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The article outlines foreign language goals, identifying specific linguistic aims and indicating major factors responsible for student incompetency in language skills. The teacher shortage, the frequent lack of program coordination and articulation, professional disunity, and time limitations are briefly discussed. The need for paying more serious attention to MLA guidelines and standards and the necessity of supporting the policies of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) is stressed. Suggestions are made for improving teacher training standards and for expanding study opportunities for in-service teachers. (DS)

FOREIGN LANGUAGE OBJECTIVES: MYTHS AND REALITIES

by

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Almost six years ago now the Advisory Committee on Foreign Languages for the State of Massachusetts published a basic guide for the improvement of foreign language programs in Massachusetts. In this pamphlet the committee, composed of leading Massachusetts educators and foreign language specialists at every level, set forth what it felt were the desirable goals of foreign language study. The general aims were:

"1. to enable the student to communicate effectively in the foreign language.

2. to help the student acquire a deeping knowledge, understanding, and appreciation of another people's language and culture.

3. to develop in the student an awareness of the relation between his own language and civilization and those of another country and, as a consequence, a better perspective on American culture and a more enlightened attitude as an American citizen."[1]

The committee then went on to identify certain specific linguistic aims requisite to achieving the general aims. For the modern foreign languages the following were cited:

"1. to understand the language as it is spoken by native speakers without reference to English.

2. to speak the language in a manner acceptable to natives.

3. to read literary texts, newspapers, and magazines without conscious translation.

4. to write, using the authentic patterns of the foreign language."[2]

I can't imagine anyone here today, be he an elementary, secondary or college teacher, seriously disputing the desirability of these objectives. However, I should like to ask of everyone who teaches a terminal course in a modern foreign language: What percentage of your students achieves all these objectives? From my own experience and from discussions with many colleagues I think I can safely predict that your responses would be less than gratifying. I venture to say also that further questioning would reveal a clear pattern as to incidence of success in each of the skills. For example, I would imagine that the reading objective is attained more frequently than any of the others and that, on the other hand, the speaking skill remains a remote and frustratingly elusive adversary that yields only occasionally to the most naturally gifted few. I would bet furthermore that such a consensus would represent not only the traditionalists in our ranks but also the many of us who use audio-lingual texts, have a language lab at our disposal, and are conversant with modern approaches to language teaching.

But let me hasten to correct any mistaken impression that I am condemning the innovations and progressive developments of the past decade. Actually I subscribe to no system or slogans or convenient labels. The only dogma I can embrace at the moment is that there should be no dogma in foreign teaching methods. There may be paradigms in declensions and conjugations but, I believe, there are no paradigms for successful teaching approaches. The controversy between the traditionalists and the audio-lingualists that flares up frequently when teachers of foreign language get together reminds me a bit of the current political scene. There are responsible and enlightened right-wingers and left-wingers but there are also, if I may say so, the lunatic fringes at both ends of the spectrum which hurl at each other slogans such as "Better read than said" or vice versa. When the pronouncements of these extremists become less aggressive -- but no less dogmatic -- they begin to assume the tone of the self-righteous missionary and in place of critical attitudes we get -- no, not even platitudes -- but beatitudes: "Blessed are the poor in pronunciation for they shall be comforted with laundry lists of vocabulary words to memorize," or "Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for oral practice for they shall be satisfied with endless pattern drills."

I don't think our problems lie so much in the area of methods and approaches. It seems to me there are other more critical factors which have prevented us from achieving all our objectives consistently. If it is true, as I think it is, that the majority of our students complete their foreign language training without having attained a full measure of competence in all the skills, I submit it is mainly a result of 1) a horrendous shortage of good teachers, 2) lack of both intra- and extramural coordination and articulation which, in turn, is at least partially attributable to the lack of unity within our profession, and 3) lack of time. I should like now to discuss these factors further, taking them up in reverse order.

We language teachers forget all too often - more particularly perhaps, fail to impress upon administrators - that learning a foreign language, is like learning to swim, or to type, or to drive a car -- only much more subtle and complicated. Like the other activities it is a skill, and the difference in the learning process lies more in degree than in kind. All the skills I have mentioned involve the development of automatic reflex actions and such development in turn requires sustained uninterrupted periods of practice. The degree of proficiency attained is in direct proportion to the time spent in active practice. That is why the military language schools and similar total immersion programs are successful and we in the schools and colleges are mostly not. How, for example, can we expect to produce fluency or even a faint facsimile thereof in our college students after two or three years when, in a typical program, these students are exposed to a foreign language for three periods a week, 30 weeks a year, and a lab period, usually optional, thrown in once a week during the first year as a kind of token gesture towards audio-lingual training? How often does a student actually get to speak the language under these conditions? Let us assume that with an extraordinarily efficient instructor a student may manage to average a total of three minutes of individual speaking drill per class. That would mean he would have 4 1/2 hours of speaking practice per year. I don't know how many hours of active practice the average college student would need in order to gain speaking proficiency, but I'm pretty confident that the figure of 4 1/2 hours per year, even if augmented by lab work, which could bring the figure for the first year up to as "much" as 12 or 13 hours, is nowhere near the required minimum. I don't think I'm exaggerating or distorting the facts. A student learns to speak only by speaking; listening or paying attention in class is of course necessary, but not enough. Imagine a typing class of, say, 20 students with only one typewriter between them and this one typewriter having constantly to be passed around in order to give each student a turn at practice. Under these conditions it will surely take a student a very long time before he can type with reasonable facility. Our students learn to speak a foreign language in an analogous situation. Therefore, we should not expect them to achieve that skill unless they have a sequence of several years in a language. In recent years the situation in the secondary schools has begun to improve with the establishment of longer sequences in the better school systems. Where students are getting a four-year sequence of a foreign language and good teaching throughout the four years, the results are, if not totally satisfying, at least promising. For if such students continue with that language in college, say two more years, I think they have an excellent chance of attaining all the objectives. As for students who only begin a foreign language as college freshmen and complete a typical 2-year or perhaps even 3-year language requirement, let's be perfectly candid. These students will, with the rarest exceptions, not achieve the speaking objective, indeed, they will be hard pressed to achieve the desired levels in the writing and understanding skills. I think most of us realize this but we are reluctant to admit it.

