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HAS THE WAR PROVED THAT OUR METHODS OF
TEACHING MODERN LANGUAGES IN
THE COLLEGES ARE WRONG?
A SYMPOSIUM*

By E. C. HILLS

IN the *Educational Review* of January, 1919, President Nicholas Murray Butler of Columbia University made the following statement:

"Intelligent youths who have spent three, four and five years on the study of one or both of these languages, can neither speak them easily nor understand them readily nor write them correctly. Here, too, as in the case of the natural sciences, the reason is to be found in wrong methods of teaching. It is a sorry commentary as to what is going on in our secondary schools and colleges in this respect to learn on the best authority that there are now in France at least 200,000 American young men, who, after six months of military activity in France and three or four hours of instruction a week in the French language, can carry on a comfortable conversation under ordinary conditions and circumstances with the mastery of a vocabulary of at least a thousand words. On the other hand, many an American college graduate who has studied French for years is as awkward and as nonplussed in a Paris drawing room as he would be in the driver's seat of an airplane."

In a letter (May 2d, 1919) Dr. Butler added:

"What I want modern language teachers to do is to teach American boys and girls how to read, write, speak and understand the particular foreign language in which they are giving instruction, and through that attainment to have some comprehension of the people and the civilization which the foreign language reflects,

*A paper read at the General Session of the Association of Modern Language Teachers of the Central West and South, at Chicago, May 10th, 1919.

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and to leave off trying to make specialists or linguistic experts out of the great body of school and college students who would like to learn one or more of the modern European languages."

Copies of the statement made by President Butler in the Educational Review, together with the following hypothetical statement which was prepared by the writer of this article, were sent to a number of prominent professors of Romance Languages:

"It has occurred to me that it might be well to submit the causes that most college teachers of modern languages give for not succeeding in teaching their students to speak the language better than they do. In most colleges and universities, first and second year French are given in classes that meet only three times a week. In elementary work the teacher can scarcely avoid speaking to the class at least one-half of the time. So far as I am able to ascertain the average college class throughout the country has about twenty-five students and the average time given to a lesson is fifty minutes.

"When classes meet three times a week, if the teacher speaks one-half of the time and the students speak during the other half, each student has one minute each day or three minutes a week, which would amount to a total of about two hours' practice in speaking French during the year. . .

"The other handicap to which reference is commonly made is that most college students never expect to visit any place where the foreign language is spoken. Consequently, they are primarily interested in learning to read the language. Here it is again the environment against which the teacher struggles.

"Some of us believe that the reform in teaching modern languages must first be made in the secondary schools. . . There are, however, in practically every college and university a chosen few that would be willing to work hard enough to learn to speak the language well if they had the opportunity to do so."

The letters that were received in reply are of great interest and offer many constructive suggestions. Unfortunately only the following extracts can be given:

"We are at one in the view that the teaching of modern languages should be better and more effective than it now is, and must be made so. The first and most pressing measure to this end is to establish a scale of salaries which will attract capable men and women to enter the field. . . .

"My own observation since coming to France is far from bearing out the statement I am told that President Butler made that 200,000 American young men, after six months of military activity in France and three or four hours of instruction a week in the French language, can carry on a comfortable conversation

under ordinary conditions and circumstances with the mastery of a vocabulary of at least a thousand words. If this is the case such men should assuredly have had the preference in assignments for study in the French Universities, and not a single case of the sort exists among the 300 members of the School Detachment of the University of Bordeaux. The only men of such facility as that above mentioned fall into one of two classes: (1) Men who have already had college courses in French in the States—this is by far the larger class of the two; and (2) a very few scattered individuals who have been billeted in French families and have passed substantially every moment of the time that was free from military duties in the study and practice of French, and in no one of these cases was the sojourn by any means so short as six months.”

EDWARD C. ARMSTRONG, *Princeton University*.

