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ABSTRACT

This conference address touches on a variety of issues in second language learning and underlines points that the speaker considers areas for thought and discussion. Initial remarks concern second language learning in Ireland. In his statements concerning second language learning in general, the speaker emphasizes the importance of contact between teacher and pupil and the greater significance of subject matter over method. The speaker discusses the special obstacles which the modern age places in the way of second language learners and cites the sudden mass movement of pupils into secondary schools of various kinds as posing one of the greatest problems. Much of the speech concerns the role of examinations in general and in second language learning in particular. (VH)

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First International Conference on ATESON, held at University College, Dublin on 27-29 June, 1973. Theme: Testing in second language teaching. Chairman: Mrs. Maureen Concannon O'Brien.

Presidential address by Dr. T. Ó Raifeartaigh at 11 a.m. on Wednesday, 27 June, 1973.

Madam Chairman, ladies and gentleman,

It was a wry remark of Dr. Johnson, "Depend upon it, Sir, when a man knows he is going to be hanged in a fortnight, he concentrates his mind wonderfully". Admittedly a Presidential address is not a hanging matter, but to prepare one calls for quite an amount of concentration, not to mention occasional bouts of alarm and despondency such as doubtless Johnson had in mind.

My particular reason for mixed feelings in the matter was that on first consideration it had seemed to me as a former teacher and former school inspector I should have a good deal to say on teaching as an art and a science. This was accordingly the kind of title suggested by me to our Committee for this morning's discourse. On setting some thoughts together under this heading, however, it soon became clear that such an approach was liable to degenerate into a series of reminiscences, salted no doubt with an occasional amusing anecdote. But while reminiscences and anecdotes have their place in life, they would scarcely be appropriate at a conference which has brought together a large number of practising teachers who expect to hear of up-to-date aids, techniques and ways and means generally of adding to their professional knowledge and improving their skills.

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You will pardon me, therefore, if this address does not

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live up directly to its title.

It did also occur to me to put myself the question whether perhaps your President should attempt to let you have an exposé of some particular aspect of language teaching of which he had had special experience. But no, not that either. Offerings of the kind are the prerogative of the various specialist contributors who come to you direct from the field of operations.

What was left, then, as it seemed to me, was to steer a course between Scylla and Charybdis by entitling the address (in my own mind) 'On learning languages' and drawing your attention in the course of it to a few general aspects of the problem of language teaching, aspects which, while at a slight remove from teaching as an art and a science and at a slight remove also from the direct purview of the teacher, will often vitally affect progress in the classroom. My modest purpose ~~therefore~~ therefore is to try to see some of the problems which will be raised at this Conference in a slightly different light from that under which they are usually viewed and, as well, to put them to some small extent in an Irish setting for you.

The idea in introducing an Irish setting ~~on~~ such an occasion as the present is that, on the one hand, professional visitors to a country are entitled to expect some enlightenment on the professional problems of their hosts and, on the other, language teaching is of especially great concern to us in this State, because all our primary teachers, and very many of our second level teachers, have in the forefront of their duties the teaching of Irish as a second language.

With this we reach the first of the matters I should like to submit to your consideration. The great problem with which this and all such conferences is concerned might be put in

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question form, "How best can people learn a second language?"

From the slightly different angle of which I have spoken a prior question will be "Why do people want to learn a second language?", for to learn a second language or to learn anything there must be adequate motivation. To say that in such or such a school Irish or English or French or whatever it be is taught is not, as you all know, to say that it is learned effectively there. Why, then, do so many people come, not all of them unwillingly, to language classes?