But important as time is, time alone will not suffice. Talk of sequences and continuation of a foreign language from one level to another presumes the kind of intra- and inter-level organization and coordination which at present is, if not non-existent, at least as rare as snow in Africa. Call it articulation if you like, call it coherence, call it anything you like; the fact remains that the lack of smooth transition from class to class, from school to school, and from level to level is a serious obstacle to success in our foreign language programs. Let us look at some typical problems that confront us in this category.

Exhibit A: Suburban Evergreen H.S. offers 4-year sequences in French and Spanish and groups its students homogeneously in 3 tracks. A couple of years ago the school officials introduced a modern foreign language in the 7th grade too. When these students eventually get to the 9th grade, i.e. to the High School, are they to be kept separate, thus creating even more tracks, or should they merge with the students who began the language at the High School? Merging students of different ages and linguistic preparation poses great problems, so the decision may well be to have the extra tracks. What happens now if the Evergreen Schools ever adopt a FLES program? If these FLES students are also kept in separate tracks, would not the town of Evergreen have to construct a new building just to house the language

empire?

Exhibit B: The Nevergreen school system which contains one high school and four junior high schools has as Superintendent a man who is firmly convinced of local autonomy. Foreign languages are taught in the high and junior high schools. Each school has its own head of department, who, jealously protecting his independence, directs the language program at his school as he sees fit. The department head at the High School, however, has the unenviable task of offering a smooth transition to students who come to him from the different junior highs with differing backgrounds. He is a prematurely gray young man with chronic ulcer problems.

Exhibit C: Evergreen High school has instituted an Advanced Placement course for its best French students. Bertram Brilliant has taken the course, achieved a top score of 5, and now enters Precocious University. But Precocious University does not recognize the Advanced Placement Program. It magnanimously places Mr. Brilliant in a third-year French course, Introduction to French Literature, which not only requires less work of him than he had in the A.P. course but offers the dubious attraction of lectures in English.

Exhibit D: At the same university, students who have had at least two years of prior study in a language but fail to qualify for the intermediate level get no credit for the elementary course if they still want to continue with that language. Now most students are not willing to begin their college careers so auspiciously as to fall 6 or 8 credits behind without having even unpacked their trunks, so they elect a new language. At Prodigy College on the other side of town, however, students get credit no matter when their level turns out to be. One shrewd fellow, determined to have both the language and diploma of his choice, is enrolling at Prodigy College for the first two years and then transferring to Precocious U. for the last two years.

These and numerous other problems could be considerably reduced if in our profession there existed a measure of uniformity, of standardization, of reciprocity and cooperation. Surely there must be a happy medium between the present state of total laisser-faire and the equally to be avoided condition of momolithic homogeneity. If enough of us would adhere to some reasonable guidlines that could compel the assent of reasonable people, we would have succeeded in bringing a semblance of order to the anarchy which presently frustrates our efforts. This means the establishment of valid criteria for levels of achievement and means of measurement which the majority are willing to accept and implement. If the College Board Aptitude and Achievement Tests can have attained the status of being a common frame of reference for admissions criteria, why then can we in the foreign language profession not have acknowledged standards that merit comparable recognition?

Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the present chaos is due less to a lack of guidelines and standards than to our indifference towards those standards that have in fact been suggested. The MLA which could be called, I suppose, our common parent organization has in recent years indeed addressed itself to some of the key issues and problems in foreign language teaching and despite its comparatively limited funds, personnel and, thus, influence, has come up on occasion with recommendations, criteria and tests. If more often than not these carefully prepared offerings have received only token acceptance, then it is probably a reflection of our cheerful indifference and perhaps reluctance to alter the status quo. I should like to cite but one specific example in the form of a question. How many foreign language departments which send teachers out into the schools administer to their graduates the MLA foreign-language teacher exam, and, perhaps more important, how many Superintendents or foreign language Supervisors demand of the prospective candidate for a position his scores on this test? I would be surprised if one in ten could answer in the affirmative.