“. . . I long since decided that the only way in which we could succeed in getting some students to learn to speak French acceptably, was to pick out those who showed special fitness, and to give them intensive training. With this object in view, I kept careful watch on the first year classes, and the second year I made up a class with those students who had shown that they could acquire a good pronunciation and were eager to become proficient in speaking the language. This second year class we call the “Drama class.” With them we make a special study of plays, preferably comedies. The class never has more than 20 students. It is in charge of an instructor, who is interested in dramatics and possesses a certain amount of dramatic ability. Scenes of comedies are taken up, learned and acted out in class. No English is spoken. The dramatic study is occasionally varied by the study of poems which are recited with the proper expression. From this class, the best elements are selected by competition for the public performance of a play at the end of the year. . . .”

“I spent six months in France, and I made it a point to enquire of soldiers and officers how much French they had learned during that time. I must have been particularly unfortunate, for I have never met any that had learned to speak it ‘comfortably.’ Some officers used a kind of pidgeon French supplemented by copious gesticulation. As the French are an intelligent race, they generally managed to catch on. . . .”

J. L. BORGERHOFF, *Western Reserve University*.

“The teaching of modern languages under the conditions that prevail among us is just about as much impeached by the reflexion that ‘many an American college graduate who has studied French for years is as awkward and as nonplussed in a Paris drawing room as he would be in the driver’s seat of an airplane,’ as the teaching of arithmetic would be impeached by the observation that our boys

who have been through the years of arithmetic of the elementary school would be about as intelligent listeners in a conference of insurance actuaries as they would be in a congress of esperantists. . . .

"I think our critics must be forced to meet the issues properly defined. . . . If they press us to adopt a certain 'modern,' 'reformed,' 'up to date' method, let us ask them whether they deem it equally applicable in the seventh grade, in the ninth grade, in the Freshman year, and in the Junior year of the college or university. If our critics insist on 'practical' results, then they must get us a six year course, at least, before they criticise. . . ."

ARTHUR G. CANFIELD, *University of Michigan.*

"Did our courses in chemistry and physics train men to serve the army *at once* in making powder and calculating high-angle fire? . . . Off hand I should say that our American class work ought to include better training in pronouncing according to phonetic methods, more oral drill (chorus work makes it possible to increase the amount of actual speaking that each man gets), and that 'free reproduction' of reading material affords excellent practice in using the language as well as in reading without translation. . . . Several of my old students became interpreters in the army, and others found themselves able to speak French the moment they got across. . . ."

PHILIP H. CHURCHMAN, *Clark University.*

"I spent some five months in France and was struck with the very small amount of French that our men learned even under unusually favorable conditions. It proved to me that our old shibboleth about picking up the language in a few months when among the people, is about as true as most generalities. Unless the men had a real desire to learn it and took some trouble to do so, their progress was very small, especially in cases where they had had no previous French. I should really like to know what President Butler means by the 'best' authority and where this authority got his very precise facts as to the 'comfortable' conversation, and the 'vocabularly of a thousand words.'

"The number of students of French in the various camps in France has been estimated at 200,000. My own observation, made on the occasion of visits to some of the camps, confirmed me in the belief that this was a pure guess, and that even the very much smaller number of soldiers in the French classes attended so irregularly and for such brief periods of time that nothing like the 'comfortable' conversational ability of which Mr. Butler speaks, was attained. . . ."

A. COLEMAN, *University of Chicago.*

"Like many other teachers of French, I have noticed Dr. Butler's remark upon the failure of our schools and colleges to

turn out students able to speak and write with ease and correctness. Dr. Butler attributes the failure to wrong methods.

"To my mind, the failure, which is by no means always as complete as his words appear to imply, is due not so much to wrong methods as to lack of time, excessively large classes, and lack of a real incentive to learn. Our courses in philosophy are not more successful in turning out philosophers, nor our courses in poetry in turning out poets, at any rate, not usually. . . .

"Our modern elementary schools, it seems to me, develop passivity in the more intellectual subjects, or at best, receptivity. Only in the teacher are activity and energy called for. His 'methods' are periodically under suspicion. Our high school pupils do not know that one of the great aims of education is to overcome difficulties. The teacher is required to find 'methods' to make the difficulties disappear. Difficulties, however, cannot be made to disappear. . . .

"Methods may be important. Far more important are small classes, gifted pupils, and an effective stimulus."

