

# THE Modern Language Journal

---

Volume II

JANUARY, 1918

No. 4

---

## DESIRABILITY OF A SYLLABUS OF FRENCH AND GERMAN TEXTS<sup>1</sup>

Is there a warrant in times like these for American teachers to discuss a subject apparently as academic as the one announced in the title of this paper? We are engaged in a great national task of putting our house in order without and within. We are experiencing at the present moment a degree of spiritual exaltation to which we find no parallel except in our civil war. We know now the meaning of service in a great cause. We have thrown aside the *laissez-aller* policy; in our material necessities we are denouncing waste and shiftlessness. Is it not peculiarly appropriate at this time to rid ourselves of aimlessness in our educational procedure? It is from this point of view that I would justify the consideration of the topic before us; let me premise that I shall offer suggestions rather than develop a conclusive chain of argumentation.

The problem of successful modern language teaching is beset, as you know too well, with countless difficulties, due to the uncertainty both in aims and methods, on which our opinions are widely divergent. Is there an approach even to an agreement on any one of these fundamental considerations? I should be opening up too vast a field, if I touched in the present discussion the question of unification of the general problem of teaching the modern languages; if I attempted to establish a kind of standardization as to the order of presenting the material involved; if I discussed the various shades of emphasis, and the relative signifi-

---

<sup>1</sup>Address before Association of Modern Language Teachers at Convention of Middle States Association of Colleges and Preparatory Schools, at Poughkeepsie, Dec. 1st. 1917.

cance that we propose to attach to the use of colloquial speech on the one hand, or formal speech on the other. We all admit the medley of conflicting tendencies as a recognized obstacle to our efforts. We have no desire of course to advocate the deadening uniformity of an unbending bureaucratic prescription. But might we not accept the agreement that results from a free interchange of opinion between leaders in the profession? When and how will such a beneficent change in our teaching reveal itself? The doctrine of coöperation in the course of which we modify our own performance by comparison with the efforts of colleagues needs an official recognition which, at the moment, it does not yet possess.

We know in a general way that in some parts of our country thoughtful men and women teachers have concentrated their attention on more rational forms of presentation. They have repudiated haphazard methods, have evolved a definite sequence, an orderly advance in their language work; true pioneers in their efforts, they refuse to accept traditional teaching simply because it is traditional. They have faced unflinchingly what should be the one and only ultimate issue,—“Why are we to do thus and so?” But of what benefit to the rest of us teachers have been such experiments? They are frequently not even recorded in professional publications. When we do hear of them, we find that, with much that is of value, they are apt to combine methods that are wasteful, that have been discarded elsewhere as futile. Our efforts are, if I may say so, incoherent, disjointed; we do not profit by each others’ successes and failures. It is a vicious circle in which we are moving instead of a steady and sure advance on lines that have found general acceptance. The curse of disparate effort impedes our progress.

And yet in a certain sense we teachers of language are free from some of the embarrassments that obtain in other branches of secondary education. There, chaos primordial still reigns. To judge, for instance, from a survey of school programs, it would seem of subordinate significance whether you teach ancient history to pupils in the first, second, or last year of a high school course; whether you lead up to American history on the substructure of European civilization in mediaeval and modern times, or whether you regard recent political developments as the sole knowledge

worth imparting, with only casual reference to the conditions of which they are the direct outgrowth. With no definite conception of an order of procedure, our history teachers in general countenance irrelevancy, scout the relation of cause and effect. No one seems to be positive as to what amount and type of historical information shall become the basic heritage of our high school pupils; no writer of an historical text book has pupils of a definite stage of development in mind, and no teacher is quite sure that a given text book is in every sense appropriate to the grasp of his class.

Or, to turn to another medley in our teaching efforts; we are at sea in our mathematical teaching as to the choice and grouping of topics, as to sequence, as to degree of emphasis, even as to point of departure. Shall an elementary acquaintance with geometric concepts precede an acquaintance with algebra, or shall it be postponed for several years to a period of relative maturity? Can we, as long as we are at variance with each other on such vital issues, speak of a *plan* of mathematical teaching?

We are, as I have said, in this respect at least, more fortunate in the matter of our foreign language work. There is a certain inevitable sequence in our main lines of endeavor. We cannot teach Racine, before our pupils know a certain amount of French vocabulary, of French language structure, may I add, of French pronunciation. In other words, third year French cannot precede first year French; let us be thankful to the gods for so much! We *do* secure definite foundation work. It is when we reach the end of our first year in modern language work that our dilemma sets in, for our pupils are then to apply their preliminary knowledge to a growing familiarity with the language. They are to gain acquaintance by degrees and through works that have a distinctly literary quality with as much of the spiritual life of the people as is there revealed. We can stand here, I believe, on a common ground; for whilst acquaintance with the present day thought and life of the foreign people whose language we are studying is one of the objects to be sought, it is not considered a sufficiently worthy aim to limit our students' knowledge to the type of communications that suffice for daily intercourse.

