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FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN SOVIET SCHOOLS.

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THREE UNITED STATES SPECIALISTS IN TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES SPENT 23 DAYS IN RUSSIA TO LEARN ABOUT WHAT SOVIET SCHOOLS ARE DOING IN THAT FIELD. THEIR REPORT HERE IS BASED ON INTERVIEWS WITH 120 SOVIET EDUCATORS AND VISITS TO 29 EDUCATIONAL AND RESEARCH INSTITUTIONS. REFORMS INITIATED BY THE SOVIET MINISTRY OF EDUCATION IN 1957 ARE BEING CARRIED OUT, AND CERTAIN REVISIONS IN MATERIALS AND METHODS ARE ALREADY IN OPERATION. INCLUDED HERE ARE THE SPECIALISTS' OBSERVATIONS ON THE COMPETENCY OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH, THE RESULTS OF TEACHER TRAINING PROGRAMS, ENROLLMENTS IN ENGLISH COURSES, TEXTBOOKS AND INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS (MOST OF WHICH HAVE NOT BEEN ADAPTED SUCCESSFULLY TO THE NEW TEACHING METHODS), A LACK OF INSTRUCTION IN CULTURE, AND LANGUAGE LABORATORIES. THIS ARTICLE IS A REPRINT FROM "SCHOOL LIFE," OCTOBER 1960. (AS)

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Foreign languages in Soviet schools

Although it is generally agreed that U.S. schools must meet U.S. needs and that the Soviet system of education would not serve our people, still American educators and the American public are comparing the systems and asking questions: Are Soviet schools better than U.S. schools? Are Soviet pupils learning more than U.S. pupils? To learn what Soviet schools are doing in foreign languages, three U.S. specialists in the teaching of foreign languages spent 23 days in the USSR—under the cultural exchange agreement between the Soviet and the U.S. Governments. There they interviewed 120 educators, individually or in groups, and visited institutions of various types, including 12 elementary and secondary schools, 6 teacher training institutes, 4 universities, 3 research institutes, and 4 ministries of education.

THE SOVIET UNION is revising its foreign language program in the schools. The new program is destined to begin formally this school year; but when we visited the country, in April, strenuous efforts were already under way to alter and improve instruction on the basis of recommendations appearing in the official language journal *Inostrannye iazyki v shkole* and in pamphlets prepared at the Institute of Teaching Methods.

Reason for the change was stated in a criticism in an official pronouncement, "For a Thoroughgoing Improvement in the Teaching of Foreign Languages," in the May-June issue, 1959, of *Inostrannye iazyki v shkole*:

"It is well known that the teaching of foreign languages in middle schools has up to now been suffering under serious inadequacies connected chiefly with abstractness in teaching and with insufficient attention to the practical training of students in foreign language and the inculcation of ability to use their knowledge in practice. The middle schools up to the present time have not been supplying means to a practical mastery of a foreign language for their graduates."

The pronouncement goes on to detail the steps being taken to reform Soviet language programs. The reform

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was initiated in 1957 when the Ministry of Education of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (RSFSR) commissioned the Institute of Teaching Methods—one of the eight research institutes of the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences—to work out, in cooperation with certain institutions of higher education, a new language program for the schools. (The Academy of Pedagogical Sciences is the center of educational research in the USSR. It is responsible for the development of textbooks, teaching aids, and curriculum and for the study of comparative education. It is supported by the RSFSR but it influences education in all other republics.) In March 1958 the RSFSR Ministry cleared the program that had been prepared. From September 1958 through the spring of 1960 first-year textbooks for English, French, and German, which were to be the basis of the new program, were tried out in the fifth-grade classes in a number of experimental schools sponsored by the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences. Beginning this fall, the new course of study with some revisions will go into general use in Soviet schools, systematically replacing the beginning textbook series formerly used. Meanwhile textbooks for succeeding grades are being developed or tried out.

At least four circumstances prevailing in the Soviet Union will probably hasten the effect of the new program.

1. All school students except those in some rural areas where effective instruction cannot be provided are required to take 6 years of a nonsoviet foreign language, beginning in grade 5 and continuing through grade 10, the last year of the 10-year school. Those who go on to higher education must continue language study.

2. Strict classroom discipline and hard work are routine with Soviet pupils.

3. Centralized control of curriculum, methods, production and approval of instructional methods, and teacher training make it possible to enforce reforms.