C. A. DOWNER, *College of City of New York*.

" . . . As regards our college work in modern foreign languages a great mistake, leading to a great economic waste in our teaching, is made through our failure to recognize the fact that no small proportion of our students are linguistic morons. That they are such is discernible already in their preparatory school stage, where great difficulty is encountered in equipping such students with even the modicum of French, etc., requisite for a bare pass mark in the Entrance Examinations. Why should there be continued effort of a linguistic sort with respect to such persons in college? . . .

"For fit students I believe that a great advantage is gained by the adoption, in at least the first year of college life, of intensive courses meeting at least five times a week.

"In so far as purely practical considerations are concerned there is no doubt in my mind that we can produce far more beneficial results through the establishment of a greater number of set courses in conversation and composition in which the instruction is limited to sections of not more than a dozen to fifteen students each. The chief issue is the procuring of the funds necessary for so costly a form of training as this is."

J. D. M. FORD, *Harvard University*.

" . . . It is obvious that our somewhat antiquated methods of teaching will have to be modified in accordance with future requirements, while, at the same time, care should be taken not to yield too much to radical and showy systems, most of which only tend to produce unstable and insufficient results. . . . In the elementary and intermediate courses the reform that will probably obtain is

the following: more frequent sessions of classes each week. These extra hours of recitation need require no additional preparation on the part of the student. They should be merely laboratory hours for practising what has already been acquired in the class-room. Extra credit should be given for such work. . . .”

J. L. GERIG, *Columbia University*.

“ . . . In so far as President Butler’s criticism is aimed at the slight oral instruction that has been offered in modern language it has a basis of justice and expresses the feeling of the average person with regard to his foreign language training. It is the duty of modern language teachers seriously to consider this rather widespread criticism and see if there is not some means of adequately meeting it.

“It is true that we can not teach students to speak a language under the conditions of our class rooms, if by speaking we understand the acquisition of a language in a degree at all comparable to our possession of our mother tongue. We can, however, and should emphasize the spoken and aural sides of our work in such a way that our students may feel at the end of say two years of work that they are able to express themselves simply in the language studied and to understand it when spoken under conditions that are not too difficult. . . .”

EDGAR S. INGRAHAM, *The Ohio State University*.

“President Butler has certainly been misinformed when he makes the statement in the January number of the *Educational Review*. During eleven months of 1918 I lived in the army zone in France, where I saw much of American soldiers. I feel sure that of the 1,015,000 men we had in France on July 1st, 1918, there were comparatively few, certainly not one in five, who studied French three or four hours a week and far fewer who attained much proficiency in it. The thing that struck me especially in the A. E. F. was its vast ignorance of French, the men’s inability to pronounce, or remember, the names even of towns in which they were billeted. A number of men learned, of course, enough French to procure the necessities of life for themselves and their comrades, to find their way on the road or in a shop, or to venture a few phrases about their health or the weather but beyond this I found in them little ability to talk French. . . .

“Let me suggest the following ways of securing improvement:

1. Greater emphasis in graduate schools on ability to speak and write the foreign language studied.
2. More frequent opportunities for teachers and graduate students to travel and study abroad.
3. Smaller classes and a larger number of hours a week for each class.

4. Organizing special classes for the most proficient students.

5. Bringing foreign students into our institutions, organizing clubs and tables where the foreign language is spoken, and having lectures given by foreigners."

H. CARRINGTON LANCASTER, *Johns Hopkins*.

"The general lack of success of which President Butler speaks is of course partly due to large classes. No class in a modern language (unless it is an advanced class in literature) should consist of more than ten students. Every student added to the ten makes teaching increasingly difficult, and I should say it is *impossible* to achieve satisfactory results with a class of more than twenty.

"I do not believe, however, that small classes alone would bring about the results desired by President Butler. I believe he is right in saying that there is something wrong in our method. I believe that many of us make the mistake of not insisting stubbornly and uncompromisingly (1) on *oral preparation* of lessons, and (2) on *grammar*. . .

"I believe that the future of modern language teaching depends on these two things: upon making our students study out loud and upon making them learn grammar. Whether these things be done by the use of low marks or by the sheer persuasive ability of an inspiring teacher—they must be done. Otherwise modern languages will go the way of the classics."

F. B. LUQUIENS, *Yale University*.

"Ample time should be devoted to practical and conversational work in the secondary schools without, however, curtailing the systematic grammatical drill.