A former inspector colleague of mine used to aver that there are as many answers to this question as there are students. He was a man to exaggerate sometimes, but there is an element of truth in the statement. Here in Ireland we have a case in point. The vernacular of 98% of the Irish people is English, but there is a fairly general feeling that the Irish language, as the repository of a large part of our cultural heritage, should be cultivated and cherished. Many of us accordingly have learned it with joy and pleasure. Many others of us, not so strongly motivated language-wise, would nevertheless like to know Irish, if only we had more leisure or if its spelling did not look so forbidding or if its verbal system were less complicated or for some other 'good' reason. (Indeed, it passes for a private joke amongst us that the Irish people as a whole will do anything for the Irish language except learn it.) Others again who learned it because they had to, have come to like it, and still others, even under compulsion, have never got very far with it. Sometimes whole groups show a leaning for or against it. It is a well-known phenomenon that there are schools of which the pupils, while faring year after year, quite well generally in the public examinations, never manage

~~achieve~~
to attain a single Honours result in Irish. Other schools do uniformly well in all subjects, including Irish. Clearly there are forces at work here other than the schools and their teachers.

It is true, of course, that the teaching of Irish is handicapped by the fact that it is not heard outside the classroom, but this is the case with most second languages. A more keenly felt disincentive is that in idiom, syntax and pronunciation Irish is quite unlike the normal run of western European ~~languages~~ ^{languages}. For instance, the verb, not the noun, comes first in the sentence. Nevertheless, ~~on the whole it is well taught.~~ (If good teaching could have restored it as the vernacular, it would now be spoken throughout the land. The point I am making is that we do not really know very much about why or even how a language dies or is restored, but it is clear from Irish experience that the teaching of a language as a linguistic medium is not enough to have it spoken generally. Our ancestral language enshrines a literature dating from the fifth century and is thus not only an important part of our national being but also of western European civilisation. In the light of this we are all somewhat to blame for not having seen clearly, as did Douglas Hyde and other early Gaelic Leaguers nearly a century ago, that there is room for a great deal more stress on Irish as part of our cultural heritage than as an instrument of linguistics or communication. Incidentally, the Minister for Education has recently announced that his policy for Irish will follow this line.

English too is a very interesting subject in relation to

language teaching, but presents too vast a field in that regard to be entered upon here. It may, however, be remarked in passing that as a second language it has all the advantages which correspond to the disadvantages from which Irish suffers under that heading. It should therefore present little or no difficulty to the teacher or pupil. But every teacher of English as a second language knows that this is far from being the case. There is therefore some other factor involved. That factor is of course in the first place that to master any second language whatsoever is a far more demanding task than is generally believed. In the second place the English language's rich vocabulary, its wealth of idiom, its extraordinary flexibility, comparable only to that of classical Greek (to which language, however, it is in my opinion inferior in point of clarity), its irregular verbs and the lack of law and order in its grammar and pronunciation, all these offer an uphill struggle to the learner.

To speakers of Latin languages English presents the special difficulty (which of course is part of its genius) of often having two words, the Germanic and the Latin, for their one, the Latin. Familiar instances of this are 'go up' and 'ascend' for French 'ascendre', 'come-in' and 'enter' for French 'entrer', 'sky' and 'heaven' for French 'ciel'. Of course French, too, has its own incomparable genius whereby it does not need a double vocabulary. Instead it makes use of the same word, depending on the context, in a variety of senses and thus can achieve the strictest precision. This quality it derives of

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course from Latin, which language was a master of the art of using to the fullest its constricted framework. If I may digress here, I should like to refer to a remarkable instance of this which came to my notice recently. You will recall Tennyson's apostrophe to Virgil with reference to Virgil's great poem the Georgics:

"Thou that singest wheat and woodland,
Tilth and vineyard, hive and horse and herd,
All the charms of all the muses
Often flowering in a lonely word".

Now in the metre of the Georgics there is no place for a word of three syllables of which the first and third are long and the middle syllable short. But the nominative and accusative of the Latin for trees is just such a word, *arborēs*. Well, in this wonderful poem about husbandry and country life Virgil manages to say a lot about trees though precluded from using a qualifying word in the nominative or accusative case. The thing shows how even under a severely restricted metrical scheme a language can be shaped by a master. Of course in this case the master was, as described by Tennyson, "Wielder of the stateliest measure ever moulded by the lips of man".

Sorry for the digression, but the matter seemed of such interest that I could not help mentioning it.

