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FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING--A REVIEW OF CURRENT PROBLEMS.

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BECAUSE FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS HAVE NOT SUCCEEDED IN CRITICIZING OPENLY THE ILLS OF THE PROFESSION, A NUMBER OF CRITICAL PROBLEMS REMAIN UNSOLVED. IF THE NEED FOR UPGRADED SPECIFIC KINDS OF MATERIALS WOULD BE ARTICULATED OPENLY, PERHAPS PUBLISHERS WOULD PRODUCE MORE EFFECTIVE AND APPEALING TEXTBOOKS. IF THE PROFESSION WOULD RECOGNIZE THE POTENTIALS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE LABORATORY AS A PROGRAM SUPPLEMENT, THE NEED FOR DEVELOPING BETTER MATERIALS FOR PRACTICAL INSTRUCTIONAL PURPOSES, AND THE DESIRABILITY OF HAVING OPERATIONALLY AND MECHANICALLY LESS COMPLEX NEW EQUIPMENT DESIGNED FOR TEACHER USE, IT COULD GEAR THE REBIRTH OF THE LANGUAGE LABORATORY MOVEMENT TO FIT ITS PROJECTED TEACHING GOALS. IF A MORE EFFECTIVE DIALOG WERE TO EXIST BETWEEN THE COLLEGE ENTRANCE EXAMINATION BOARD (CEEB) AND SECONDARY AND COLLEGE TEACHERS, MUCH COULD BE ACCOMPLISHED IN HELPING THE TESTING SERVICE KEEP ITS MEASUREMENT PROCESSES MORE REALISTICALLY ATTUNED TO THE TREND IN MODERN LANGUAGE CURRICULUMS OF DEVELOPING ALL FOUR LANGUAGE SKILLS. FURTHERMORE, CEEB COULD HAVE A GREAT IMPACT NATIONALLY ON IMPROVING LANGUAGE TEACHING PRACTICES BY OUTLINING THE PEDAGOGICAL THEORY AND PHILOSOPHY UNDERLYING ITS TESTING TECHNIQUES. THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "THE INDEPENDENT SCHOOL BULLETIN," VOLUME 27, NUMBER 1, OCTOBER 1967, PAGES 39-43. (AB)

THE INDEPENDENT SCHOOL BULLETIN

OCTOBER 1967

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FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

A REVIEW OF CURRENT PROBLEMS

By Bruce E. Burdett

The function of the NAIS Foreign Languages Committee is to explore, in a very broad and general way, the field of foreign language teaching as a whole, rather than to concern itself with problems pertaining to the individual languages. Since its inception it has undertaken to determine what problems are of particular concern to teachers, and it has tried to shed helpful light on them, through its discussions, through its programs at the Annual Conferences of NAIS, and through occasional offerings in The Independent School Bulletin. We have been increasingly aware, in recent years, of the needs of beginning teachers, and of people who are starting or rebuilding schools or departments. These are the people who most frequently make their wishes known to us, and from whom we most often receive some sort of acknowledgment of help received.

As might be expected, our discussions range widely. Though our primary purpose is to be of service to teachers in member schools, we have always agreed that, as individuals, we derive great personal benefit from the talks that we have, talks that are most notable for the atmosphere of candor which pervades them. It is gratifying, and it is reassuring, to hear from a number of experienced and able colleagues that they, too, experience frustrations, failures, and predicaments similar or identical to our own. All too often, in meetings too large or too public for such candor to flourish, one hears only the official pronouncement, the story of success, of positive solutions, and of almost utopian programs. It is to be expected that in publications, by their nature very public things, this same optimistic mood will tend to prevail. One is given the impression that God's indeed in his Heaven—everywhere but in one's own personal situation. Yet we on the Committee know, and we are sure that many of you who read this article know too, that persistent dilemmas and problems exist in considerable numbers, and that many of them are not receiving the scrutiny they deserve.

