

GRAMMAR IN FIRST YEAR SPANISH¹

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THE present trend of secondary education appears to be toward a simplification of courses and a general lightening of the burden borne by the student. We are trying to make it so easy for the learner that he has but to lie on his back and catch the fruit from the tree of knowledge as it falls. On the other hand, we are multiplying courses in our programs and new things are added from time to time, military training being the latest to take its portion of the pupil's study time. In our teaching of modern language these things have done much to lower the standard of work, but it is the opinion of some that the "direct method" fetish has been a potent factor as well. This does not refer to the work of those genuinely successful teachers who by rational and pedagogical plans have combined the teaching of grammar, reading, and conversation so as to produce a well-developed and well rounded knowledge of the foreign speech, but to those false prophets, who use the phrase "direct method" as an advertising slogan, and in truth practice a method as indirect as it is irrational. The true originators of the phrase would not be proud of some of its sponsors. The latter are sometimes the least justified of all in attempting anything so difficult. No doubt the personality and individual bent of the teacher has much to do with the success of any method, but one in which the basic facts are to be absorbed, as it were, without effort on the part of the student, is certainly that which taxes most the teacher's ability.

The tendency to neglect formal grammar study is evident in the instruction in our own language. A professor at our own Normal College has said that grammar is applied psychology, the conclusion being that a course in mental science should precede it. Many other theorists, taking their cue from advocates of "direct method" in foreign language teaching, have done away with the learning of rules and paradigms, and substituted a course in

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oral and written composition. The teaching of English in the elementary schools has been influenced to such an extent that our pupils often come to the high school totally unacquainted with grammatical terminology, and having scarcely any conception of sentence structure, case relation, and conjugation. The High School pupil who expresses his thoughts in florid verbiage but violates simple grammatical rules is common. He is the result of "language lessons" in the grades.

But it is also unfortunately true that a great many teachers of foreign language are conducting classes without due regard to the foundation they are laying and the structure they are erecting, being satisfied to substitute a smattering of conversation learned by parrotlike repetition, for real knowledge. It appears that some teachers in reputable schools are trying to adopt the methods and practices of certain highly-advertised concerns that promise command of the language by some short-cut method or other, eliminating all difficulties. The ability to say "¿Cómo está Ud?" "¿Habla Ud español?" "El profesor escribe en la pizarra" and other favorite phrases of these compendious methods will avail but little when the actual test comes. The real ability to construct sentences, whether oral or written, and to understand the language as spoken or read, cannot come from a method based entirely upon memory work. The mind of an adolescent as well as of an adult is rational and demands a reasonable exposition of processes, causes and effects. An old fashioned grammar and translation method will accomplish more than this committing of phrases, though both are to be condemned.

I cannot help quoting from an old grammar of Juan de Luna, published in London in 1623, brought to light by Prof. E. C. Hills, our chairman, "Sin duda, saldrás del error en que muchos están creyendo ser mejor aprender una lengua sin reglas, lo cual es contra toda razón, porque las reglas, fuera de que facilitan el camino, hacen que no se olvide tan presto lo que una vez se ha aprendido y que después de olvidado, por medio de ellas por si mismo pueda cada uno reparar la falta. Esta opinion erronea de que es mejor aprender una lengua sin arte, la fomentan muchos maestros de ella, que no sabiendo ellos ni entendiendo los reglas, dicen ser mejor aprender por un discurso familiar." It is evident

that even three hundred years ago this question was thrashed over and definite conclusions drawn in favor of grammar from the start.

Of course, language can be learned by ear just as music can, but who would advocate such methods for the musician? He studies the laws of harmony and notation, and theory occupies a part of his time from the very start. Even the baseball player who does not study the theory of the game is not likely to succeed. Why should we be willing to neglect the foundation work of the language, and the firm superstructure upon which the learner must fashion the complete mastery of the language?

Having established the necessity of teaching formal grammar, it is necessary then to consider secondly, what to teach, and thirdly, how to teach it.

In a recent article in "Hispania" on the subject "Grammar, how much and how, in elementary year of High School," a writer compares the old grammar method with the out-of-date wooden frame of buildings, with its bulky beams, multitudinous braces and supports, while the desired grammatical framework was to be likened to the modern steel structure, slender, hidden, but immensely powerful. The author of the article in question speaks of forming grammatical habits, and implies that it is possible even in the elementary year of high school to accomplish this aim. Would that it were true. But habits require time. Even those who are studying the language in their third and fourth year, will be found making the errors they made when they began, and avoiding them only by a conscious effort. It is well to limit the grammar to be studied to an amount possible to be covered in a year's time, but it is unfortunate that it must be done. The most ambitious teacher will not claim that his students have mastered the elements of grammar in a scholastic year. He will only have made them clear to the class, and they will have learned to recognize them, so as to apply them consciously to their composition, oral and written.