To return to the learning of English despite its difficulties, Scandinavian and Dutch schools appear to teach it pretty effectively, for the obvious reason that they and their pupils are highly motivated to do so. What I am really coming to, however, after a long detour in which it was necessary first to treat of Irish and English, is why so many Irish children want to learn French or Spanish or German or Italian - that is the order of demand for these in Irish schools, with French leading by a very long stretch.

The answer cannot be because French is 'useful'. Up to the present the emphasis in our schools has been mainly on its literature and indeed only our younger teachers have had much opportunity to speak French or hear it spoken. Before the advent of Aer Lingus it took just twenty-five hours to reach Paris from Dublin. Now it takes an hour and a quarter. So those of us who set about learning to speak French in the old days had to be pretty serious about it.

What was our motivation? For myself I can only say that what inspired me to continue with French after my schooldays was that I had had a good teacher and that through a certain school-text, Lettres de Mon Moulin, he had inculcated in me a love of the French countryside, so that I was off for Provence, the scene of the Lettres, as soon as there was enough money in my pocket to bring me there. Others will have had their personal reasons, commercial, social, love of travel, curiosity about other peoples and their ways of life and a hundred and one things down to pleasing teacher or doing well in examinations. When all that is said, we Irish cannot hope to gain materially from a knowledge of French or Spanish or German or Italian as would the speakers of these languages from a knowledge of English, which is the established world medium for commerce and science. Why then were increasing numbers of Irish people studying Continental languages even before our accession to the E.E.C.? In Ireland, as in most countries, the native educational system is more often faulted than praised, but it seems proper to say that it is greatly to the credit of our schools and young people that without the spur of any significant material gain so many Irish pupils seek after a Continental language. Rightly or wrongly it is my belief that in so doing they are acting on an instinctive

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respect and regard for knowledge that, thanks to certain literary circumstances which are too involved to treat of here, have over many centuries grown into us.

Incidentally, the great benefit which in the matter of languages we shall in the long run derive from our B.B.C. membership will not be on the technical side. Rather will it be the deeper insight we shall have into the minds and hearts of many millions of our fellow Europeans.

Before proceeding further let me stress once more, at the risk of being banal, that in my experience what is most important in language teaching is the contact between teacher and pupil, the common ground these two find in the subject-matter of what is being taught, and the incentive thus offered to the pupil to pursue his studies further. This is not for one moment to deny any modern aid or medium which may be available. No aid or medium is to be neglected, but it is to be emphasised that in education the medium is not the message. It might be thought superfluous so to stress the obvious, but it is beginning to be said that the method of teaching is just as important as what is taught. What this means, as it stands, is that a teacher who only half-knows his subject but has mastered thoroughly all the skills of imparting as much as he does know, is of the same worth as a teacher who knows his subject thoroughly but is not so skilled in the classroom; in a nutshell, that a half-truth well taught is as good as a whole truth badly taught, which would be to ignore that a half-truth entails a half-lie. The intention of course is to say that if the truth is badly packaged, some of it may get lost on the way. Woolly-phrased half-truths are the deadly enemy of truth. Indeed woolly thinking and woolly

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expression are especially to be avoided in relation to such an important matter as education, where they have had a long innings.

There is so very much more that springs to the mind about the actual learning of a second language, but time is passing and so let us pass with it to a second point, namely, the special obstacles which the modern age places in the way of second language learners. The unthinking might see the raising of such a question as somewhat off beam, for has not modern technology annihilated distances between countries - and in any case cannot one now hear from one's armchair almost any important foreign language? It is true that with the proper scientific methods applied to ear and tongue it is possible for almost anyone with staying power to attain to correct pronunciation and fair fluency without setting a foot abroad. But while in this field technology has produced many new species of trees, in the form of a multiplicity of teaching aids, it has also produced a very large and thickly-grown wood. It is a direct result of technological advance that throughout western Europe second level education has in a single generation ceased to be the preserve of an élite, to become universal.