In an unaccustomed burst of frankness, I said recently to a teacher of history, a man I really didn't know well enough to address so openly, "I think that, in general, the languages are worse taught, in our country, than any other course in the curriculum," and I meant it. To my astonishment, the man replied, "On the contrary, they couldn't possibly be as poorly taught as the social studies." I have tried out this gambit several times since, with teachers in other fields, and have received the same sort of response. The experience proves nothing conclusively, but it suggests a great deal. I was surprised by it at first because, to judge from the superficial impressions one gains by looking at almost any operation from the outside, it had seemed to me that every discipline but my own was in good order. The inference I draw is that the gravest problems are only discernible from within, from the perspective gained by daily experience and total preoccupation.

In the following pages, we want to share some thoughts about a number of areas of the foreign language field which, in our view, do not commonly receive the forthright kind of attention they merit, and must have if they are to be solved. We know that they are talked about, here and there, but not, as a rule, in the more public sort of forum. Our hope, obviously, is to stimulate others to explore them openly, in various ways, and to hasten the day when they cease to be problems.

How can we account for a reluctance to come to grips publicly with matters which concern our profession so intimately? There is probably no single answer, but a number suggest themselves. I am persuaded that our collective personality as school teachers is a contributing factor. We are not, as a group, people who are much given to vehemence or to strident expression, at least not in the marketplace. We come on softly, seek light rather than heat, and have keen sympathy for the feelings of others. Unfortunately, some of the problems that face us are the fault of individuals, and we shrink from criticizing

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them beyond a certain discreet point. And do we not, all of us, often refrain from going too deeply into matters which might expose shortcomings of our own? I know I do. It is more comfortable to look for trouble elsewhere, when we suspect that it really lies at home.

Another curious impediment to honest criticism is the traditional immunity enjoyed by commercial products and enterprises. (Until Ralph Nader, few people publicly found fault with Chevrolet, least of all the Ford people.) In the teaching field, we are dependent upon organizations of every description which are in business to make money. They sell us the goods and the services we must have to do our work. It is vitally important to us that what they place on the market be of the highest quality, and that it be tailored carefully to our needs. Yet we hear daily in our private talks with colleagues that the things we need are simply not to be had, or that they only partially fill the bill. Such grievances as these, which should be made known forcibly and in public, seldom are developed beyond the point of casual grumblings.

There is no doubt that to a large extent the independent school teacher is limited in his choice of materials by the fact that he represents only a relatively small per cent of the total market. What is available is what the public schools will buy in sufficient quantities to make it worth producing. Yet our needs are sufficiently unique to constitute an important market if we were to make them known; and it has become a commonplace in our society that what is needed gets produced.

To illustrate what I mean, I have never seen mention of the notion that the language class in the boys' school requires a very different kind of fare from its counterpart in the girls' or the coeducational school. Yet, as a teacher of boys, I have long sensed that the textbooks we have to choose from are geared for feminine rather than for masculine interests. The reading passages in most grammar books are commonly so saccharine, so "Pollyanna," that even girls, I am told, find them difficult to bear, least of all to take seriously. In them, people speak and act in a way that living people never do. The illustrations in a popular series of textbooks which our classes are currently using are so grotesque and unappealing that each year I am compelled to join my students in honest ridicule of them. Only as the butt of jokes do they become tolerable. How often have we all heard in conversation the opinion that such-and-such a book is fine, except that it lacks sufficient exercise material, or conversation questions, or interesting supplementary passages for reading? Most people, and I think many teachers, will agree that the study of grammar is not of itself the most entertaining of pursuits, however necessary it may be thought to be. Would not a touch of humor, or a fine sense of irony, do much to temper the tedium of learning the use of the French infinitive? Some small progress is being made, by a handful of intrepid writers and publishers, in alleviating the shortage of textbooks that are both nourishing and palatable. But the work has just begun, and it is the obligation of the teacher to be very articulate, both about what he wants and about what he wants no more of.

THE advent of the language laboratory has opened up a new and vast field into which the materials-creators have just begun to move. Most of what is now available is designed to be used in close conjunction with elementary grammar courses. Much of it, in fact, simply restates verbatim on tape or on discs whole segments of the text it supplements. In actual practice, this type of recorded material is of only limited usefulness.

