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A JEREMIAD ON MODERN LANGUAGE
TEACHING¹

For the past few months I have been burning with the desire to be able to fire some hot shot which I have accumulated recently on the teaching of modern languages. I hope you will not regret your kind invitation after you have heard what I have to say. I have a feeling that most of you on entering this room had resigned yourselves with the best possible grace to hearing a new theory on the teaching of languages to be added to your ever increasing collection. One of the difficulties which we teachers of languages have to face to-day is the fact that our educational theories are constantly changing. We poor down-trodden pedagogues are kept constantly on the *qui vive* trying to keep up with the *A* method of Mr. *B* or the *C* method of Mr. *D*. We attend religiously teachers' conventions and modern language association meetings where we are told how much better my new method is better than your old method. Often our pupils begin with method *A* and are utterly at sea when they continue a second year class with method *B*. On the other side of the desk a teacher who has been eminently successful with method *X* finds himself completely bewildered trying to teach by method *Y*.

And so we often ask ourselves in moments of despair: "What is our real aim in teaching modern languages anyway? Are we trying to inculcate a cultural spirit into our pupils or are we teaching them solely with a utilitarian end in view. Very often in high schools students preparing to enter college are mixed in pell-mell with those who are taking commercial studies and with the vast

¹An address delivered to the Modern Language teachers of Plymouth County, Mass.

throng who are merely passing the time of day, looking forward longingly to the hour when they shall be released by state law from the shackles of the higher education. I often feel that we might succeed better if we tried to teach only one language in our high schools. But of late years the trend has been moving in the opposite direction. In addition to French and German we are burdening the pupil with Spanish. We have had constantly dinned into our ears the plea for the study of Spanish as an absolutely necessary requisite to the pupil's stock of learning.

You are all familiar with the arguments that are brought forward: Now with the completion of the Panama Canal our trade relations with South America, etc., etc. Have any of you ever met a high school trained student who has found a position as foreign correspondent or traveling commercial representative for the Spanish American countries? I have been longing for many years to meet this *rara avis*. And yet in the High School of Commerce in Boston, ninety-seven per cent. of the 1500 boys are studying Spanish, two and three quarters per cent. are studying French, and the remaining one-fourth of one per cent. have elected German. These figures afford an excellent indication of the hysterical state of the study of Spanish in this country to-day. The percentage of Spanish students is entirely out of proportion to the relative importance of that language to the average American pupil. Not only is Spanish studied feverishly by large classes in high schools, colleges, extension courses and correspondence courses you can also acquire it from our itinerant hawkers of languages by the ba-ba, bo-bo method without text-book, without study, without anything in fact except the payment of a fee. To use a familiar Americanism "Everybody is doing it." There is a grave danger attendant upon this false situation in our high schools and colleges. Instructors who have for many years been teaching French or German successfully are suddenly thrown into teaching a language which they have not completely mastered.

But I am digressing. How many of our pupils retain the hundredth part of what they have been taught of languages? I have often occasion to meet graduates of high schools in our extension courses at Boston University who have previously studied the language two or three or perhaps more years, but who feel that they must take the beginner's course. This is a frightful economic

