AN EXPERIMENT IN TEACHING SPANISH

By EDITH FAHNESTOCK

AN EXPERIMENT in modern-language teaching which we have been making for three years with apparent success in the Spanish department at Vassar consists of an arrangement of class work by which each class has part of its work under an American and part under a Spanish instructor. I am using 'American' reluctantly to distinguish a resident of the United States from a Spaniard, whether from Spain or Spanish-America. To speak of English-speaking and Spanish-speaking teachers is cumbersome and is not satisfactory since the American also speaks Spanish and the Spaniard English.

It seems to me that this plan of combining the instruction of the two types of teachers has distinct advantages which recommend it even under ideal conditions of modern language teaching; but that for a time like the present, when the demand for good teachers of both French and Spanish is far in excess of the supply, such a plan, modified, of course, to suit the needs of the various colleges and institutions, is especially helpful. I think it may also offer suggestions for making our foreign-exchange students contribute more directly to general departmental work than they could otherwise do.

Most of us will agree, I think, that the good foreign and the good American teacher each contribute something extremely important, and something different, at least in emphasis and point of view, to the training of the student. This divergence is naturally less great when we compare the contribution of a foreign teacher who has had the best training and who has been in contact with American life for years, knowing the language, literature, and general background of the student and understanding his psychology so that the maximum amount of work may be required of him, with that of an American teacher who through long and sympathetic study of the foreign language and literature and years of contact with the country, understands the foreign nation, the traditions of the people, and their point of view. But the foreigner who has recently come into contact with this country and who

often knows very little English, and even less of the literature, of the conditions of life in America, of the differing system of education, and of the entirely new type of student, certainly gives instruction as different as possible from that of the American who frequently has had very inadequate training, and but slight direct contact with the foreign country.

No matter what we conceive the qualities requisite for the teacher to be, the fact remains that the demand for teachers of Spanish came before we were ready to meet it, and has been increasing rapidly, and the same thing is coming to be true of French (though perhaps in lesser degree), for the number of students of French has increased everywhere since the war. In spite of the helps offered in the summer schools and in other directions we know that conditions, even though they are improving, are still bad. The combination of the work of the two kinds of teachers seems to me to save the student, in cases like this, from the worst effects of the teaching of either type of instructor whose preparation has been inadequate. And, on the other hand, it offers much of interest in difference in point of view and manner of presenting material where both teachers are ideally prepared. Still another advantage of the proposed plan is that it is for the first-year language work an admirable arrangement. It is possible to use younger foreign teachers, even those who know very little English. They are eager to give and to receive new impressions, and they make closer contact with the students giving them much outside the class-room as well as in class. They are invaluable, moreover, for their help with foreign plays or clubs.

After much thought, when I found that a young, inexperienced Spanish assistant was to be added to the department, I made a division of the work which has, with the expansion of the department, developed into the following plan. Our classes meet three times a week. The first year we divided the sections of first-year Spanish so that an American teacher met them once a week, and a Spaniard twice. This plan was due to necessity and not to choice, and the next year when there were additional instructors in the department, and when we could give the Spaniard one-third of the time and the American two-thirds, we found the results much better.

In general the American instructor gives the instruction in grammar and begins the reading of Spanish texts. Nearly all the reading (and the little translation which there is) is in the hands of the American. He knows the difficulties and can make all explanations absolutely clear without wasting time. He also realizes in the reading of texts what the student knows from his English vocabulary, his Latin, or his French, and can judge what assignments of work are adequate. For pronunciation I have found that the American instructor, who is thoroughly and scientifically trained in Spanish phonetics—a training that few Spaniards have had—is best for the preliminary work, and that this work combines excellently with the practical laboratory-like work of the foreigner, who gives in short interviews, individually or in groups, especial drill on sounds, and who keeps up that drill constantly on his day of class work. The foreign teacher, again, contributes in a practical way to the instruction in grammar, by continual corrections in conversation and in the written work which the students prepare for him. This written work is also differentiated. The American teacher is largely responsible for exercises and translations from English into Spanish, whereas the Spanish teacher requires much free composition. These compositions grow out of the ordinary subjects discussed in class by which the foreign teacher extends the vocabulary and knowledge of the student. It is a part of the work that the students enjoy, and at times they show much ingenuity in combining in new ways what they have learned. There is also much opportunity for the foreign teacher to introduce information about his country, customs, legends and the like. In the second semester, when part of the time is devoted to reading, our division of reading material gives him poems and one or two dramas. The poems, if carefully selected, offer much to discuss and explain, and they help the pronunciation of the student, especially when parts are learned by heart. They also give the student an added sense of the beauty of the sound of Spanish poetry—a beauty which it is always hard for any one not a Spaniard to convey adequately. The drama adds interest and vivacity to the class. It is often read by students taking different parts—and sometimes scenes are acted. Many conversational phrases and expressions have thus been almost unconsciously added to the active vocabulary of the student.

