The Modern Language Journal

VOLUME V

DECEMBER, 1920

No. 3

ATTAINABLE AIMS IN MODERN LANGUAGE TEACH- ING IN THE PREPARATORY SCHOOLS

By FREDERICK S. HEMRY

(Read before the New York State M. L. A.)

EIGHT years ago it was my privilege to present to the Association of Preparatory Schools and Colleges (please note the order in which I put them) my views on the aims that modern language instruction in schools and, to a certain extent, in colleges should have. Since that time I have served on the Modern Language Section of the Commission of the National Educational Association on the Reorganization of Secondary Education, and have had two years each of service as examiner and reader for the College Entrance Examination Board. A dozen years of experience in teaching in preparatory schools constitute an additional factor in the personal equation that you have a right to know as the basis of my views.

Eight years ago Professor Armstrong, then of Johns Hopkins, expressed the hope in his address to the Association that the time devoted to the modern languages might soon be increased. And in its report to the N. E. A. the Modern Language section of the commission already referred to urged the establishment of a six year course. But I have been informed that the reviewing committee, which sits in judgment on the recommendations of the various sections, has limited its approval to two years of a modern language. The public high school will surely not be a less potent factor in the future than in the past in the setting of entrance requirements.

I do not believe, then, that in the country as a whole there will be any increased emphasis placed upon the teaching of languages in the schools. We are face to face today with a world in which the problems of the creation and distribution of wealth, the production of goods, are uppermost in the minds of men. The schools will be

called upon to furnish stenographers and electricians, draftsmen and designers, budding chemists and engineers, and in the training of these teachers of modern languages can have but small part, even though we may occasionally help a girl of nimble tongue and fingers to a stenographer's place in an importing house or start a boy on his way to South America as a Yankee drummer.

We shall, then, have to continue working in the schools practically under existing conditions as to the sum total of time allotted to our subjects, two or three years each of four or five periods per week. These schools of which I speak fall into two categories:

1) The public high schools, an extremely inconstant quantity, varying from the large well manned or "womaned" urban school, where, however, preparation for college entrance examinations is a by-product, to the schools in towns of five or ten or twenty thousand, which may, to be sure, be well staffed, but find it difficult to maintain proper standards because of a lack of understanding on the part of school officers or because of social pressure. It is, however, from these latter schools that the majority of our boys and girls must find their way to college.

2) The private preparatory school, likewise a variable quantity, an older institution than the public high school and owing its continued existence, first, to a certain class aloofness of the well-to-do and, secondly, to the belief that the public high schools, established as they are for a different purpose, are not always able to give the thorough training necessary to enable a particular boy to enter the particular college for which he is bound. It has become, therefore, a common practice of well-to-do parents in the middle and central states to send their sons to the local high school for one, two, or three years and then to a fitting school, if indeed they do not send him directly from the grades.

The natural outgrowth of this is, that, along with many brilliant and ambitious boys, there descend upon us, to be fitted for college, many youngsters whose high school career has been unsuccessful by reason of their own lack of interest and talent or who, with a moderate share of both, have been lulled by inflated grades into blissful unconsciousness of their real attainments.

In determining the kind of instruction to be given, there are three things to consider: 1. Who is to give it? 2. Who is to receive it? 3. What use is he to make of it? Let us consider here the

recipient, for of instruction, if not of advice, it may be said that it is more blessed to receive than to give. What are his tastes and what sort of relations has he established with such a subject?

Frankly, he is not interested in the literature of France or Germany or Spain, as he is quite uninterested in English literature, nor especially in the language as an art. To be sure, it does stir his curiosity a bit to hear some boy from South America, denominated a "guinea" or a "wop," speak glibly a language of which he understands not a sound, and if he could purchase the ability to do likewise, he would cheerfully wire Father for extra funds. Moreover, Father, who is a manufacturer of plows in Illinois or of collars in Troy, is extending his business to South America, and it would be a pleasant adventure to take personal charge of that end of things a little later on.

No, he has never had any Latin. He tried it three years ago and repeated the experiment the second year, but that stuff sure did get his goat, and he dropped it. What is a verb? A verb is—he can't quite define it, but he is sure that in the sentence "It is John," *is* is the verb and John its object, and as for a progressive or emphatic verb, you are quite at liberty to search his person. Or perhaps, like one attractive boy that I know, he has had four years of high school Latin, including Virgil, two years of German, and one of Spanish, and must slowly be helped to an understanding of verb, subject, direct object, indirect object, genitive case. And if you undertake to probe more deeply into the question of what he did last year or the year before, you will probably learn that "it was a brown book" or a green one or a red one.