"In the case of beginners' courses in the College, the ideal class would consist of ten or twelve students meeting five hours a week. In view of the greatly increased cost of conducting such classes and the further fact that our elective system makes it difficult to give full time and credit for such courses, I should suggest the following plan:

"Three hour classes with a maximum enrolment of twenty students; an additional hour for exclusively oral and practical drill based on the regular work of the class room, with the students divided into groups of six or eight. This additional hour should be regarded as parallel to the laboratory hours of the natural sciences and should be a required part of the course. The student should receive no additional credit for the 'laboratory hour' or, at most, only a fractional credit. . .

"Wherever possible, and especially in beginning and intermediate classes the foreign language should be the language of the class room. To spend the time of advanced classes in acquiring facility in conversation or skill in purely commercial branches, must

result in lowering our educational standard for collegiate instruction in modern languages. Additional facility in conversation is an extra-curriculum problem which the intelligent student can solve in various ways."

C. CARROLL MARDEN, *Princeton University*.

"Let us make a selection of students and try to teach these to 'speak.' At the same time, the more important matter is the schools. . . .

"As to 'special' classes in college for 'speakers,' I also agree—in principle. At the same time I am in favor of using this device only as a make-shift until the schools realize that they, not the colleges, are the places to teach students to speak a language—our function being quite another.

"I hardly believe President Butler can have informed himself thoroly on the matter."

WM. A. NITZE, *University of Chicago*.

" . . . I believe that President Butler is right in calling attention to the fact that American college students, who have been trained solely by the old translation method, are quite unable to handle the language as an instrument of conversation. I think I should go somewhat further than he in believing that they cannot even read the language adequately or with a grasp of its inner meaning. I do not believe, however, that he is correct in supposing that at least 200,000 American young men, after six months of military activity in France, and three or four hours of instruction a week in the French language, can carry on a comfortable conversation. . . . "

EVERETT W. OLMSTED, *University of Minnesota*.

" . . . All our elementary classes meet five times a week. Every instructor must speak the language readily and well. These two conditions are merely preparatory to attacking the problem. The next thing is to inspire in the students at the outset the desire to learn to speak. With Spanish, I find that to be easier than used to be the case when I taught French. We begin by talking Spanish to them from the first day. . . . We are just as rigid in our insistence that the grammar should be accurately learned as the most reactionary of the classicists. . . .

"We make, however, a somewhat different use of reading material and composition than is usual under the traditional system. The composition is for the most part done orally. That is, the classroom presentation of it is oral: the student writes the lesson in preparation. The reading material is read; not, except where understanding demands it, translated. Our theory regarding the nature of this material is that it should be both interesting and easy, and that the class should cover a comparatively large

amount of it. Even in the first semester we 'discuss' the reading. We make it evident to the students that in the elementary work the thing is to talk. . .

"Beginning with the second year we have a course in conversation, which meets five times a week and gives but three hours' credit. This course is required of all students majoring in the subject and is, of course, taught by a Spaniard."

ARTHUR L. OWEN, *University of Kansas.*

"The following about represents our experience here, a State Institution with a large enrollment in the Romance languages.

(1) Our salaries do not attract the best teachers and we cannot honestly urge able and gifted men to go into the profession of teaching unless they have private means.

(2) Capable and adaptable foreigners, fitted to teach our courses in composition and conversation, do not grow on every bush; those whom we secure do not always understand the American student.

(3) Our elementary sections have ranged from 35 (a minimum) to 60 students; no teacher however competent can reach all members of such a class. There are 'never' any funds available for all the instructors necessary.

(4) A very small percentage (hardly more than five to ten per cent) begins a foreign language with the object of making use of it in foreign parts. Most students desire merely a reading knowledge. . . "

R. SCHEVILL, *University of California.*

". . . I doubt exceedingly the statement that 200,000 of our soldiers have learned to speak French comfortably. None of the considerable number I have seen returned is so fortunate. . .

"However, the main point is that speaking and writing the language is not the chief aim for the great number of our college students. If this were the chief benefit to be derived, most of them should study something else, for they will never need it. Our instruction is usually aimed at the chief value, reading. Speaking is of large importance to the majority only to the extent that it contributes by interesting and stimulating.

