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Attention is focused on (1) the chronic failure to attract a larger percentage of the student population, especially male students, and (2) the perennially high rate of attrition in intermediate and advanced language courses in secondary schools. The merits of offering the teaching of contemporary foreign culture as an alternative to the compulsory study of foreign literature at the advanced levels of high school language study are emphasized. (AF)

WHAT SHALL IT BE, ASKS HOCKING,

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TEACHER: Johnny, why are you beginning the study of Spanish?

JOHNNY: So that I can some day appreciate Cervantes and Calderón in the original.

Unless he is an exception to the rule, Johnny is talking through his hat, mouthing the words that he thinks his teacher wants him to say. In most cases Johnny begins his FL because he wants to speak it, or because his counselor has told him that a FL sequence on his transcript will help him to gain entrance to college. But in all too many cases Johnny avoids FL compietely, for his friends have warned him that "foreign language is for girls — like English."

The "emasculating" influence of English and literature as commonly taught in high school is deplored in a recent article: "English and literature especially . . . suggest to boys that the provinces of written language, books, imaginative expression and art are the exclusive property of women and the strange men who take interest in such flights of fancy." (Professor Patricia Sexton, *Saturday Review,* 19 June 1965, p. 57.) Shortly later a letter to the editor commented: "Whenever I hear of another male dropout who is unable to pass English . . . but can build his own radio receiver, I groan at the prejudice against boys within the system . . ." (Professor Irving Weiss, *Saturday Review* — 17 July 1965, p. 53.)

Prejudice or not, it is certain that FL teaching is largely a woman's profession: a USOE survey of college majors in their Junior year reports only 34 per cent of the FL majors to be men, as contrasted with 78 per cent in science and mathematics. (USOE publication OE-54021-62, June 1962, table 4.)

Johnny can't escape the required English courses, but a MFL is usually not required. Historically, our classes have largely been composed of girls, especially after the first year. Our advanced (third year and above) classes contain only 12 per cent of our enrollment, which in turn is about one-fourth of the school population. *(FL Offerings and Enrollments in Public Secondary Schools.* MLA, 1963, pp. 15, 7.) Of

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this 12 per cent perhaps one-fifth are boys, comprising two or three per cent of the total school population. But James B. Conant was referring to the remaining 88 per cent when he spoke his widely reported comment on the two-year FL sequence: "Two years? They might as well play basketball!"

Of course, since Sputnik, a new seriousness has impelled an increasing percentage of secondary school students — boys and girls — to undertake long sequences in science and mathematics. For a few years the same surge spilled over into our field, which enjoyed a spectacular increase in its share of the student body. More recently, however, this upsurge has been losing momentum. In the colleges the recent pattern is similar: from 1960 to 1963 the student population increased 30 per cent, while MFL enrollment increased 31 per cent. *MFL Enrollments in Higher Education,* MLA, 1964, "Highlights.") In short, our high enrollments are no longer caused by increasing popularity, but by increasing population.

Boom or Bust?

It is easy to sneer at "mere popularity," and easier still to be smug about the present situation: with rising salaries and a shortage of teachers, we never had it so good. But we owe it to our profession of the humanities, and likewise to the national interest, to ask ourselves whether our students are also having it so good. Perhaps the answer can be found in modern history.

From early in the century until about fifteen years ago, while the school population increased enormously, our share of it declined from one-third to one-seventh. Similarly, the post-Sputnik increase in our share of the student body reflected the upsurge of student continuations into college (now over 50 per cent of the high school graduates). In short, our subject continued to be "college preparatory." Very recently, however, the increase in our share of the school population, in high school and college, has been levelling off, and this fact should give us pause.

Another sobering indication: Three years ago the *New York Times* reported, and *Hispania* (December 1962, p. 766) quoted it as follows:

> Mathematics was voted the favorite subject by student leaders in a survey of 1,500 class presidents in New York State high schools, conducted by the Saving Bank Association of New York. The highest percentage of all students (28 per cent) placed mathematics ahead of their other studies. Although the boys favored mathematics slightly more than the girls, both rated it ahead of the next popular subject — science for the boys and English for the girls. English is far down on the boys' list of preferences. In spite of much recent talk about the increased interest in language study, it ranks at the bottom of all academic subjects, preferred only by 5 per cent of the boys and 13 per cent of the girls.

"Project English" and similar programs, national and regional, are major efforts to overcome imbalances and make the English sequence functional for all students. Spectacular reforms in the teaching of science and mathematics have made these subjects vital to students in general. But we language teachers are apparently content to teach only the college-bound — especially the college-bound girls. As recently as 1958, our classes had a higher ratio of first-quartile to fourth-quartile students than any other subject.

