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TEACHING OF MODERN LANGUAGES IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The Subject of an Interesting Address Over the
Radio Recently by E. J. Poirier, Instructor
at the Provincial Normal School

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Ten years ago I had the honour to be accepted as a teacher for one of the largest and best-equipped vocational schools in the province. This, however, was done on the condition that I take a course at Columbia University, New York, on methods of teaching "conversational French."

I still have a vivid picture of the peculiar impression made on my mind by this condition. Just imagine, going to an English-speaking city far from any French community to study methods of teaching French!

But, as you know, if teachers have more or less authority over their pupils, they have very little, if any, over school boards!

That is why, about the middle of July 1926, I could be seen on a train bound for the largest American City!

I remember having heard once that traveling and experience are our best teachers. I soon realized this fully. In fact, I had not attended my new classes more than a day when that impression of tacit disapproval about my going to Columbia University for the course above mentioned gave way to a complete satisfaction. It could not be otherwise, for I had been given professors who certainly could be rated among the best, who could speak French as well as any one I had heard and who were giving and exemplifying what I thought and still think the best methods of teaching foreign languages.

And today, I am particularly pleased to have the opportunity of publicly thanking the school board referred to for their wise decision with respect to my being accepted by them.

This most unexpected situation aroused my curiosity to such a degree that I decided on studying the different courses given that year at Columbia on modern languages. My study bore upon three different aspects of the question (a) the number of courses, (b) the number of students and their attitude towards these courses, (c) and lastly the motives or reasons prompting these different courses.

I had no difficulty in finding the number of these courses. It is clearly given in the Bulletin of Information of the university. But I was astonished to find 69 courses given on modern languages excluding English, French heading the list with 30, Spanish being next with 17, German 12, Italian 6, Japanese and Russian 2 each.

As to the number of students attending these courses, there was through the management. For obvious reasons this inquiry was out of the question, so my only option was to make an estimate based upon the courses I attended. This estimate—a very conservative one—brought the number up to nearly one thousand.

However, what surprised me most was not the number attending these courses, but rather the eagerness and ambition of these persons of mature minds to acquire a useful knowledge of foreign languages and the pride taken in being able to use them.

The third phase of the question was still more interesting. Why were there so many spending a large portion of their yearly savings and sacrificing their vacations to acquire another language? Of course to secure employment. But on the other hand, because there was a demand in that field. Now, what were the motives or reasons behind that demand? They are few in number, but they are a natural outgrowth of the position of the United States in the commercial world and of the specific national characteristics of that country.

It is a universally known fact that for a few decades the commercial status of the world has been subject to man changes. Inventions have brought nations closer together and given an ever increasing impulse to

international trade. This is clearly shown by the increase in imports and exports. As a consequence, international commerce had to be transformed so as to follow more closely the methods proved by and adopted for a successful internal commerce. Now, sound business implies a mutual and sympathetic understanding, and no such understanding can exist without at least a fair knowledge of the customers' language. In that respect, let me quote the following from an article written by Mr. W. Sherwood Fox: "Because of a certain magic sensitiveness that is inherent in human nature, a person who is approached through his own language is a much better business prospect than one who is approached in another language. . . . An approach of this kind reveals a goodwill that unlocks hearts and slackens purse-strings. Failure, for any reason, to use it is simply bad business." Our American neighbors have made that reasoning long ago. Having been for many years one of the leading manufacturing countries of the world, depending therefore to a large extent on foreign trade, they had been taught by experience that their school curriculum to be adequate must necessarily provide for the teaching of foreign languages. But they went further. They saw that international commercial relations were being placed on an international competitive basis and that a country to be really successful in that field must possess as agents expert linguists. Consequently, not only did they decide on teaching foreign languages, but they provided for each one practical advanced courses.

At first, these reasons appeared quite satisfactory. But as soon as I tried to account for the proportion of these courses, I had to conclude that there were other determining factors. And rightly so, for not long after, I came into contact with the problem of americanizing immigrants through the medium of language. This question has always been considered by the educational authorities of the United States as an important one. An exhaustive study of it had been carried out for many years while different types of tests were being conducted, with the outcome that the best teachers for the purpose were those who, in addition to knowing English, had a fair command over the language of their foreign-born pupils. Hence, it was deemed necessary to establish courses with a view to that end.

This shed a rather bright light over my study. By considering concurrently international trade and the different groups of American inhabitants speaking foreign languages, the proportion 17, 12, 6, 2 and 2 for Spanish, German, Italian, Russian and Japanese could be accounted for. However, there was still at one place a deep shadow. Why 30 courses for French? Certainly not on account of trade nor on account of French immigrants, for there are very few and most of those coming from Canada speak English. But there were reasons, and what were they? This was the most intricate part of my study. I had to resort to questioning to get a full and satisfactory answer.