waste. Who is at fault? To some extent the student himself, but I attribute this condition of affairs in large measure to our democratically paternal system of loaning text-books to high school students. The graduate, not owning his foreign language texts, has no opportunity to review his foreign language in leisure moments of after life. We make it easy for the student financially, but we make it difficult for him culturally. For the possession of books is an incentive to further study. I want to call your attention to the expression, "make it easy for the pupil"—that seems to be one of the chief American educational formulas of the twentieth century. You teachers are asked to do all the work. Let the pupil play as he learns. Have him sing songs in the foreign tongue, give him picture books, let him play games. He must never realize that language study is hard work, otherwise he will shun it. In other words, a language will come and eat out of your hand if you sing to it prettily. Now I have no quarrel with modern language instruction that includes singing and playing of games provided that they go hand in hand with solid study. The teacher may work himself into a state of nervous prostration to no purpose, if the pupil himself does not exert himself and work. By work I mean simply application of the memory. The high school child, especially in the junior grades, is in the monkey-parrot state that easily assimilates and mimics. It is not necessary to be gifted with a great amount of intellect to acquire a modern language. To learn a foreign tongue, one imitates speech sounds and commits to memory words, phrases and rules. A reasoning power is not necessary as a matter of fact it is a hindrance. The more mature the student the greater his reasoning power. He wants to know the why and the wherefore of an idiomatic expression when all he need do is swallow it whole. I always presuppose of course that the student has a good model to mimic. Such is unfortunately not always the case. Thorough language preparation requires longer study and more practice than most branches of teaching in which the teacher can instruct himself by means of books. Not so with a language. A speaking knowledge of French or German or Spanish is acquired only after long years of constant, patient practice. The art of speaking a foreign language is just as much of an art as singing. Indeed speech is not so far removed from song as most teachers think.

A course in phonetics or in the practice of speaking French or German or Spanish is far more valuable to a language teacher than one of the multifarious courses in educational theory which are now inundating our colleges and summer schools. Unless one has mastered the general science of speech sounds as well as acquired the art of pronunciation one is not a thoroughly equipped teacher. High school teachers have often suggested that I give a course on the teaching of modern languages in our extension department, but to me it seems preposterous to try to tell teachers of longer experience than myself how to teach a foreign language. It is only by experience that we learn how to teach, we gradually eliminate methods which work well merely in theory until we evolve a method that seems to win a fair measure of success. One teacher is successful by using one method, another gets good results with a totally different method. If a teacher can pronounce a language accurately, if he has complete command of it so that he can converse in it fluently, if he has a thorough knowledge of its grammatical principles, he can impart that knowledge to others successfully provided he has within him a spark of the divine fire of the born teacher. To those of you who are willing to admit that you are not always absolutely sure of your pronunciation, to those of you who have lacked the opportunity of speaking in the foreign language which you are teaching, I heartily recommend one of the many extramural courses now given by our colleges during both winter and summer sessions.

"But we want a course in teaching languages by the direct method which has been recently introduced into our schools," insist the teachers. Behold the latest panacea for remedying all the evils of our modern language teaching—a shibboleth, a mere word as meaningless as the term efficiency which we meet so often in our pedagogical parlance. (I can feel that I am now treading on sensitive toes, but our educational world to-day is crowded with so many conflicting theories that it is pretty hard to stand still and remain neutral.) For some years past the cry has come forth from the high priests of modern language teaching, or at least those who are looked upon as such, "let us make our French and our German and our Spanish living languages, let us train our students to speak the language". But if, as is frequently the case, the instructor himself cannot carry on a conversation in the

language he is teaching, how can he possibly teach others to converse? Until modern language teachers are paid higher salaries which will enable them to better equip themselves until our colleges provide more practical courses in their curricula, there is no immediate hope that present conditions will be remedied. Heretofore, we may have done little else than teach a knowledge of grammar and train students to read ordinary prose, now there is grave danger of throwing over this solid knowledge for a few catch phrases such as "open the door," "shut the window," "or how do you do?" Ask the average pupil trained by this method how he was yesterday or to shut the door to-morrow and he is all at sea. As a rule he has not learned the fundamentals. There is no reason at all under more favorable conditions why both a reading and speaking knowledge cannot be combined. This method would naturally require more time. But with our crowded high school curriculum, is the normal student able to afford the time to learn in this way two or three foreign languages, and in some cases Latin to boot? Furthermore the so-called direct method is doomed to failure when we try to use it in our crowded classes of forty or more students. Again, how much individual attention does the student get in a large class with a forty or fifty minute period four or five times a week? The method is an excellent one when employed with a single pupil. But when a high school student gets five to ten minutes of individual attention per week it is utterly ridiculous to suppose that he can learn to speak a foreign language.

