

MODERN LANGUAGES IN THE SCHOOLS

P. L. H. MUSCHAMP

THE gift of language is surely the greatest gift that we possess. It is this gift above all that has placed man far above other living beings. In the measure in which we develop this gift, our superiority increases. Knowledge is power; but there is no knowledge without speech, or the fruits of speech. And when people are entirely without speech they are intellectually little, if at all, superior to the beasts of the forest.

"A man with two languages is like a man with two souls," says a Sicilian proverb. Indeed as we study the lives of great men who lived in the past, and consider the leading men in the world to-day, we must admit that the knowledge of two or more languages does seem to increase a man's soul-life, to enhance his perspicacity, to stimulate his understanding. Even when a second language has not actually been mastered, who will say that the study of Latin and French has not given him a greater feeling for language as such? Who will say that his English is none the better for it, that he has not learned to speak with greater precision, and that his sense of rhythm has not been improved?

As time passes, a knowledge of modern languages is becoming less and less a luxury and more and more a necessity. The age of travel and international trade is only in its dawn. Fifty years ago few Canadian boys and girls had any hope—or, for that matter, any particular wish—to see Europe. To-day there are few who do not wish to do so, and sooner or later, for business or for profit, by sea or by air, the majority will go.

Some there are who believe the time is near at hand when all the world will speak English. Others, with a more merciful ideal, make a similar claim for Esperanto. Now, Esperanto is a truly wonderful language, and the whole world might learn it in a month. But the world is very unreasonable, and will have nothing to do with it! English is a weird mixture of fantastic idioms, with a rich, varied, and picturesque vocabulary which lends itself to poetry and which all intelligent people take delight in studying. But inasmuch as only intelligent and scholarly people can master it, there is practically no hope of English ever being spoken to any

sufficient extent to warrant the neglect of other languages. The Germans in Germany, the French in France and elsewhere, the Spanish-speaking people of Spain and South America think highly of their respective languages, and show no noticeable desire to give them up in favour of another. A more rational world may some day adopt an international language, but we are vitally concerned with the present. To-day has its own complex requirements.

As time passes, we are thrown into ever closer contact with the French, the German, the Spanish-speaking people. We have to correspond with them, to treat and trade with them, in every way learn to get along with them, sharing the duties of civilization and progress, in order that we may bring about the only peace that will last for ever: Peace by understanding. For, as the French say, *tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner*.

Nova Scotia, in the van of Canada's international trade, and, with its universities, colleges, and great traditions in the van also of education, is especially concerned with the teaching of modern languages. In the past, Nova Scotia was handicapped by a dearth of qualified teachers, by lack of funds, or, rather, a mistaken idea of economy, by the sparsity of population, and by the fact that classic studies, wherever possible, were over-emphasised. In all these respects there has been marked improvement since the end of the war. Standards for teachers have been raised. Normal school and university students are rapidly taking the place of the girl with the M. P. Q. (Minimum Professional Qualifications). Industrial expansion and transportation facilities are making the erection of centrally located, well equipped schools possible. A more enlightened sense of citizenship and general prosperity is providing money for better qualified teachers. Fuller realization of modern needs is gradually introducing the teaching of essentials at the expense of non-essentials. Above all, the extensive use that is now being made of Summer Schools, and the auspicious beginning of educational broadcasts, are heralding a new era for education in general, and for languages in particular.

French, as one of the official languages of bi-lingual Canada, and as a language spoken by one-third of its population, has great and indisputable claims to being extensively studied by all Canadians. It should become as much a second language to English-speaking Canadians as English already is to a great majority of French Canadians. Only in this manner can true Canadian brotherhood and Canadian equality be brought about. The expansion of Nova Scotian trade is particularly dependent on a better understanding of the great French-speaking populations west of us.

These are to us the most easily accessible. Moreover, Nova Scotia has her own French population, and anyone who will make enquiries will soon find that these fellow Nova Scotians of ours have not the slightest intention of giving up French for English. On the contrary, as in New Brunswick, Quebec, and Ontario, the French population of Nova Scotia is expanding more rapidly than the English. The children speak French in school, and use French text-books. Digby county has its own French college; the people of Isle Madame in Richmond county speak the language of France remarkably well; in the North of Inverness one might easily imagine oneself on the coast of Normandy; such villages as Pointe Eglise, Belliveau, Cheticamp, Grand Anse, Arichat, etc. are not only French in name, but essentially French in every respect. It therefore behoves us, as loyal and progressive Nova Scotians, to learn the language of the first of civilized peoples who settled on our shores and who have ever since toiled among us.