One cannot in good conscience be too sharp in criticism of the publishers here. What they did was to follow the suggestions of the earliest experimenters in the field of language laboratory construction and use, and they did it at a time when many important lessons had not yet been learned. Most teachers assumed in the early days that what one did with a laboratory was to take entire classes into it and have the students listen and repeat material, most of which was to be found in their textbooks. They thought that, through a sort of sonic osmosis, correct new language habits would be magically formed. But they quickly learned several disappointing things. Once the delightful novelty of the electronic toy wore off (and it wore off very quickly), the student came to regard the lab work as a bore and a nuisance. Often he intoned the material on the tapes listlessly. The headset began to hurt after a while. A variety of irritating tape noises interfered with the recorded voices. And, most important of all, the student did not see the magical effects that he had been told would result. The outcome, in many cases, was a grave disillusionment to teacher and student alike.

In recent months, there have been many signs that the language laboratory movement may be undergoing a sort of second birth. In my own area, teachers are comparing notes, visiting each other's installations, and having long, soul-searching talks. Indications are that the same thing is happening on a large scale throughout the country. People want to know what went wrong, and what can be done.

At least part of the problem can be attributed to the nature of the available materials themselves. Simply to say, in effect, "Listen to the authentic oral recording of today's lesson; it will do you good," was

not enough. When the fun wore off, the student quickly discovered two things: first, that it is perfectly possible to hear something for a period of time without listening to it; and, second, that it is all printed in the book anyway, so why bother. Regrettably, he was often abetted by the fact that his grade still depended almost entirely upon composition and translation, rather than on his oral achievement, so the motivation to train his ear and his tongue was partially, or even wholly, lacking.

One of the first remedies that began to suggest themselves was that taped materials should *not* be mere transcriptions of the printed text. They should be based on the same vocabulary and syntax as the daily lesson, insofar as possible, but should be sufficiently different from it in context so that the student would be compelled, in doing his assignment, to work *with* the lab. He would have to listen, as well as to hear. He would have to study his tape with exactly the same concentration that he had always had to study his book. And he would have to be convinced that he could not do the work in his next class satisfactorily unless he studied his tape, for his tape would be *the only source* of the information he had to have. This realization has apparently compelled many inventive teachers to create their own taped materials by microphone recording, conscious even as they do it that there is no satisfactory substitute for an authentic native accent. What is needed, therefore, and needed desperately, is a large quantity of well-recorded material, spoken by natives, independent of printed texts, but closely coordinated with the progress of the course they accompany. The materials themselves may be almost infinitely varied in content: questions to be answered, dictation passages, short anecdotes, dialogues, news items, historical accounts, poems, songs. It would be useful, of course, if scripts were available for the teacher, but the student must be made to rely on *the sound he hears*, rather than on the printed word. And finally, they should be available at a reasonable cost, so that a school could collect a large library within the limits of a modest budget. Up to the present time, the prices of the available taped lesson material has been, many of us have found, prohibitively high.

It is logical for our discussion to move from here into the question of the physical equipment itself. A great deal of the lamentation that is heard refers to labs which break down repeatedly, which are too complicated for many teachers to operate, which are easy prey to vandalism, and which do not produce satisfactory sound. Many schools are now working with their second labs, having torn out the first after they proved unworkable. There are reports of schools' waiting interminably for service while their labs, or parts of them, stand idle.

A large part of the responsibility in this sort of problem must lie with the manufacturers, who must take very seriously the complaints that are made, and bend every effort to improve their product. The teacher and the engineer must engage in a candid and a continuous dialogue, for each has much to learn from the other. The manufacturer's maintenance operation must be made at least as competitive as the sales force, and particular attention must be paid to preventive maintenance. Wherever possible, trouble must be averted before it happens, or at least before irreparable damage is done.

On the other hand, the school has a responsibility in the use and care of the equipment which is frequently not being met. In too many cases, no member of the staff is actively in charge, so that difficulties are not detected promptly. Very often we hear that not even minimal precautions are taken to prevent malicious damage, to which this kind of equipment is peculiarly susceptible. Schools with very large installations probably should hire a technician whose sole occupation is to supervise and operate the electronic components. In most instances, this work is rather informally handled by members of the teaching staff who are already fully occupied with other tasks. If no technician can be justified, some responsible person should be trained in at least the more rudimentary types of minor repair. For example, I was able to avoid a breakdown and a service call simply by locating three loose connections and then doing the necessary soldering, a fifteen-minute job. And I certainly recommend that maintenance contracts be negotiated as soon as the guarantee has expired. The finest components on the market will break down periodically; and when they do, it is not a job for the do-it-yourself repairman or the local electrical store.