It was absurd in the past to acquaint our pupils only with the foreign language on its highest literary plane. As though the

language and thought of an Andromaque, of a Britannicus, were not highly conventionalized, rarified so to speak, beyond the demands and possibilities of the average man's thought and expression; as though a Nathan, an Iphigenia, a Johanna, were not primarily the media through which their respective creators revealed *themselves*, their aspirations and their ideals, to willing and sympathetic listeners. Was it not absurd to urge our helpless and struggling youth to dizzy heights where they must needs accept *words* instead of fathoming the underlying thought? Quite as extreme and irrational was this effort, as the other of hedging their intellectual interests within the commonplace, the banal.

The problem before us seems to me to be this—by what stages, through the use of what material can we acquaint our students with the existing social conditions, the prevailing life interests and intellectual strivings of two great cultural nations? What literary products of theirs can most completely and reliably express to our students their national aims? And finally, from which productions of their greatest literary heroes may be gathered the flower of their intellectual quality?

Our publishers have put forth at the suggestion of college and school men (mainly the former), a number of German and French texts for study in schools and colleges. Some have been brought out in numerous editions in response to constant demands; others meeting with less favor have gradually disappeared from the market. It would be presumptuous to aver that the persistence of the one group or the infrequent occurrence of the other furnishes any definite proof of their respective values. The question of value is indeed the crucial one; yet standards by which we determine values are not equally obvious and acceptable to all minds. Thus, for instance, I cannot admit that the question of *excellence of style* should be most prominent in our minds; it must be distinctly subordinated to that of value in content and in the power to arouse interest. I have the less hesitation to press this point, because it has found a striking corroboration in a very carefully considered Joint Report for the Reorganization of the Teaching of English in secondary schools, which has recently been issued by the Bureau of Education. Here too the fetish of supreme stylistic excellence appears to be losing its hold on the

most thoughtful teachers; as I view it, it requires the same kind of courage for a teacher to rule out, say Coleridge or Landor—both excellent stylists,—as to replace a German or French classic by a writer of inferior lustre whose subject, however, makes a more direct appeal to our students.

Protesting against too early an introduction of French youth to their own classical literature, Paul Lacombe says (and his statements bear frequent repetition): Our classics are too substantial for young people, their psychology is beyond youth's capacity; they intimate, suggest, leave much unsaid: 'far more valuable, an author who, without such consummate art, dilutes his thought and reveals it at full length.'

Turning now to our accessible material,—what have we available? Is it illuminating in the best sense of the word? Does it embrace with any degree of completeness various angles from which the foreign people may be regarded? What side is wanting to complete the picture, and does the absence of it distort the picture as a whole? Do the texts that are available emphasize unduly national self-consciousness? How can we counteract the effect of a work that leans excessively to sentimentality? Can we furnish as a desirable antidote one that breathes distinctly the note of virility?

In the center of our consideration ought to stand a thoughtful estimate of the capacities and needs of our pupils. I cannot sufficiently emphasize the significance of this, one of our greatest difficulties; for the books we use as texts were not primarily written for pupils; they were composed for the edification of mature hearers or readers; it is only accident, if they are found available for the needs of our students. Recall the masterpieces as you know them; the theme may be a lucid one, but it may not be elaborated in simple terms, and on the other hand, the clearest and most direct language may not free a searching soul-problem of its intricacies. This lack of adaptability of the purely literary production to student use constitutes one of our gravest teaching problems, and it is here where the call for a syllabus of extant material in the two languages has its distinct justification. I believe that both in French and German literatures a more exhaustive search should be instituted for material that is of service in our work. There should be a critical survey of existing