4. Soviet people, especially those in republics where languages other than Russian are spoken, are highly language conscious; many are competent in two languages and some in three or four.

In the schools we visited the teachers were already following the new recommendations. Our report of our observations is therefore essentially a description of a transitional period.

The goal of the revised program is for each student to acquire the ability to carry on simple conversations on

general subjects and to read simple texts without a dictionary in at least one foreign language. To achieve this goal, teachers stress practice in using the language, especially in speaking during the early stages of instruction.

Competent teachers

We were much impressed by the language competency and the personality of most of the teachers of English we observed. If, in many of these instances, the Soviets were deliberately showing us teachers they considered superior, then their best is of a very high order. We saw alert young women leading their classes in a very authentic if formal British English, young women of warm personality and good humor, faithfully adhering to their orders to get pupils to speak in English. When we had conversation with them, they easily understood us and responded readily.

We also saw teachers who, though probably highly efficient under the old style of teaching, were having great difficulty with the new. In one class the teacher spoke fluently but with a broken synthetic British pronunciation. Her pupils mimicked her so faithfully, with the typical intense raptness of Soviet pupils, that we had difficulty in understanding what they were saying.

We were reminded in this classroom of how hard it is for even a good teacher experienced in using one method to change to another. And here too we found convincing evidence that the Soviet practice of keeping the same teacher with a language class from the first year to the last is fundamentally unwise, especially when the teacher is a faulty speaker.

Instructors at pedagogical institutes, special foreign language institutes, and universities all say that the principal objective of higher education in language is the preparation of teachers, with the preparation of interpreters and translators a close second. Since these institutions have more applications for admission than they accept, their standards for admission are high.

All students admitted to a higher institution have had 6 years of language and those admitted to a language training program must complete 5 more years of concentrated language study to earn a diploma. (According to the official program they are required to have 272 semester hours for graduation, with a little more than half of these in the language they plan to teach.) With a diploma they may teach in any Soviet republic without further certification.

On the whole, the results of the teacher-training programs seemed notable, although length of time and sheer hard work should perhaps be given more credit than the quality of training. We talked at some length with groups of English majors and found them fluent and accurate in their speech. We believe, however, that more effective training might have achieved the same result in less time, though both the long sequence and the quality of results far surpass those of any typical training program

for language teachers in the United States. Clearly language faculties in higher institutions are laboring within their abilities and means to turn out new model teachers with the speaking proficiency demanded by the revised program.

According to the USSR Deputy Minister of Higher Education, 12,400 of the students enrolled in college in 1959-60 were training to become teachers, translators, or interpreters of English. Such a large number of coming English teachers seems highly significant in view of three facts: (1) the USSR maintains that it has no shortage of teachers; (2) quotas of teachers in training are set by the ministers of education of the various republics, which means that the number must reflect a plan; and (3) the Lenin State Pedagogical Institute in Moscow had 230 English majors last spring but none in the third or fourth years because, according to the staff, the Ministry had not called for any freshman majors in 1956-57 and 1957-58.

The large number of students now preparing to become teachers of English may indicate that the USSR is planning to expand the teaching of English, particularly in the lower grades. Further expansion will mean a heavy concentration on English in Soviet schools, for English is already the most popular foreign language offered. According to the USSR Deputy Minister of Higher Education, about three-fourths of all students in higher education in the USSR study English; 60 percent of all language majors are in English; and there are 77 English faculties in higher institutions.

The Ministry of Education gave us no statistics on enrollment in foreign languages in elementary and secondary schools, but recent Soviet publications report that 45 percent of all pupils, excluding those in experimental and exotic language programs, study English; 35 percent, German; and 20 percent, French or Spanish (we visited no Spanish classes, nor could anyone we asked tell us where Spanish was being offered).

As we see it, the major weakness of Soviet language programs lies in the methods and materials being used, for they severely limit the effectiveness of programs, however proficient teachers may be in the language they teach and despite the advantages of long sequences and disciplined students. The weakness is understandable, for the traditional analytical method is not easily adapted to teaching language as communication, and the new materials soon to go into general use still bear a heavy freight of abstract analysis.