The most sensitive aspect of this entire complex matter has to do neither with material nor with equipment; it is what we must call the psychological factor. The most frequent complaint we hear is that certain members of the language faculty either refuse to use the laboratory as a matter of principle, or are not ambitious enough to learn how. If either of these situations exists in a school, it would probably be wise to question seriously the advisability of installing a laboratory at all. Many are the instances of costly equipment, often in good working order, standing idle for days and weeks at a time, only because no one knows what to do with it, or cares enough to learn. This is a problem that must be attacked by each individual school in its own way, and its solution will necessarily depend upon the personalities that make up the teaching staff. It is the strong consensus of the members of this committee that the laboratory can be an extremely useful supplement to a language program, provided that a number of essen-

tial conditions are met. We must learn what the lab can do and what it cannot do. New materials must be created to satisfy the practical needs of the teacher. The shortcomings of existing equipment must be diligently studied by everyone concerned, so that future labs will be simpler to operate, more trouble-free, and increasingly consistent with the teacher's practical needs.

It is scarcely possible for secondary school teachers to discuss their work for very long without bringing up the question of the CEEB examinations. As long as the conversation remains intimate, a great many honest opinions are exchanged, many of them refreshingly heretical. But let the meeting become too large, or too public, or too formal, and a pall of reticence is likely to descend. It is as if each person felt that, by criticizing this long-established institution, he was somehow confessing to his own inability to cope, or to his school's lack of competitive stature.

I hasten to say that the Committee is not in sympathy with a great many of the complaints commonly leveled against the exams. The tests are, in fact, created by reputable teachers with reasonable goals in mind. Careful efforts are made to inform and orient the students who take them and, to some extent, their teachers, who are naturally curious about their content. The security precautions, often elaborate to the point of drollery, are nonetheless necessary to insure equal examination conditions for every student.

In the foreign language field, however, recent developments in teaching techniques have brought about changes to which the examiners have been unaccountably slow to react, In brief, whereas strenuous efforts are being made by many teachers to teach *all four* language skills, the examinations still test only two. They cover very thoroughly the student's ability to read the printed word and to write it, but completely overlook his ability to speak and to understand what he hears spoken. In my opinion, a student who has had an archaic, but thoroughly-taught, two-skill course has an advantage over a student who has also been taught speaking and oral comprehension, since the former has spent all his class time concentrating on the areas which the exam tests.

Granted that the so-called Supplementary Achievement Tests of Listening Comprehension (SATLC) represent an effort to recognize the attainments of the student who has had a well-balanced four-skill course, nonetheless the tests still are not very widely administered, and apparently enjoy little prestige. Although the CEEB has explained their purpose clearly, many students *and* teachers do not have a clear idea of what use the colleges make of them. The opinion, in fact, is widespread that the tests mean very little to the colleges, and that they are largely experimental. We hear of many schools which simply do not bother to give them at all.

Language teachers have been led to believe that at some future time the tests will be made a compulsory part of the FL Achievement Test, and we hope that that time is not far off. We hope, too, that colleges will make clear to secondary schools what use, if any, they are making of the test scores. Many teachers feel that more colleges should *require* a report of the SATLC scores along with the applicant's other credentials. Others, acting independently, require that the tests be taken as part of their own schools' course requirements, and the students' scores are reflected in their final grades. In such cases, the tests are put to a valid, practical use for which they were perhaps not intended, and the scores are on file in the event that any college wishes to have them.