publications, an elimination of those that are undesirable, and a readiness to advocate substitution of more acceptable material when we have become convinced of its value. This involves that every teacher of French and German delve conscientiously into all material at his disposal; that he read and scan books and selections with an eye directed intently on student-use. We know how misleading general impressions are. The books you and I enjoy and enjoyed for our private edification may be most undesirable for our classes. A specific example may serve to illustrate my point. Of a certain German tale, Riehl's *Burg Neideck*, there exist at least half a dozen different editions; evidently the story appeals to many teachers and is largely used by them. To forestall criticism, I may state that personally I find the work exceedingly amusing, but that is not the issue. Will it so impress our pupils? It is conceived in a vein of gentle satire, intelligible in its curious conceits only, if you have saturated yourself with the grotesque contrast that the author has in mind between actuality and a fancifully exaggerated sentimentalism. Read it as the story runs on, with the attention of the pupils of necessity riveted on the literal interpretation of the language, and not a glimmer of its underlying spirit is apt to reach their minds. I honestly doubt whether one teacher out of a hundred can create for his class the atmosphere that will make the story genuinely significant; does it serve any purpose to annotate with elaborate suggestions the various incongruous situations? It is as though somebody were going to edit with copious notes the playfulness of Mr. Crothers' essays, or the lambent geniality of Oliver Wendell Holmes' *Autocrat*. Perhaps some enterprising editor of *Burg Neideck* will feel called upon some day to punctuate his comments with such remarks as "This must not be taken seriously." Or, "note how absurdly exaggerated." Now it is my contention that a work, distinctly alien to our pupils' point of view and involving elaborate apparatus to make it at all palatable, is not wisely chosen. I have, alas! witnessed the screaming solemnity with which a class of pupils will plod through a piece of literature that is admirable beyond peradventure, but about as appropriate for class work as attempting to break a butterfly on a wheel.—Reread each book, with your student body insistently before your mind's eye. How does the book serve their purpose?

What will it do for them? How does it correlate with what they have read—with what they are still to read? What gain in appreciation, in insight, is to be secured, and by what means?

We ought to deprecate as unpedagogical a jumble of unrelated literary tidbits. You would be surprised, if you once settled down to a serious consideration of a literary production, centering your thought on analysis of its *educational* possibilities, how vastly your conception of its significance would be modified.

Consider for a moment our peculiar educational conditions, above all, the prevalence of the co-educational high school, and you will admit that before we recommend it, we ought to reach definite conclusions about the applicability of a piece of literature to our class requirements. How lightly we have hitherto regarded these serious questions! No one but a teacher of long experience realizes the pitfalls that result from a lack of forethought; it is criminal to ignore what the possible reaction of his class to a certain piece of literature may be. Forewarned is forearmed! A single indiscreet question by a pupil, an awkward statement by a teacher off his guard, may do a world of mischief. I have marvelled at times at the fool-hardiness of teachers in this respect; for him who has not thought out all contingent possibilities in connection with these French and German readings, there may develop many an embarrassing situation. Preparedness is the great safeguard; if you realize the danger point, you will probably succeed in steering clear of a difficulty; but to be taken unawares from lack of insight is altogether inexcusable.

To this task of enlarging the range of our reading material the competent teachers and professors of French and German may profitably bend their energies. With their knowledge of the literary treasures in both tongues, I am convinced that much material that has hitherto not been made available can be introduced. What we need is variety and scope in our material; that above all is a desirable end. I know that we should breathe a sigh of relief, if there opened to us and our pupils a wider range of literary productions. We have, for instance, a group of French plays of lighter character, charming in their way, like *Le Gendre de Monsieur Poirier* or *Poudre aux Yeux*. There surely must be, for purposes of variety, at least three or four other plays quite as unobjectionable that might be substituted for these.

As in our study of English masterpieces, we have been yielding in the foreign languages also to the assumption that we ought to offer to our students only connected masterpieces—literary wholes; but I would suggest as introductory to such a course a carefully balanced literary reader, a series of well-chosen selections along various lines of literary effort. The objections that we formerly raised against books of selections were based largely on the indiscriminating, haphazard method of culling such selections from heterogeneous sources. In our English readers and in our foreign readers we were apt to offer an objectionable hodge-podge of unrelated material, devoid of the essential charm of distinctive literary merit. But if you wish to realize the full possibilities of carefully-edited books of selections, prepared by a group of pre-eminent masters in pedagogy, read what Professor Brown sets forth in his recent masterly publication: *How the French Boy Learns to Write*. Nothing left to chance, every step, every selection judiciously weighed in the balance—thus and thus only does literary taste, literary appreciation, and eventually literary power blossom forth; the Frenchman *can* write.

Suppose now we set ourselves the task of endeavoring to combine in these reading selections literary quality with enlightening content. It is not an easy task, but undoubtedly there can be culled from writers of real literary merit that are not too technical, a series of selections, each one of moderate length, that throw light on political, economical, geographical, cultural, or historical relations. There would be a distinct aid in the fact that they would be of moderate length. They would have a real significance, because they do not impose on the student the need of wading through desert stretches of inane commonplaces. In both of these languages a number of writers can be found who in their several spheres of information are at once interesting, stimulating, and accurate, whether as naturalists, as travelers and explorers, as geographers, in the fields of biography, of history and in the plastic arts. Excerpts may be found that combine vivid and glowing word-pictures with material of intrinsic value.