Yes, he is going to college. His teacher in Texas or Wyoming or in Indiana has assured him that with the start he has been given, he should easily make Princeton or Yale Sheffield or Cornell or the Wharton School or Massachusetts Institute in two years at the outside. Or perhaps, indeed, he has, or has been assured, credit at Pennsylvania or Cornell or Swarthmore.

And when he emerges from college halls, he will be an electrical engineer or a mechanical engineer or an administrative engineer or an engineering administrator, ready to take upon his young shoulders the responsibility for making Portuguese plows for Brazil, Spanish ones for Mexico, or collars and cuffs for these Unionized States.

Of such, with variations as countless as the shadings of the autumn leaves, is the kingdom of the modern language master in a preparatory school. But here is the boy in your second or third year French or German or Spanish class along with the brands you and your colleagues plucked from last year's burning. And in your first year class is his younger brother, as yet virgin soil for your sowing. What are you going to do with them?

This is no time for hitching wagons to stars, that is, if you wish to continue teaching modern languages in preparatory schools. For the private preparatory school, whether conducted as a gainful enterprise or as an endowed semi-public institution, shares with no other institution of our whole educational cosmos or chaos, as you will, the distinction of being checked up by an outside agency, nowadays the College Entrance Examination Board. You are confronting the irreducible minimum.

To steer your boys safely past these examinations—let us be perfectly frank about it—must therefore largely constitute the primary aim of your instruction. And since the proportion of successful candidates to the unsuccessful in these standardized tests, the country over, is only a little better than "fifty fifty," you probably heave a sigh of relief and pat yourself on the back, when you find that your candidates, even the football heroes, have piled up for you a score of seventy-five or eighty or perhaps even a century.

In order to attain this goal or aim, which you have proposed to yourself out of purely pragmatic considerations, you must do some real teaching, even if it be in no small measure what one of the most successful men I know calls "stuffing and cramming and pounding," the same sort of intensive, concentrated drilling on essentials that, in 1917, transformed clerks, lawyers and even schoolmasters into lieutenants and captains and even majors. What shall you teach?

First of all you will teach pronunciation, but you will not have time for a purely phonetic method, nor indeed a great deal of time for just pronunciation at all. It is in French that the task is hardest and you will never be able to relax in your vigilance. Vowels, consonants, syllable division, word and sentence stress, taught largely by imitation, using phonetic symbols as a means of visualizing sounds, will lead presently to dictation. In the third

year reading aloud and questioning in French on a portion of the text read or a composition lesson prepared will probably be the means employed. Exceptional students will have acquired a fairly good pronunciation, but many will still have far to go both in the clearness of the vowels and in the general swing of the phrase. In many cases their reading of English could not serve as a model for a foreigner. German or, I presume, Spanish will show better returns for the same effort.

Meanwhile you will teach formal grammar and translation. You have learned from experience about what is expected of your pupils, and you set about teaching, if your subject is French, adjectives, pronouns, the partitive, and the regular verbs the first year. You have to teach fundamental grammatical notions. Your pupils must forget—but they are very Bourbons for remembering it—what they have been taught about English *my* and *your*, learn the real possessive pronouns, the difference between *who* and *whom*, for few of them have any use for the latter form, between relative *whom* and interrogative *whom*, though it is a veritable achievement to get quickness and accuracy in these things in the modern school-boy, who has rarely learned to parse. And direct and indirect objects mean but little even to the boy who has some Latin, nothing at all to the one who has had none.

If the first year is devoted largely to pronunciation and grammar, the second is consecrated to grammar and translation. The grammar of the first year must be reviewed, for your second year class is composed of the survivors of the first year and as many newcomers. Then you make a frontal attack upon irregular verbs, the subjunctive, the infinitive, and special constructions. Every step of the way must be carefully explained, for your youngsters have no idea of mood, they can't distinguish an infinitive from a participle, and as for seeing any difference between the uses of the infinitive in the two sentences, *This exercise is difficult to write* and *It is difficult to write this exercise*, the boy throws up his hands in despair at the intricacies of the French language. But you pile example upon example till at last he remembers, four times out of five, to use his infinitive or subjunctive correctly. Much of this, to be sure, is preparation for the third year's work, for in recent years the examination of the Board in French A have done little more than touch on the subjunctive.

With this study of structure goes reading, that is, translation, again a study in the comparative structure of French and English. You perhaps raise your brows at the suggestion of so antediluvian a practice. I take it, however, that we are agreed that in school and college we expect to teach French largely through literature, the artistic expression by means of language of the worth-while thoughts and feelings of a people. What better means have we in the time at our disposal to effect comprehension and assimilation of these ideas than the persevering attempt to exchange the symbols we know best for those strange ones, which we shall probably never know in all their fullness of denotation and connotation?