For this sudden mass movement of pupils into secondary schools of various kinds neither the schools nor the pupils had had the opportunity to prepare. To such an extent were they and, for that matter, society caught unaware that up to this moment post-primary education is still engaged, in a slightly dazed way, in the process of sorting out its clients on a who shall do what basis. All sorts of problems have been thrust, on a large scale, upon school authorities, - for example, that of to what extent should language teaching be linked with socio-cultural training (by way perhaps of a more intensive study of

a country's contemporary literature or its industry or history or geography); individual, social, or other group differences in the rate of learning; ~~the~~ the transfer effects, if any, between the first foreign language learnt and the second or a particular second; the advantages or, as the case may be, drawbacks of streaming or non-streaming. These and a thousand like problems were always there, for children present an infinite variety of natures and talents, but the increase in the demand for post-primary education is so enormous as to generate stresses and strains not only among school directors and teachers but, as is almost daily evident, among pupils too. To say the least, these last are no longer content to regard themselves as a captive audience.

A further change from earlier times is that for the very reason that ours is a technological age, science is making more and more demands on school curricula and time-tables. In particular science subjects seem to have an appeal for boys beyond that of foreign languages. This is not of course the whole story in the matter of a preponderance of girls at foreign language courses. Neither is it the whole story to say that there are more women qualified to teach foreign languages than there are men so qualified. That would be to beg the question rather than to answer it. Not that it is proposed to try to answer it here. This question of boys' less than favourable attitude towards foreign languages compared with that of girls calls ~~in fact~~ a whole psycho-socio-historical thesis to itself.

One of several further disadvantages in the learning of a second language in the new age is that a claim to know it connotes a fair speaking knowledge, including correct pronunciation.

Correct pronunciation does not perhaps matter all that in English, where such a six-syllable word as 'extraordinary' is often carelessly given a syllable and a half, 'storny'. But try 'storny' or anything less than the full five syllables of 'extraordinaire' on a Frenchman and you will be met with a puzzled stare. This well-known puzzled stare (or terrible sourire francais as it was called in the eighteenth century - it goes back at least that far), is not, as is popularly believed, just cussedness on the Frenchman's part. The word is really unintelligible to him unless its every syllable is clearly pronounced and carries a more or less even stress (or, if you like, non-stress).

Leaving behind, but only for lack of sufficient time, the ~~aspects~~ ~~features~~ in which technology, as well as being our ally, can create new difficulties or at least accentuate old ones, let us move on to ~~the~~ with which this Conference will be specially concerned and in which debate waxes keener than formerly, namely, the problem of examinations. Here again I must be allowed to deviate slightly from 'advanced' opinion, which inclines to condemn root and branch all examinations and all their works and pomps. My plea is that if they are an evil, at least let it be acknowledged that they are necessary, for there has not yet been devised an alternative which is free from the suspicion of partiality as between one pupil and another. You may know of the cartoon in which the master, waving a cane, warns the scholar, "Now that the examination is abolished, that is the end of ~~backdoor~~ ~~methods~~ methods. In future I make the decisions about you."

In my own private opinion (but nowadays one is almost afraid

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to employ so heretical a phrase) examinations are not just a necessary evil, but sometimes a necessary good. The 'sometimes' depends of course on their nature and form. It is one thing therefore to reform them, but quite another to talk of their abolition. Reform is by definition desirable, but to abolish something is as likely to create new problems as to resolve an old one.

Before further pursuit of this, you might perhaps be interested in a small slice of history, the story of how public examinations came about in this country in the first instance. They started with a purely political end in view. It happened thus. In 1831, some time after the penal laws restricting the education of Irish Catholics had been repealed, the State launched a nation-wide scheme of aid for primary schools here, in the form of a subvention towards the cost of the teachers' salaries ^{or} the provision of books and of buildings, on the conditions, inter alia, that schools so assisted would be open to children of all denominations and provide common literary and separate religious instruction. This is to say that, in theory at least (for the Government did not always keep its own rules), ^{the} system was undenominational.