Textbooks, auxiliary instructional materials, techniques, and methods are all universally prescribed and used. The educators who are responsible for developing them and for pedagogical research are either unable to free themselves from the analytical method or unaware that the teaching of the spoken language may call for a wholly different concept of language and pedagogy. Soviet researchers and phonetics teachers are familiar with American structural linguistics—a science that has contributed

much to the philosophy and techniques of audiolingual teaching in United States schools—but no one we questioned thought that linguistics had any pertinence to classroom teaching.

We noted one other significant limitation, by our standards, in Soviet instructional materials: Language is taught as a linguistic code and neither textbooks or supplementary teaching materials used in the lower grades contain information on the culture of the people whose language is being taught. For example, in his first years of studying English a Soviet pupil learns nothing of the culture of the people who speak English. In his later years he reads American and British fiction and nonfiction of the 1930's or earlier. We were told that beginning textbooks exclude information on foreign culture to avoid burdening pupils with both a new language and a new culture.

In most higher education institutions we visited we saw language laboratories well equipped with magnetic tape recorders and players but with varying physical arrangements. We also saw some interesting operations. Although both instructors and students take laboratory equipment seriously, we doubt whether it is being used as effectively as possible. We saw no audio material keyed to standard classroom instructional materials, and we assume that the USSR produces none, but we heard that it imports commercially available language tapes and transcribes foreign radio broadcasts on tapes for use in language laboratories. With few exceptions, we thought the sound reproduction by electronics equipment of poor physical quality but that may have been the result of poor maintenance.

None of the grade schools we visited had language laboratories, and we saw only one grade school teacher using a tape recorder. We noticed, however, that grade school teachers generally were making good use of visual aids, particularly posters and projected slides, to stimulate pupils to speak on a given subject. Apparently motion picture films are not widely used in either grade schools or higher institutions.

We were particularly eager to learn the results of Soviet experiments with language instruction in the lower grades. Fortunately, we were able to observe classes in nine schools where children begin to study a foreign language at various ages—some in a boarding kindergarten at 5 years; some in the third grade at 9 years. The languages now being offered include Arabic, English, French, Hindi, Urdu, and Russian—the last beginning in the second grade for all children in non-Russian-speaking republics.

Strong support

There are indications that persons high in authority are interested in these pilot programs in the early grades, are willing to invest heavily in them, and are making it possible for them to operate under the best possible conditions. The teachers are good; discipline is good; the children are naturally receptive and enthusiastic.

And the programs are getting good results. Children are making substantial progress in learning to speak a foreign language and considerable progress in reading and writing.

The pride with which Soviet officials showed us these classes suggests that they already have confidence in their success. It seems very likely, judging from the number of students now in training to become teachers of English, that the Soviets plan to expand the English program in the lower grades.

We observed classes in a Moscow boarding school where children begin to study Hindi and Urdu in the second grade and three schools in Tashkent where they begin Arabic in the third grade. The Tashkent classes were of a superior order, taught by effective and linguistically competent young women who had been trained at the nearby State University of Tashkent.

In earlier issues of School Life

The Russian Race for Knowledge, by Lawrence G. Denthick, June 1958, pp. 3-4.

Through Soviet Eyes: Report of U.S.S.R. team of educators on their visit to U.S. schools, January-February 1959, pp. 8-10, 23.

Soviet Educational Research: Its Organization and Tasks, by William K. Medlin, October 1959, pp. 18-21.

Science and Mathematics Education in the U.S.S.R. Today, by Clarence B. Lindquist, November 1959, pp. 8-12.

Practical Work—An Essential Part of Soviet Education, by Marshall L. Schmitt, November 1959, pp. 13-17.

According to the Deputy Minister of Higher Education, oriental languages are taught in the State universities of Moscow, Leningrad, Tbilisi, Tashkent, Baku, Yerevan, and Stalinabad. We asked to visit higher education classes in oriental languages, but were given no opportunity to do so. We surmise, however, that Soviet institutions offer fewer programs in Asian and African languages than American universities, that their classes are generally small, and that language teaching is highly conservative but changing.

We agree that our visit to the USSR was profitable. Although we were not given all the information we wanted, did not visit as many classrooms as we wished to, we were treated with professional courtesy wherever we went and sometimes with sincere cordiality, and we learned enough to make some comparisons and to draw some conclusions. In two ways, at least, the U.S. and the USSR are alike. Both recognize that a strong language program in schools and colleges is necessary to national and international progress. Both are supporting a reform program.