Circumstances bring together nations as well as individuals. Historic events have established between France and the United States very friendly relations. Now, it is natural to like what belongs to a real friend and to distinguish to a certain extent what belongs to an enemy. Or again we are inclined to appreciate rightfully the qualities and belongings of our friends and to undervalue the property of our enemies. Consequently, our neighboring republic is in a fairly good position at least not to undervalue the language spoken in France. On the contrary, I found that a fair proportion of the educated

American citizens consider French as a language of culture, of precision, of real value, and that knowing it means a higher degree of cultural development. To substantiate this statement it might be worth while mentioning here that its spreading over the world is due to these intrinsic qualities rather than to commercial expansion.

But for those who want to accent but the practical viewpoint, there is one. It lies in the fact that French still holds a prominent place in international relations. This is not unknown to our American neighbors. They are well aware of the fact that at Geneva French is officially, at least on an equal footing with English. Moreover, they do not ignore that representatives of all countries where English is not the official language—and this represents at least 80 per cent—use French in their deliberations at the League of Nations; and that French is recognized as the official language of all international unions.

These are the factors that influenced the prescribing of courses for the teaching of foreign languages in the United States.

However, let us bear in mind that all this has reference to only one university. On account of their special positions, other universities probably have a different distribution of courses. But on the whole, what has been said about Columbia University may be taken as reflecting the general American opinion.

Let us now get a bird's eye view of the same question in other countries.

In Europe, especially in Continental Europe, that problem is as old as history. No one there would dare question its necessity. The school curriculum gives a large portion to the study of modern languages. And this means not only one language. Now, if I were to mention results, many in my audience might call my statements incredible, especially if I should add that European pupils are not inferior in general knowledge to our Canadian pupils.

England, probably on account of her isolated position, has been reluctant in adopting such an elaborate programme. However, in 1918, the Committee appointed to inquire into the position of Modern Languages in the Education System of Great Britain, pointed out that modern language study has a practical value in connection with commerce, the public services and the increase of knowledge; and it is also a means to general education and culture, not only through the training it affords in accuracy of comprehension, expression, and what may be termed scholarship, but especially because "foreign languages help us to understand foreign peoples whose history is full of fascinating adventure, who have said and felt and seen and made things worthy of our comprehension, who are now alive and engaged in like travail with ourselves, who see things differently from ourselves and therefore can the better help us to understand what is the whole of truth."

As we shall see by the following, this report was endorsed by the educational authorities. Mr. A. Cozens Elliott, editor of the Linguists Review recently wrote in the British Chamber of Commerce Journal, that the change that has taken place in the last fifteen years is a veritable revolution. With exceptional opportunities of testing results, he says, I can affirm with confidence that the youth of England are far ahead of those of pre-war days as regards ability to speak foreign languages. He mentions the appeal of Sir Lacon Threlford that a more strenuous educational effort be made to make the British people a nation of linguists, and he terms it "an ideal worth working for, as its attainment would not only assist our recapture of foreign markets, but would be a potent force in preserving peace."

In Canada, although the problem is an old one, at least as to the acquisition of English by the French population, the authorities seemingly made little effort for a long while to improve methods and benefit by the experience of other countries. However little by little modern ideas crossed the ocean and spread over the frontier, with the result that a few years ago American and Canadian Committees on Modern Languages were appointed. The report of their

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findings, published in the French Word Book, coincides as to principles, with that of other countries.

As a consequence, many provinces have made real and earnest efforts to remodel their system in that respect, either for the teaching of English to French-speaking pupils or for the teaching of French to English pupils. Results have been more satisfactory where changes were more radical. But for want of publicity and interest in that direction, progress goes at a snail's pace.

Nevertheless, whether it takes time or not, there is progress. During the course of the present school year, many prominent men, some of international reputation, have come to Fredericton, through the invitation of the National Council of Education, and lectured in the Normal School auditorium. Many of them, undoubtedly on account of the present disturbed world situation, have proposed as the only possible solution for these difficulties that education be directed towards developing what some called "world mindedness."