If the art of imitation is essential in learning to speak a foreign language, why is it not a good plan to teach modern languages in the junior high school? (I feel your toes becoming more sensitive under my rough boot.) Since it is universally recognized that the power of language assimilation is greater in the child than in the adolescent, why is not the junior high school an admirable place to begin language study? It is an excellent plan to do so, provided that you do not teach it indiscriminately, and provided that your junior high school is not in the jelly fish state. In Boston, if your child lives in the western part he studies French, in the east he studies German, in the north he studies Spanish and in the south he studies Italian. We college instructors will soon be struggling with the junior college due to arrive shortly from out of the west, so do not pity yourselves over much. We can now look forward to a two years' college post-graduate course in junior life.

I have often wondered why we have not followed along the lines of the long established six year courses of such schools as the Roxbury Latin and Boston Latin Schools in planning our junior plus senior high schools. These institutions are modelled on the French lycée and the German gymnasium, and represent the highest type of secondary school in this country. Why must a thing be necessarily new to be solid?

Languages are more successfully taught in schools like these because the classes are small and the students are picked by competitive examination. In your junior high schools you must take large classes of all comers and you must teach the bright student who wants to learn, with the dullard who is merely marking time. Some of us have to be the hewers of wood and the haulers of water although we do live in a democratic country. It seems to me that in our ardent struggle for democracy we are often in danger of falling over backwards. Our tendency is to lower instead of raise the democratic level all along the line. Is there not a vast deal of energy wasted in trying to teach, (I repeat trying to teach) a foreign language to every single child in our community, most of whom will never have occasion to use it? Is not English a foreign tongue to a great many pupils now attending the junior high schools in our large industrial cities? Is not the English of most of the others a corrupt jargon? To my way of thinking it is our first duty to teach a correct use of the English language to our youth whom we are trying to train for American citizenship, and whom we force by law to receive instruction in our public schools. Furthermore, I insist at the risk of being suspected of baiting you that a large number of our teachers are not properly equipped to teach languages by any method in our junior high schools. Ah, if we could only select our pupils as is done in most cultured lands to-day, and give them a sound training in foreign languages in small classes handled by thoroughly trained teachers! Alas, no. That would be contrary to the spirit of democracy. Some of you are preparing to ask me "Is it giving the unambitious student a square deal to discriminate against him?" My answer is that we give him the opportunity to make an effort to learn a foreign language. If he chooses to fritter away his golden hour, it is "his own option" as one of my country neighbors remarked to me when I warned him that his child was in danger of falling down my well.

It is yet another instance of "margaritas ante porcos". Besides, whether you try to stuff a language down his throat or whether you release him from modern language instruction he will take a beginner's course anyway, in one of our evening institutions, if in maturer life he decides that the knowledge of a foreign language will be of service to him. Ninety-nine out of every hundred students who take elementary French in our extension courses or in the evening courses at the College of Business Administration have studied French for one or more years in our high schools. Why not put our energy in the teaching of our masses into studies more vital to them than a foreign language?

You are now probably waiting for me to offer a remedy for the existing evils that I have enumerated in my jeremiad. But I can claim immunity from your cross-examination. I carefully prefaced my talk with the statement that I had no new theory to offer for the attainment of better results in the teaching of modern languages. Fellow-teachers, I have come to condole with you, I have not come to prescribe for you a panacea for your troubles.

Teachers, could ye and I with Heaven conspire,
To change all ways of teaching tongues entire,
Would not we shatter them to bits,
And teach according to our heart's desire?

I have followed the time-worn American custom of the college professor who makes the best of every opportunity to inveigh against high school teaching. It is now your turn to follow an equally prevalent custom and take a fling at the methods of teaching of the college professor. Meanwhile let us console each other with this thought with which I shall leave you. If a teacher has complete command of his language, if he loves to teach with his heart and soul, he cannot help but attain some measure of success in spite of all obstacles.

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