"There is a very important minority who need to learn to speak and write the language. For these special classes and training should be provided. We give small classes (10-15) in conversation and composition, and they do learn to speak the language reasonably well. Also there are other possibilities. One of these we are now using here with remarkable success. This is our French House, in which French only is spoken, at tables and at all times. The advantage is that it makes use of what would otherwise be lost time for the student. We keep several French natives in the house, and thirty to forty of our students. These students have made a

progress in speaking French fairly comparable to what they would make in a similar amount of time in a French-speaking community, and I dare risk the assertion that they in general speak the language better and more readily than do any thirty who can be picked out of President Butler's 200,000 soldiers."

HUGH A. SMITH, *University of Wisconsin.*

" . . . The conversational ability of our students presents no 'sorry commentary.' We cannot avoid teaching our students how to read the foreign language. Requirements in the professional schools—the school of medicine, for example—demand a reading knowledge; and there are other good reasons for exacting a reading ability in the foreign languages. . . .

"I have just conducted a survey in a second-semester Spanish class on the difficulties offered by conversation in Spanish. The answers by the students are what I expected: lack of opportunity in class, lack of time outside of class because of other university demands, the necessity of putting the language aside from one's thoughts on leaving the class to go into another class,—perhaps into a different foreign-language class, lack of self-confidence because of the size of the class, the too rapid reading of texts, lack of concentration, lack of Spanish environment, lack of mental agility in language-study, lack of verbal memory. The problem is by no means the simple thing that it appears to be.

"It would pay an experimental psychologist to study student mentality under class-room conditions in the languages. He would probably discover an unusually large number of intellectually alert students whom it is nothing short of criminal to force into language straight-jackets. He might find it necessary to advise that such students not only be exempted from further language muddling after the first semester, but that the ordeal of the first semester be not counted against them, as manifestly unfair. . . ."

J. WARSHAW, *University of Nebraska.*

" . . . It is natural that such drastic criticism as that made by President Butler should come from one *extra muros*, who knows little of the difficulties of the situation. You cannot put a quart of water into a pint pot, and there is no use in claiming that it can be done. As long as our classes in modern languages meet three times a week in one hour sessions it is idle to talk of any such progress as President Butler seems to expect.

"As to the statement that 'at least 200,000 American young men, who, after six months of military activity and three or four hours of instruction a week in the French language, can carry on a comfortable conversation under ordinary conditions and circumstances,' etc., we may well be sceptical. During a recent sojourn in France, I met no young American of whom this is literally

true, altho I met some who could talk a little about certain things."

RAYMOND WEEKS, *Columbia University*.

"The possible values of knowledge of a modern foreign language are of four types: first, values resulting from ability to understand the language as written; second, values resulting from ability to understand the language as spoken; third, ability to speak the language; fourth, ability to write the language.

"The values of the first type are in themselves by far the greatest, for they include the potential knowledge of all the thought of the country in question, whether philosophic, religious, social, political, literary, or scientific, which that country has felt worth preserving. . .

"The values of the second and third types concern only those students who will visit the foreign country or will have to deal in some way with foreigners, who, on coming to this country, speak the language of the country from which they come. The number of students concerned with these values is larger now than previously, but I do not believe that more than 10 per cent of the students are really now so concerned. Furthermore, it is utterly impossible under American school and college conditions to give these values to more than a very small proportion of students enrolled in ordinary language classes. It should be recognized that the ability to understand the foreign language when spoken is distinctly more valuable and distinctly easier to teach than the ability to speak the foreign language. . . . So far as American schools and colleges are concerned, the endeavor really to give the ability to understand and to speak should be made not in the ordinary classes, but in special limited classes in which intensive laboratory conditions should be approximated as closely as possible. . . "

ERNEST H. WILKINS, *University of Chicago*.

". . . Many individuals are quite lacking in linguistic ability. Scientific tests devised to eliminate those thus handicapped should be instituted in both high school and college.

"Modern language classes are organized in the large city systems with about twice as many pupils in the class as there should be. For instance, in New York City high schools it is no uncommon thing to find an attendance of 40 to 50 in beginning classes, the very type of class in which the number should be smallest.