Their arguments were considered so weighty that the same National Council of Education suggested as one topic for the Education Week "An International Outlook." The same trend of ideas could be noticed in some of the much enjoyed radio programmes of the local High School. One young lady in particular after having dealt with that matter in a masterly way, suggested geography as one of the ideal subjects for that purpose. In that respect, let me quote again Mr. W. Sherwood Fox, a man of experience who, more than thirty years ago, was a student in the University of Geneva and who has had an inside view of the language situation in the old countries. He says: "Any person who has traveled at all in foreign countries, even without becoming a student of languages, is keenly aware of the fact that no person can ever acquire a sympathetic understanding of any nation except through using its language."

No one needs any help to draw the conclusion.

Sir Andrew MacPhail, one of our outstanding Canadian citizens, deals very definitely with our special language question, in an article published by the Toronto Saturday Night of June 29, 1935. Pointing out two advantages of knowing well another language, he says: "He who speaks only his native language becomes careless—his words worn out, debased by usage. He who speaks a language that is learned anew gains a freshness and a precision in the value of words. For that reason, the best English in the world is spoken in those places where it has had to compete with the native tongue."

Let me sum up by saying that all this would prompt better understanding between the two chief elements of our Canadian population and turn into priceless benefits the vast amount of energy which goes to waste every year on account of this language question.

Ladies and gentlemen, we have come to a turning point in the history of the world. New international relations have rendered old and many present national policies detrimental to peace. It is the conflict between these different policies which is dragging the world into another terrible war. And this war is inevitable unless adjustments are made at once. Now, these adjustments require, for their quick realization on the one hand, leaders not only with broad views, but with the determination to bring about these changes, and on the other hand the sincere and active co-operation of the majority with the willingness to sacrifice petty and selfish national aims to the common good. To my mind, the future of nations depends on this

PICTURE STORIES ALASKA, QUEEN CHARLOTTE ISLES

Amos Burg, Famed
Magazine Writer, Gets
Information From C. N.
S. Official.

VANCOUVER, B.C., June 29—An interesting visitor at the Canadian National Steamships offices here today was Amos Burg, famed national geographic magazine writer, explorer, and lecturer, whose hair-raising adventures in the South Seas have been witnessed by thousands of travel motion picture enthusiasts.

This summer he will make motion picture stories in Alaska and in British Columbia's Queen Charlotte Islands for release through one of the large Hollywood organizations. He also plans on writing a number of travel articles in which the waters of British Columbia will receive prominence.

Mr. Burg is sailing north in his sprit-rigged surf boat, "Dorjun." In this small craft he has retraced Charles Darwin's voyage in the 'Beagle' explored the Patagonian archipelagos, passed and repassed Cape Horn and visited the home of the Yachan Indians, most primitive of the earth's peoples.

Through G. A. McNicholl, general passenger agent, Canadian National Railways and Steamships, an old acquaintance, Mr. Burg received a variety of information on his forthcoming trip and visited with Captain D. McKinnon of the SS. 'Prince Charles,' which makes the scenic Queen Charlotte Islands run for the Canadian National Steamships.

GANDHI IN BACKGROUND

Mahatma Gandhi is not the power he was in the Nationalist party of India, which he founded and made a finding force in that crowded, many-tongued and religiously divided country. Thrust into the background, he sees his policies and plans set aside by a new leader, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. This young man, aggressive and militant, has no patience with the Gandhi policy of passive resistance. He is for direct action.

The new Nationalist leader purposes to set up unions in the ranks of the peasants for strike movements against British rule. He promises results much faster than Gandhi, who moved with caution and always in a way that made it possible for him to exercise, when occasion offered, the privilege of negotiation. The policy of force which the new leader advocates is certain to challenge force on the other side.

Gandhi fears that the plans of his successor may result in loss of much that has been gained—that it may indeed lead to disruption of the Nationalist party. In that case serious difficulties probably would follow; and Gandhi might be hard put to it to salvage anything from the wreck. One may sympathize with him in the situation that has developed. His sincerity and simple goodness have given him world fame. It would be tragic indeed to see all his works destroyed.

principle. And it is my sincere hope that this same principle will soon be realized and that our British Empire will emerge from the present disturbed international situation a still stronger empire.

City of Fredericton

NOTICE OF ASSESSMENT

The Assessment Roll for the City of Fredericton for the year 1936, is now in the hands of the City Treasurer, for collection, and all persons therein assessed are hereby required to pay the amount of the respective taxes forthwith to the City Treasurer at his office in the City Hall, Fredericton. A discount of five per centum will be allowed on all taxes paid on or before the TWENTY-THIRD DAY OF JULY NEXT, after which date interest at the rate of one-half per centum per month will be added and execution may be issued and proceedings had thereon, as by law provided.

Dated at the City Hall, Fredericton, this twenty-second day of June, A.D. 1936.

FRED I. HAVILAND,
City Treasurer.

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