There is a pedagogic question in this matter of language teaching which calls for our serious consideration, and in justice to our teachers of foreign language, I am free to make the admission



that our teachers of English have been quite as indifferent as ourselves to the peculiar nature of the reading problem. They too have been guilty of monstrous blunders in the perfunctory assignments of prescribed and of cursory reading material.

Is it not a sorry spectacle to use our texts simply as a means of turning words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs from one language into another? A sordid view, this, of our teaching opportunities. It would be an ideal attainment, if in the selection of each single text, whether in the vernacular or in the foreign tongue, the teacher previously satisfied himself completely as to a number of fundamental points such as this: Of what value is this selection to my group of pupils, constituted as I know them? How does this selection measure up to their previous knowledge? Their antecedents? Their environment? Their moral and spiritual tendencies? The simple fact of appropriateness, of desirability, is the one that must first be established, and it is here that the work of our Committee depends upon your coöperation and active contribution. It is primarily a scheme of collating professional opinion; on the individual teacher it does not impose undue burdens.

Expert opinion gathered from the independent answers of say twenty first-class teachers on a given text, standardizes in a measure the value of that text with respect to the points under consideration. We shall expect to find divergences on minor points, but even in such differences of judgment there is a distinct advantage; in the very act of formulating the features acceptable, and interpreting the discrepancies, we strengthen our standards of judgment. The outstanding advantage that I see in such coöperative professional effort is that we compel ourselves to give adequate thought to the problem in hand. We get from the searching analysis that we bring to bear on our present material a series of facts that will guide us in our efforts to extend our list of reading texts.

Here are, then, some of the questions that we would suggest to each one of you in connection with the texts that we would invite you to study with a view to their acceptability for the class. They are by no means the only questions, and in the discussion which I hope will follow, it is easily possible that other questions as significant may be suggested.

1. Is this book a text suitable for High Schools
    - (a) from the point of view of content
    - (b) as to the ease or difficulty of the language employed?
  2. Is the book in question more desirable for boys' classes or for girls' classes, or is it equally valuable for either?
  3. Does it commend itself for mixed classes? If not, why not?
- There is no more serious question than this. Some teachers will hesitate to recommend a book, in which others find no objectionable features whatever.

To a second group of inquirers I should assign these considerations:

To what extent and in what particular direction is the book under consideration typical of the national life with which we want to acquaint our students? Is the general tenor of the work wholesome and moral? And I should want to include under this head the query whether or not the book has a morbid tendency. I dwell upon this particularly, because we ignore at times the influence of morbidity on adolescence. I entertain little fear that any of us would ever dream of using as class material that which is outright immoral, but there is a very immediate and subtle danger that lurks in the unwholesome. For it is of the very essence of classroom recitation that we are called upon to expatiate, to dwell rather insistently on our context, and to illuminate it by diverse forms of interpretation, and it is just there that the insidiousness of a morbid piece of literature is apt to do its most serious damage.

Again, we shall want to know whether in your judgment a given work lacks seriousness. Of course no one of us would criticize genial humor, but I question myself whether flippancy enshrined in a text is a desirable adjunct to our class work.

Keeping in mind furthermore the intellectual stage that our pupils have reached, we must ask ourselves "is, or is not, the book under consideration too distinctly philosophical in character?" Comparison with the experiences of our teachers of English may always serve as a guide and a warning. They, if we listen to their admissions, have been none too careful in avoiding this snare, and I have the feeling that the distaste for some of the noblest productions in English thought may be traced to an

incomplete appreciation of literary work that makes its appeal only, after one has advanced considerably to an understanding of the reasoned life.

I think it was Thomas Arnold who once said "Set before your pupils a goal slightly in advance of their present capacity, but only slightly, very slightly." The warning I think may well be heeded by us also. And in this connection we may want your judgment on the place where in a secondary school course you think a certain book can be made most effective.

I have suggested but a few of the points that come up for consideration in connection with any piece of literature. My main contention is that by enlisting the coöperation of a number of thoughtful teachers we shall secure, as we coöordinate their several points of view, standards that we have hitherto not possessed. When once we have sifted the observations that have come in from a number of teachers, we shall know, as we never have known before, what gain our pupils may derive from the study of a given work, and we shall then realize how we can fit each succeeding selection into its proper place as an element of expanding insight and appreciation on the part of our pupils.

JULIUS SACHS.

New York City.

---