If professional unity has heretofore been a myth, I think we are now at the point where we could do something about translating it into a reality. Those of you who keep up with the latest developments know that the foreign language teaching profession is on the threshold of a great forward thrust through the establishment of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. This body, which will represent the interests of all foreign languages at all levels, will hopefully become for our profession what the NCTE has been for all teachers of English. Among its functions will be the tackling of common pedagogical and professional problems such as "FLES," articulations, sequence of language learning, certification, the adequate preparation of new school teachers, the adequate preparation of new college teachers, the role of culture in the language classroom, the psychology of language learning, study

abroad, flexible scheduling, junior high schools, the role of language instruction in the rapidly expanding junior college, bilingualism in the American society, educational television, self-instruction, etc. But ACTFL will only be able to function effectively, I am convinced, if we language teachers, lend our cooperation in the form of active participation. Here is a golden opportunity for the newly founded Massachusetts Foreign Language Association. The MFLA, it seems to me, should take upon itself the task of local representative to the national body. It should act as liaison between its own constituents and the national group, maintaining a much needed two-way communication and flow of ideas between the local and national levels. It should seek on one hand to bring local ideas as well as problems to the attention of the national organization but it ought also to promote the implementation of policies promulgated by ACTFL in its own back yard. The acronym ACTFL, as Mr. Mildenberger of the MLA states, will most likely be pronounced to rhyme with "tactful" but the stress must be kept on the syllable ACT. With a vigorous joint effort we can make sure that ACTFL will be not just a cermonial association but the vehicle through which we can achieve widespread acceptance of basic procedures and standards and thus come closer to achieving the goal of unity that has so long eluded us.

Finally I should like to comment on the matter of teacher competence. Since increasing attention is being paid lately to the preparation of future teachers I should like rather to focus attention on our teachers-in-service, those already on the job, many of them even on tenure. The fact is that a large number in this category are in great need of help because they need to, and mostly want to, improve their own competence in the language they are teaching, yet have comparatively little opportunity to do so. Lest you think I'm exaggerating about the large number, let me cite a statistic. According to a survey undertaken in 1963 by the Mass. Dept. of Education, Division of Secondary and Elementary Education, of 59 teachers of one particular foreign language in Massachusetts there were 28 that had not even the equivalent of an undergraduate major in their subject. Frequently a teacher who feels insecure about his subject will seek out appropriate courses at the local universities whereby he can reduce his shortcomings. A few will wait for the summer to do this, but for many, particularly for men with family responsibilities, the summer is the time to meet the bills, not the books. Let us not condemn them for this; for most heads of families the summer paycheck is a necessity not a luxury. So such teachers and many others want to take courses during the academic year, and that means of course during late-afternoon and evening hours or on Saturdays. The unfortunate fact is, however, that very few such opportunities exist. Either the upper-level undergraduate and the graduate courses in our various institutions are available only to full-time students or, as is more frequently the case, they are offered at such times when the teachers are themselves busy teaching. It is interesting to note parenthetically that whereas offerings in French, Spanish and German language and literature are so meager at such times, a host of courses in various Schools of Education are scheduled at those very hours to accomodate specifically the teacher-in-service.

I suggest that university departments of foreign language go out of their way to schedule one or two of their advanced courses regularly offered to their full-time students at hours when teachers in the area can also enroll. If it is too much to ask every department to do this every year, let the various departments in a given language coordinate and pool their efforts through their local AAT chapter, and perhaps devise a rotation scheme for late-hour scheduling.

Such an expansion of study opportunities for the in-service teacher could be an important step forward for the purpose of remedial training but actually I would urge yet a further provision: the opportunity via late-hour scheduling to gain advanced degrees on a part-time basis. Such a provision would require of course the abolishment of the so-called full-time residence requirement found in many institutions, but I think we need not shed tears about that. I have always found this requirement puzzling, particularly when applied to the Humanities, where accumulated knowledge is of the essence. The point is that we should attract teachers back to further study, for remedial purposes if necessary, but also for the further development of an already established competence. The possibility of attaining a further degree is not only an inducement to learning; it assures also just recognition of achievement. If this is so, then we should not make degrees inaccessible to those who cannot meet arbitrary evening hours. Or does some magical atmosphere guaranteeing scholarly achievement pervade the campus only at certain hours of the day? It seems to me that the entrance requirements to a graduate program should rather be those which relate to a candidate's intellectual ability and professional potential.

The task we have in reaching our objectives is a massive one because success is dependent

on the simultaneous solving of many problems. Our programs can only be as strong as the weakest link in the chain of required conditions. It may seem that, even when we find a solution here and there, these are but temporary victories in a seemingly endless Sisyphean struggle. But let us remember: even the probability that the stone will eventually roll down again is no excuse for not trying to push it up anyway.

References

1. A Basic Guide for the Improvement of Foreign Language Programs in Massachusetts (Massachusetts Department of Education: Boston, 1961), p. 7.

2. Ibid., p. 8

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The spring meeting of our MFLA on March 30 at Holy Cross was a brilliant success. We hope you were there. Our congratulations to the panelists, speakers, the active audience participation, and especially to our President who did such a superb job of planning and execution.