It would be very useful to teachers if the CEEB would publish from time to time an information bulletin for *teachers* to enlighten the profession as a whole about matters of common concern. These matters would be pedagogical in nature, rather than statistical. Many of us would like to know, for example, what the CEEB has learned from past testing programs about continually recurring shortcomings of examinees. We should like to be kept informed about CEEB's plans for future testing services, and about projected changes in existing ones. We should like to be told not only about how the tests should be administered and evaluated, but about the pedagogical theory and philosophy which underlie them. We believe that the tests could serve the profession as a teaching device, as well as a tool for measurement, if the Board would share its findings and its reflections more freely with the men and women who prepare students for college. Conversely, one often hears the suggestion from college language departments that the Achievement Test scores are not an accurate guide to placement of incoming students, and that they are relying increasingly on placement exams of their own making. Most frequently, the complaint is that some students with impressively high scores are utterly unprepared for a college class in which the foreign language is used exclusively in the classroom. Again, much could be accomplished if better communication were established between the three principals involved: the testing service, the secondary school teachers, and the colleges. An information bulletin would be a helpful step in the establishment of such communication.

I am certainly not suggesting that the teacher's aim should be to teach for the College Board exams. But

if a teacher is reluctant to do so, it must be because he regards them as an inadequate standard. And if this is so, surely ETS would wish to know every detail of his dissatisfaction, just as it would want to learn why an entering freshman's classroom performance did not measure up to his achievement score. Assuming that all parties are interested in improving the quality of the job they do, certainly much more is to be gained by a free exchange of information than by intramural muttering. Say what one will of the tests, they are the nearest thing we have to a nationwide criterion, and we should both devise them and use them as effectively as our collective efforts will allow.

The CEEB, in turn, is in an excellent position to go far beyond its essential function. It could do much to solidify and to further the advances now being made in the improvement of FL teaching techniques throughout the country. For in this area our schools, public and private alike, are involved in a vast and perplexing paradox. Although what might be called the audio-lingual revolution has been under way for many years, indications are that the conventional two-skill method is still firmly entrenched in many schools. If a really effective three- or even four-skill achievement test could be devised, many schools would be encouraged and even compelled to upgrade their teaching techniques. The day would thus be hastened when American secondary school students would no longer study a foreign language for three, four, and five years, with at best a partial command to show for it. The so-called "grammar-translation" method is dying hard, and for a number of reasons. Many teachers have been teaching for a very long time and are reluctant to change their familiar ways. The old way is easier because, in fact, the teacher needs to have only two skills himself. Oral proficiency is a complex thing to teach, and oral performance is difficult to grade. The four-skill course undeniably moves more slowly, at least at the outset, and there are many pressures to accelerate. Though few would deny that ultimately it is the FL teachers themselves who must determine their own standards, nevertheless the CEEB could render an extremely valuable assist. By keeping its testing technique constantly abreast of the most advanced developments in the classroom, it would lend its admittedly enormous prestige to an endeavor of crucial importance to our students and our whole educational structure.

Our discussion has touched upon four vital and, we hope, controversial areas of the FL teaching field. We have explored the upgrading of texts and materials; the language laboratory; the improvement of three-way communication between the secondary school teacher, the colleges, and the CEEB; and the need to strengthen and broaden the improvements in FL teaching techniques.

In closing, we should like to suggest a number of other topics which frequently arise in our Foreign Language Committee meetings and wherever teachers gather to discuss their work. Some are of a sensitive nature and some are not, but each one could furnish matter for long debate, and each represents a problem that needs to be solved. Stated in question form, they are: Is the "language requirement" for secondary school graduation a valid educational concept? Why must the dialogue between school and college language teachers be as limited as it is? How are the schools coping with the problem of the "very poor linguist"? Does not the advent of the four-skill approach necessitate a slowing down of the teaching pace in the first and second years? Why do some headmasters apparently stifle communication between NAIS and the teacher? Is the time-honored, one-year-at-a-time promotion theory a practical one for language study? Do we not need a system whereby teachers may periodically have their skills evaluated against a national criterion? How can we narrow the gap in understanding that exists between public and independent schools? How is FLES progressing? And, finally, how can the NAIS Foreign Languages Committee improve and broaden its function? Needless to say, it is the hope of the Association, and of this Committee in particular, that any interested teacher or administrator will not refrain from expressing his views, his objections, or his suggestions, either on the subjects to which we have alluded here, or on any related subject. Our essential premise is that in matters which concern us all so intimately, a free flow of ideas leads ultimately to solutions.