much must be left to the reasoning power, observation, and initiative of the student and to the progressive training in making distinctions which he receives perforce as he goes on in his tasks from day to day. Nevertheless, the burden of furnishing the indispensable foundations rests ultimately upon the teachers and the text-books, and no escape from this responsibility can be argued, no matter how long the vocabularies may have to become. If the text-books offer meager explanation and analysis, the teacher is in duty bound to provide drill and practice to make up for the want. The material for this drill can ordinarily be obtained in sufficient quantity in such detailed treatments of grammar as Ramsey's *Text-Book of Modern Spanish*, the authorities on whom Ramsey has drawn, and Olmsted and Gordon's unabridged grammar.

But even these longer works lack the much-needed chapter on the idiosyncracies of English from the viewpoint of Spanish composition. That chapter, if it is ever incorporated into one of the more complete grammars, will prove illuminating and of the utmost practical value to the teacher and the advanced student.

Consideration of a few of the complex English terms which are commonly looked upon as perfectly simple and free from troublesome elements leads to the conviction that any course involving composition should devote a fair amount of time to a study of the true meaning of many common English words, and especially of the auxiliary verbs and apparent auxiliary verbs.

What teacher does not realize that the twenty-five expressions

and forms given below are daily thorns in the flesh when it comes to supervising the composition written out or recited by students? Yet what teacher consistently dissects them and requires his students to drill in them until the use of them becomes spontaneous and almost unconscious?

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|------------------------------|------------|
| 1. do | 13. become |
| 2. may | 14. get |
| 3. would | 15. enter |
| 4. should | 16. leave |
| 5. ought | 17. any |
| 6. must | 18. where |
| 7. could | 19. to |
| 8. will | 20. it |
| 9. make | 21. so |
| 10. let | 22. last |
| 11. should like | 23. next |
| 12. to be able <i>or</i> can | 24. what |
25. the restatement of subjunctive phrases in terms of Spanish equivalents

To illustrate: the primary meaning of *do*, namely, to perform or to execute, gives no hint of the flexibility and variety of this ubiquitous word when subjected to foreign language exigencies. To have it under control in its most frequent phases and to be able to manipulate its Spanish equivalents in such phrases as, "How do you do?" "He does not study," "Do they expect to come?" "We did not go," "Do you know her?" "Yes, I do," "I do admire him," "Let us do our best," "I shall have nothing to do with them," "Don't wait," "That will do," "Be a good child, now, do," is fully as vital as a knowledge of any of the ordinary rules of Spanish grammar. Similarly, *let*, *must*, *what*, and the other words mentioned above present difficulties which do not usually occur to those who look at them solely from the English point of view. Even *would* is not the innocuous expression that it seems, and its use in such phrases as, "When he lived in foreign cities he would always visit the popular places of amusement," and "In spite of my advice, he would do it," requires thoughtful attention. The subjunctive, above all, is totally new to English-speaking students because of its nearly complete disappearance in English, and it is imperative that students should become accustomed to the mental

translation of the English phrase by a convenient subjunctive formula before transferring the idea to written or spoken words. "I am sorry that you can not come," is straightforward enough, though here, too, a part of the subjunctive formula should be borne in mind so as to give *can* its proper form in Spanish. But when the subjunctive idea is expressed in English by the infinitive, as in "He wanted me to drive the automobile," or "They begged us to stop complaining," a distinct gain is made if the student can be induced to think, "He wanted *that I should drive* the automobile," or "They begged *that we should stop* complaining," and in like manner for all analogous cases.

The list of English expressions chosen for close analytic treatment may, it goes without saying, be extended *ad lib.* by the individual teacher, though its practical efficacy depends largely on its restriction to a limited number of the most common terms and on incessant drill in their use by means of varied exercises.

Lest the purport of this discussion be misunderstood, it should be stated that the problems here presented are entirely distinct from the problem of teaching idioms or turns of expression peculiar to a particular foreign language, at least, in the ordinary sense. Stripped of its verbiage, the present paper seeks to show the necessity and the desirability of ample drill in the following essentials, which are usually unheeded or only superficially considered in composition work:

1. The application of the "five constants" suggested for the purpose of "checking up" the correctness of any piece of composition.
2. Careful analysis of English vocabulary with a view to habituating the student to select the proper part of speech or "the one right word" in Spanish.
3. Practice in a limited list of common English terms of varying meanings, in which the auxiliary verbs should have a prominent place.

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