Toward the end of the year the Spanish teacher occasionally talks during the whole hour, and the confidence that the students have acquired from understanding him has been of the greatest help in enabling them to understand the one or two Spanish lecturers from outside whom they hear later. The foreign teacher gives the oral examination at the end of the semester.

On the other hand, it has been possible to go much further in all these directions than could otherwise be done because the American teacher has been all this time laying a sure foundation—a scholarly knowledge of the grammar and the ability to read as rapidly and easily as possible. The reading at first is very slow and thorough. Later some of the texts are read very carefully and exactly, and others rapidly in order to stimulate the imagination of the student and to increase his feeling for the language. The student is being helped also in slower fashion to use Spanish in class, for he uses the language in conversation, largely based on the material found in such grammars as Hills and Ford or Olmsted and Gordon, as well as in summarizing any story he is reading and answering questions about it. The American teacher also knows what customs will strike the student as strange, and explains much that perhaps would not occur to the foreign teacher. He also looks out for the executive work that comes up in connection with the classes—the general planning of the work, and the grading of the students, combining his estimate with that of the foreigner.

The second-year work continues the distinction in reading matter—poems and dramas again being read with the foreign teacher and discussed from his point of view. Free composition in the form of topics growing out of the work are written for both teachers, but with the foreign teacher the expression and general point of view are emphasized in the interviews that follow. With the American the knowledge of the reading assigned, and the conclusions arrived at in the topic are of the most importance. The American finds time in his teaching of Spanish literature to bring in comparisons and connections with other literature with which the student is familiar. The foreigner, on the other hand, can often make the student appreciate a foreign point of view better than the American, no matter how sympathetic the latter may be with Spain in general.

The third-year work divides easily. The subject matter of the course is sixteenth and seventeenth century literature. It is, however, expedient to keep up the contemporary language, and the Spanish teacher can do this by taking the class once a week, or once every two weeks, and using modern material for his part of the work. The long papers written by the student and the interviews which the Spanish teacher gives him on each are among the most interesting and valuable aspects of the work in this course.

Although not forming part of the "combined" class work, each of our two one-hour courses in composition carries out the same principle. The first, given by the American, consists of advanced grammar, exercises, much translation from English into Spanish, study of corresponding English and Spanish idioms, general ideas of the history and development of the language, etc. The second course has this course as its prerequisite, and is given by the Spanish teacher. There is no translation; the work consists of the study of Spanish authors and a great amount of writing in Spanish—letters and all kinds of prose, with chief emphasis on facility and correct Spanish idiom.

The conversation courses are entirely in the hands of the foreign teacher and offer opportunity to give much information about his country, its art, customs, institutions, etc. In this work there is generally an alertness and spontaneity and enthusiasm about the young instructor that holds the interest of the student.

It seems to me that the benefits of this method of combination are especially great in the early stages of modern language study and that it is here that the younger, less experienced teachers can be used, and I feel that the students get a great deal more from the directed work of the young instructors along these lines than older teachers perhaps realize.

One word of caution, however, is necessary in regard to the method. The success of the whole arrangement depends on careful planning, so that there is no unintentional overlapping, and so that the work does not lack continuity. Although by planning ahead classes may be exchanged in case of absence or illness and substitutes avoided in this way, yet regularity of schedule is also absolutely essential. Students do not like uncertainty as to who is going to appear in class. On the other hand, the advice to plan carefully must in its turn be modified;

for the planning should not be carried too far and include enough detail to check in any way the initiative and spontaneity of either teacher. This caution is especially necessary in the case of the foreign teacher, for it is these very qualities which make his work invaluable to the department. It is to obtain this freedom, and to emphasize as much as possible the aspects of his teaching which his initiative develops, without sacrificing other sides of the work equally important, that we have resorted to this method of combining the work of these two distinct types of instructors.

Vassar College.