"Modern language teachers are too often lacking themselves in oral facility. Now that the war is over, these teachers should study abroad (especially teachers of French and Spanish). To make this possible, the sabbatical year with at least half-pay should be granted by Boards of Education to all such teachers.

"I am convinced that the high schools do more to secure oral and aural facility in French and Spanish than do the colleges. This is due in part to the greater impressionableness of the minds of the

younger students of the high schools and in part to the fact that the high schools deliberately aim to train tongue and ear, as well as the eye of the student. . . ."

LAWRENCE A. WILKINS, *Acting Director of Modern Languages in High Schools, New York City.*

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The statements given above make clear the general belief that some reforms are needed in modern language instruction, but that as a whole the present conditions are not nearly so bad as our critics would have us believe. There seems also to be a widespread opinion—which, however, is not held by all—that the primary aim of language instruction in colleges and universities is cultural and that the ability to speak the foreign languages must be acquired either in the secondary schools or *extra muros*. It is affirmed that beginners' French or Spanish is too elementary a subject to have a place in a college, and that, moreover, the average college student is too old to begin to learn to speak a foreign language to advantage.

Although there is much truth in this affirmation, the conditions are such in our general educational system that the elementary courses in modern languages can not be discontinued at the present time in most colleges and universities, and certainly not in the State universities. Students come up from the high schools with four years of Latin and they wish to take French, or they have had French or German and they wish to begin Spanish. This demand for beginners' courses in college must be met.

The real problem then is: What can we do for the students who begin a modern foreign language in college? If the statements made in this "Symposium" are typical—and I believe they are—we are beginning to take the position that students who commence a foreign language in college should be separated into two groups: those who desire primarily a reading knowledge of the language, and those who wish to speak and write it as well.

If the beginners are divided into two groups, should the separation be made at first with the privilege of shifting later, or should there be a general course for a semester and then make the separation? Only experience will tell which is better.

If the separation is made at the end of the first semester—or the first quarter in those universities that have the quarter system—it might be wise to excuse, at this time, from all linguistic requirements those students who give evidence of being "quite lacking in linguistic ability," "hopelessly unfit," tone-deaf, or "linguistic morons." This elimination should be made by a committee, and it should be based either on the student's record in all subjects, supplemented by personal interviews, or on scientific tests.

The students who are to continue the language would then be separated into two groups. The reading courses would be conducted largely in English and the emphasis would be put on translation. It would be the purpose of the course to teach the students to read and understand the written language and to pronounce it intelligibly. There would be no pretence whatever of teaching these students to speak the language easily and correctly.

The second group would consist of those students who wish to learn to speak and write the language and are willing to make the necessary effort. The plans suggested for the conduct of these courses differ, but they all presuppose capable, well trained teachers and wherever possible the use of the spoken language in the classroom.

Two general plans have been suggested for teaching the students to speak the language. One plan would be to organize the students in groups of twelve or fifteen and give them five times a week intensive work with much oral drill. The other plan would be to organize "special limited classes in which intensive laboratory conditions should be approximated as closely as possible." The enrollment would be limited to twenty, or twenty-five. The entire class would meet with the instructor three times a week. Twice a week the class would meet in groups of five or six, with tutors, for "exclusively oral and practical drill based on the regular work of the classroom."

Opinion differs as to whether the college credit for these courses should be three, four, or five hours.

The "laboratory system" offers interesting possibilities. The chief difficulty would be to find tutors and rooms. If funds were available to engage the services of competent tutors, and if rooms were available, the "laboratory system" would be ideal.

Most of the students who enroll in the advanced courses in philology and literature would come, of course, from these intensive and laboratory courses.

Our "Symposium" has also made evident a rather general opinion that, in addition to class work, students need the practice and the stimulus that come from extra-curriculum opportunities to speak and hear the foreign language. These may be had to some extent in clubs, at tables, and probably best of all—at least for the chosen few—in such organizations as the *Maison Française* at Columbia University and the *French House* at the University of Wisconsin.

In conclusion, it may ease our conscience somewhat to learn that the evidence available shows that, for the most part, our soldiers in France learned little French over there. I am sorry they did not learn more.

Indiana University.



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