No attempt was made by the State, however, to found a secondary school system. One reason for this was that the ~~general~~ opinion at the time ~~was~~ ^{that} no necessity for secondary education save for a select few. Another reason was that in ~~response~~ to demand a number of private secondary schools had sprung up, these usually founded and conducted by religious orders, the Church being the only country-wide permanent

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circumstances of the time, with Parnell's star rising rapidly, it was anxious to appease the Catholic Church authorities. On the other hand the British 'non-conformist conscience', as it was called, was not yet prepared to tolerate direct State assistance for denominational (or confessional) schools. In the usual British way the solution was a compromise. Under a law called the Intermediate Education Act, passed in 1872, the State was thenceforth to hold annual public examinations for various levels of secondary school pupils, and for every pupil who passed the school would receive a grant. The payment-by-result part of the plan has long since disappeared, but the rest remains. The Intermediate and Leaving Certificate public examinations held throughout the State here a ~~few~~^{week} ago were conducted under the Act of 1878.

As it happens, a committee has recently been appointed by the Minister for Education to make recommendations on that same Intermediate Certificate Examination, usually taken at the age of 15-16. Its Chairman is the Rev. Father Paul Andrews, from whom I understand we shall have the privilege of a contribution at this Conference, and it has just issued an interim report. Unlike most such ~~reports~~^{reports} this one does not lay down the law, but sets out a number of pros and cons, asking for the views thereon of its readers. One of the arguments it submits in favour of the Intermediate continuing as a public examination is that it furnishes the pupil himself, the teacher and the school with an objective judgement on his progress. The committee will not, I hope, mind if I suggest that it might have gone a little further. The pupil, the teacher and the school, all three are perfectly aware, after three or four years' experience, of the pupil's progress or lack of it. Any teacher here present will bear me out in the view that he or she would have no difficulty in placing his

or her pupils in the correct order of merit by almost any criterion.

There is one person, however, who does not know for certain how Johnny or Mary is doing. That person is the parent. The vital importance of a public examination at 15 or 16, as it seems to me, is that for the first time it gives the parent an objective view of the academic progress of his child, and that not only relative to the progress of his classfellows but to the standard obtaining throughout the country. If I may reminisce, just once, I have a clear memory of two very worried parents coming to me with the news that their boy, who had always received good reports from his school, had got 10 marks out of 400 in Latin and 12 out of 400 in French at the (public) examinations for the Intermediate Certificate. To follow his father's profession he needed Matriculation in two years and at this rate how was he to get it? Well, I secured a good 'grind' for him and he did pass Matriculation in due course. But what would have happened if the parents had not discovered until he was 18 that he had been idling?

In that way, therefore, our public examinations have all along been what modern educational thinking would surely have them, that is, not so much a means of selection for employment but rather a signpost, a guideline, a means of orientation useful to schools, teachers and pupils but above all to parents. This of course is not for one second to argue that a very hard look should not be taken at the matter and form of such examinations. An obvious case in this regard is that where there is no oral test for modern language teaching the oral side will inevitably sag. At this point non-

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educationalists usually stop thinking and proceed with a demand for an oral test. The experienced teacher, however, is aware that while it is hard enough, when dealing with large numbers of candidates, to ensure reasonable uniformity of standard in even a written examination, it is much more difficult to achieve such uniformity in an oral test, so that ultimately the oral test tends to be a qualifying rather than a graded one - which is perhaps no bad thing.

At any rate, whatever the difficulties may be, if modern languages are to be taught effectively, there must, I think, be an oral test. All I would ask is that it should not assume such an importance as that its demands will tend to weary out the class and its teacher. Over-use of the language laboratory and numbingly repetitive oral work can become very boring. Nor should glibness in speaking be so sought after as to bring about neglect of the literary side. A language and its literature are not Siamese twins, but none the less they are closely related. And when I say literature I mean just that. There was for a time (I don't know whether it is still so) a fashion of setting detective stories as school texts in modern languages. The trouble in that regard is that if there is anything more boring than to read a detective story a second time it is, as must happen with a school text, to have to read it a third time, whereas the oftener a piece of literature is read the more it gains in interest. ~~Let me~~ seize this opportunity to ride a hobby-horse. It has gone out of vogue somewhat, I am told, to ask children to learn poetry by heart. But surely God intended that the good memories He has given to children and adolescents should be put to use. Unfortunately in past

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 times the marvellous gift of memory was used to load the child with mental lumber. But why go to the other extreme? What better use could be found for this gift of Providence than the memorising by young people of noble lines which will be a delight to them all their days. Why murder a beautiful sonnet by dissecting it (we all know the formula - time, place, matter, form) when to learn it by heart would put the child in possession of a joy for ever.