This is not the time to engage in any labored defence of translation. For us who are preparing boys to translate from French or Spanish at sight, the question is not a debatable one. For there is no other way to learn how to translate than by translating, doing it well, with constant attention to differences of idiom, to differences of meaning, for example, between such English words as sensible, indifferent, conscience, pupil, tutor, and their French congeners; to the particles, the *va! tiens! allez! allons!* of French dialogue, or the *schon, doch, denn, auch,* of German, which, like the *μήν, δέ, καίτοι* of Greek, are so important for the proper understanding of your text, teaching your boys that every word has a fundamental meaning and may have a host of figurative ones derived from that. Such things as these, well taught, may make your modern language class the same broadening educative force that the study of Greek was to former generations.

How much reading and of what kind? The first year you will probably not read over seventy-five pages of an easy French text, working it over carefully to fix forms; the second you will read perhaps two hundred pages, all the time keeping up work in pronunciation and grammar, including much writing of phrases and sentences. As the modern schoolboy rarely of his own accord reviews any portion of a subject already passed over, we find our hands quite full.

I doubt very seriously whether, with proper attention to pronunciation and grammar, careful translation, and any attempt at oral practice at all, preparatory school boys in their first and second high school years can compass the "250 to 400 pages of easy modern prose in the form of stories, plays, or historical or

biographical sketches" of which the syllabus speaks so lightly. Nor do I believe that the pupil can be expected "to read at sight easy French prose," unless that be qualified by the words "carefully selected as to its vocabulary."

In the third year the work in grammar consists in the development of the syntax of the subjunctive and the infinitive, the writing of paraphrases and summaries, with an occasional excursion out on the slippery field of free composition in the form of a letter or a brief description or narrative.

In connection with the reading of the third year we want to teach our boys something of the geography, the history and the political organization of France: the department with its subdivisions, the rivers and cities, the centralized political organization; some of the great figures and movements of her history: Charlemagne, Louis XI, Louis XIII, the Revolution, Napoleon, the Second Empire; before they leave us, they should have some idea of the significance of such names as Corneille, Molière, Racine, La Fontaine. We want to try to teach something of the foreign way of thinking, do something to create that understanding of foreign countries that young Americans so much need.

Here again the syllabus expects, I think, the generally unattainable in the Intermediate requirement that the pupil should be able to read at sight "ordinary French prose." If "ordinary French prose" means, for example, any French novel, it is asking too much, especially when we consider that it is based upon the reading of from 400 to 600 pages. At Tome, where our third year of French is the pupil's junior year, we aim to read 400 pages, sometimes falling slightly below. That amount is probably not greatly exceeded by most other schools.

In all that I have said, I have used French as the example, because of the fact that in the territory represented by this association, German, with which I am more familiar, is practically an extinct language. In such intellectually benighted regions as New England, where German is still taught, in the preparatory schools at least, there comes criticism of the Intermediate requirement in German, particularly on the side of composition. As to Spanish, schools are still feeling their way. It will be years before, the country over, there will be built up as efficient organi-

zations for teaching French and Spanish as existed in many schools for the teaching of German.

For a decade now we have been talking a great deal about method, but I wonder whether the improved methods have materially raised the level of student accomplishment. Certainly the statistics of the Board do not show any steady progress in the last five years, and it is quite possible that the gain of this year may be wiped out in next year's report.

For twenty years we have been working on the standards set up by the Committee of Twelve. Is it not time to modify these standards in the light of this experience? Would it not be advisable to establish a standard of accomplishment for the entire combined school and college course in modern languages? Are we not beginning to realize that mastering a foreign language is a task of some difficulty, that perhaps talent of a marked degree is rarer than we thought? Could we not say then that every graduate of a reputable college should give proof at the close of his junior year that he is able to read any modern piece of pure literature in *one* foreign language, to write personal letters in the language, and to comprehend thoroughly a lecture in that language on a literary, historical or economic theme?

Then in the schools let us require that one foreign language be pursued throughout the course, that one which the student will continue in college, and that no other one be taken up in school except in those cases where the pupil is looking forward to specializing in modern languages. This would give even in the school a degree of mastery that might make the language a permanent possession of the pupil who does not go on to college, and would give the college graduate what we are all anxious that he should have.

To the realization of such aims the good preparatory school is making and will make a substantial contribution, helping also to form in its pupils those habits of industry, concentration and accuracy that are even more important to most boys than learning a modern language.

*Tome Institute,
Port Deposit, Md.*