Instead of looking upon the first year's work as the erection of framework or laying a foundation, perhaps we might consider it rather in the light of a systematic survey, an introduction, as it were, to the material to be used in building the superstructure. The man who is about to build a skyscraper spends years of study in preparing for the task. He studies the nature and qualities of

each of his materials, the scientific laws that govern the construction, the relationship of one part to another. He does not begin his building until after a period of observing and learning. The completed structure is before him in his mental vision before he attempts to construct it in fact. So it seems it would be well if the first year could present a maximum of the grammatical structure of Spanish, whereupon the student would attempt to build his own foundation and framework. This at least appears logical, and probably is the way the ordinary student develops linguistic strength.

It is hard to believe that habits can become fixed in so limited a time as one year unless a great deal of practice is given on a few selected points of grammar, and it is to be doubted whether a general presentation of the grammar as a whole in an orderly progressive fashion is not to be preferred. All education is a habit, to be acquired by long and continued effort, and only after years of speaking and using a foreign language can the average learner feel free and untrammelled in his command of it.

The second year usually brings to the student a novellette or a collection of stories in Spanish. What point in grammar is not involved in the simplest story by a writer of Spain or Latin-America? Would it not be of some satisfaction to the student to feel that though he had not entirely mastered the subjunctive, yet the rules involved in its use were not unfamiliar to him, and that he could refer to them readily in his text? Here we have the true laboratory method—the rule adapted to real objects, and the learner who is required to consult his book and review the matter covered gradually is forming the habit of correctness desired. When this is supplemented by systematic composition and grammar review, the result is better, of course.

Now how would this grammar be covered? What would be the method involved? It would require at least another paper to discuss this subject at length, but a few remarks may not be out of place.

The attempt to teach grammar in the Spanish language does not appear commendable. A committee of the Central division of the modern language Association of America, of which Prof. John D. Fitzgerald was Chairman, reported against it, and

quoted the following instructions from the Minister of Public Instruction in Austria in corroboration.

"The teacher of modern languages should bear in mind that he must use the language which is the subject of study as much as possible, and the language of his pupils as much as is necessary; but he should never forget that he must at all times be intelligible to all the pupils."

It is no doubt possible to teach the grammar in Spanish, but why such a waste of time and effort? Of what value is a vocabulary of Spanish grammatical terms? Why increase the difficulty of an abstract science by forcing the learner to adopt a new vocabulary and waste time trying to comprehend the rules in a strange tongue? The vocabulary to be acquired in the first year is extensive enough without these words, and they are of so little use outside the classroom. Why not concentrate our effort on covering ground in Spanish grammar and on acquiring a vocabulary of useful terms and idioms?

In learning grammar and a great many written exercises should be assigned, and corrections made before the class, black-board work being the best method of making errors plain to all pupils. With the sentences written on the board it is quite easy for the teacher to make corrections and explanations in Spanish, and the pupils will then often understand the teacher's discreet use of a grammatical term in Spanish quite readily, though he has not been called upon to learn the word himself. After a lesson has been thoroughly mastered in English, the written lessons may be gone through entirely in Spanish, giving oral practice in the language while correcting exercises.

As for paradigms, concert drill is found to be efficient. A conjugation is readily learned when all repeat it together a few times, and the weaker pupils required to repeat it alone before the class, using a variety of subjects and objects with the verb. Modern languages are gradually taking the place of Latin in High Schools. Is it not worth while to bear in mind the many arguments advanced for the cultural value of foreign grammar study as such? Why lose all of the good that Latin has done, when some of the benefits can be derived from Spanish?

It is not the aim of this paper to minimize the effort to teach Spanish as a living tongue, and substitute a dead grammar and

translation method. It is to be hoped that we have outlived the latter. But surely the only really direct method is that which results in ability to speak, read and write the language correctly and with ease. Since grammar study, pure and unadulterated, has been found the best in acquiring a correct and facile use of the vernacular, why is it not true of the foreign idioms? It should receive major attention the first year, when the student is introduced to the new structure and the foundation is being laid. The following semesters will bring a repetition of these ideas, and gradually a complete grammatical structure will shape itself in his mind upon which he will build his knowledge of the language, adding vocabulary and idiom day by day, and forming habits of correct speech and utterance.

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