This elite clientele may or may not

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remain loyal to us, for the position of women in society is changing rapidly, and the education of women is a subject of increasing debate. Certainly, except in German, the male students are generally lost to us: the estrangement of several generations of boys has not only established a feminine "image" of our profession; it has also alienated an uncounted number of future policy-makers — principals, superintendents, school board members, and so on. The boy is father to the man.

However feminine, elite and college-bound our students may be, few of them enter our third-year classes. Although in this respect there has been considerable improvement in recent years, caused in part by the increasingly keen competition for college entrance, the latest statistics show only 9 per cent of our students in course III, and 3 per cent in course IV and above. (*FL Offerings . . . Secondary Schools.* MLA, 1965, p. 15.) This fact constitutes the greatest single indictment of our profession as a whole.

It is true that many schools do not offer the third year course, but it is equally true that they would offer it if there were a vigorous demand. Even though a good many students continue their MFL in college, many change their language or take none; of those who elect to continue, perhaps 50 per cent are demoted or failed. The lower courses in college have an attrition rate comparable to that of the schools.

In summary: our current failure to attract a larger percentage of the student population, our chronic failure to attract male students, and our perennially high rate of attrition — all these point to a serious weakness in our intermediate and advanced courses.

Literature — Or Else!

"Language and Literature" is the traditional phrase to designate our college departments, and it expresses also the assumption that the (sole) purpose of language learning is to study literature. Generally accepted also in the schools, this assumption has been challenged from time to time by some of our most distinguished teachers, and lately by the descriptive linguists in general. The former argue that literature is but one aspect of the foreign culture, which should be studied as a whole; the latter agree with this, and contend further that language is entirely worthy of study *per se*.

Although these views are making some headway, they are resisted by most of the profession. Academic tradition dies hard; only *in extremis* — as it was fifteen years ago — does it accept innovation. Now that happy days are here again, the audiolingual revolution is under attack, the new audio-visual materials are suspect, and we force literature on youngsters who are unprepared or unwilling. Apparently we can't stand prosperity.

But this prosperity is a perilous one, for it rests on a misunderstanding by the public which supports our schools — and us. Ten years ago William Riley Parker warned the MLA:

> I am completely convinced that the tide has turned, that American indifference or hostility to language learning is gradually diminishing. There is only one reason why this discovery is not cause for general rejoicing; it so happens that countless people now ready to give us their support do not mean what many foreign language teachers mean by language learning. It remains to be seen what they will say and do when they discover that we don't teach what they assume we teach, but insist, rather, on giving them what we believe is good for them. (*PMLA,* April 1956, p. 12).

"What we believe is good for them" is literature, and the sooner the better. We teach as we were taught, and we were taught literature. From our professors we learned to feel that only the teaching of literature confers prestige. And so the sins of our academic fathers are visited upon the children in our classrooms. Students who want to continue their foreign language find that they must study literature — or else. As we have seen, most of them, including almost all of the boys, choose "else."

There should be another "else" available to them: the study of the contemporary foreign culture. This would include common readings of expository material of a general nature; specialized readings according to individual interests (history, political science, chemistry, music, etc.); current magazines and newspapers; audio-visual materials such as films, filmstrips and tape recordings from abroad. Here is a wealth of materials and subjects to appeal to the interests of boys and girls both; moreover, our youth find the language of exposition better suited to their linguistic and esthetic level than the implications and the style of imaginative writings.

Even for the minority of students who have some literary sensitivity in English, a mastery of the expository or denotative usage must precede any true appreciation of the artistic (affective, connotative) language of literature. Without it, we have the spectacle of the student fighting his way through a masterpiece, understanding at best "the plot," and acquiring a distaste for literature — as he sees it. So he drops French (or German or Spanish), but the bitter taste of frustration remains.

Conclusion

Although it is our duty and our privilege to bring our students to some genuine appreciation of the literature, as of the other aspects of the foreign culture that we represent, premature efforts to "teach literature" serve only to stultify the art and discourage the student. The teaching of the contemporary foreign life and institutions is equally important to our monocultural students, more suited to their level of linguistic (and other) maturity, and prerequisite to a truly literary experience.

Unless we come to terms with these simple facts, great numbers of students will continue to stay away from us, and most of those who do come to us will continue to drop out before the third year. "They might as well play basketball."

Perhaps better.

About The Author

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Dr. Hocking earned his B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. at the University of Wisconsin and has taught in several of the country's large universities as well as in the summer language program of Middlebury College.

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