There is of course no end to what could be said for and against examinations. One argument often heard but of which it is hard to see the force is that a student is asked in a matter of hours to marshal what has taken him years to learn. But is this not a pre-view of what life is going to hold for him? Are not all of us faced from time to time with problems demanding speedy or instant decisions based on a life's experience?

Let me conclude on public examinations with three cardinal points, one in favour of them, the other advising caution in regard to them and ~~one~~ *a third* in relation to the examining of history at school level. In their favour is that if they are exercised as being the work of the devil, their place is liable to be taken by seven devils worse than themselves, by which I mean examinations conducted by commercial interests, for we need be in no doubt that examinations are dear to many school authorities, if not to their pupils. The end result would of course be that the employer's criterion would not be attainment, on which he would have no means of exercising a comparative judgement, but the standing of the school, and on an old school tie basis justice might or might not be done but it would certainly not be seen to be done.

On the other hand, where a public examination requires a pass in a particular group of subjects, the examination, and not

the school authorities or the inspectors, are the arbiters of the curriculum. Such an instance is the requirements of Matriculation in the National University of Ireland. For many years four of the five subjects there needed for a pass were Irish, English, Latin and Mathematics. Without passing any judgement on the merits or otherwise of this rule, it is to be said that it left little time in Irish secondary schools for the cultivation of continental languages or science. It is sometimes contended that the answer to this problem is that the school authorities should from the beginning group the pupils into Matriculation-oriented and otherwise-oriented, but the trouble is that no one can tell until the final year who is going to pursue what avocation. Terminal examination requirements do therefore direct school curricula much more than is generally realised by the public.

Finally there is the question of the examining of history. A drawback to set examinations on set programmes generally is that they tend to discourage initiative on the part of the teacher. In no subject is this more so than history, where there are so many viewpoints which might be taken, so many vistas adown which explorations might be made and so many exciting areas to choose from if the teacher had a ~~free~~ choice. But the principal objection to the examining of the subject history before the university stage is reached is that the pupil cannot possibly be in possession of enough evidence to make the series of judgements that the study of history entails. To the question, for instance, 'What were the causes of the Seven Years' War' he can answer ~~what~~ ^{the same way} what his teacher or text-book has told him, whereas in Mathematics, say, he might work out a little more for himself or in literature have a few

ideas of his own. At primary or secondary school level the pupil should of course be encouraged to interest himself in the story of the past (there is no more fascinating subject), but on the basis that it is a story and so only part and perhaps not an entirely accurate part of history. This I know must sound slightly pedantic and stuffy but if one thinks the thing over it does border on the absurd to seek in an examination knowledge which can only be a regurgitation. It seems to me therefore that 'history' should be taught in school for pleasure and as a bridge towards a better understanding of other peoples rather than as the examination subject 'History'.

With that, Madam Chairman, ladies and gentleman, comes an end to my riding of pedagogic hobby-horses, my preaching to the converted or to the unconvinced and the pursuit of all the other Presidential hares of which I have been guilty. It would perhaps have been desirable for me to have had more to say of adult learners. My excuse is that it is always better to treat of what one knows best and my experience has been mostly with secondary schools and their pupils.

Thank you all very much for your patience and, if I may, let me welcome you all to Ireland with a céad míle fáilte (for the scientific-minded that means 10 welcomes to the power of 5). I should like at the same time to thank sincerely our charming and energetic lady Chairman, who was the moving spirit in the organising of this Conference. Finally, it is the sincere hope of the Irish participants that our visitors from abroad will enjoy their stay among us as much as we shall enjoy it.