But French has greater claims to being studied in Nova Scotia than that of furthering emotional and commercial interests. French is *par excellence* the language of culture, and possesses a literature second to none in the world. The cultural values of French are for us chiefly bound up with this literature, but they are sufficiently great to warrant a thorough study of the language. Anyone who is deprived of free and easy access to French thought, deprived of an appreciation for French prose and poetry with its picturesque phraseology, its clarity and its rhythm will live life less completely than otherwise. It is but slight consolation to reflect upon the fact that such a one will never know what he is missing. The claims for German are more definite, and also more limited. The Germans have a literature of great merit, and many may think it worth while to study German for the sake of its literature alone. Goethe, indeed, has often been considered the greatest literary genius that ever lived. But, besides being difficult, German is not a beautiful language. Heine, great artist that he was, managed, by a careful choice of words, to clothe his exquisite thoughts in harmonious sentences. But Heine's German is really only Germanized French, and one may as well go to the source of his inspiration. Life is short; we have time only for the best in all things. Anyone who has not yet mastered French, Spanish, and Italian is probably wasting time learning German for its literature and language alone. For those interested in science, however, German is of great value. Not only is Germany herself a leader in that field, but the Germans are usually the first to translate scientific books and treatises from Slavonic and Scandinavian

languages. And scientists know what a wealth of scientific information constantly comes to us from these countries.

During the last fifty years, the universities of all English-speaking countries have laid great stress on German studies. There has even been a danger of over-emphasis. For instance, at Dalhousie, until recently, German was compulsory for all wishing to study for a B.Sc. degree. This requirement has been dropped. Why, indeed, should one endowed with excellent scientific abilities be prevented from taking his degree just because he happens to be incapable, or, as is so often the case, mentally impotent with regard to languages? On this score, much could be said about compulsory Latin for medical degrees, which is equally absurd, but I am writing on the utility of living languages, and not on the futility of dead ones.

Spanish is of even greater value than German. It is, next to English, the leading language of commerce, and should in this respect be of particular interest to Nova Scotians. Close commercial interests have recently developed between us and the Spanish-speaking countries to the south. As our export and import trade with these people increases, so will our need for Spanish. Canadian banks and firms need agents, officials, and representatives to act for them in those countries. They prefer Canadians to natives, but rightly insist on a knowledge of Spanish. Skilled men are in great demand throughout Central and South America. Engineers, especially, can secure lucrative positions. Recently, in an American magazine for engineers there were a great number of positions being offered in Central and South America. Two out of three required at least some knowledge of Spanish on the part of the applicants.

But Spanish has merits other than mercenary. By linguists, Spanish is generally conceded to be the most beautiful of all cultured languages, and the easiest to learn. It is, as the Spaniards with just pride call it, *el idioma de los angelos*, the language of the angels. Here indeed is a language with a wealth of picturesque idioms, rich tones, and exquisite cadences such as none but the Spanish can claim. The finest shades of meaning, the truest and most poetical expressions that human speech can produce are Spanish. Nor is its literature to be despised. From the days of Cervantes, who wrote the unique and universally admired adventures of Don Quixote, to the present, an immense library of good prose and poetry has been published in Spain and South America. Spanish well deserves a place of honour in our high schools and universities.

Italian, too, has distinct claims. But these are such as to make its study of importance only in the university and the private

school. For those who pursue higher literary studies, Italian is indispensable. The fact that each year more books are published in Italy than in any other country in the world is of little significance. But Italy has produced so many great masters of thought and style that no literary man can well afford to be excluded from that great source of inspiration. Then Italian is of great importance for those who study music and voice culture. On account of its rich, mellow tones Italian lends itself pre-eminently to singing. At Dalhousie, German is compulsory for a degree of Bachelor of Music. Why? The fact that Germany has produced great composers is no justification for inflicting an unmusical language upon all those who wish to study music. Italian should be compulsory in its place.

The merits of each of the four languages mentioned can not be placed in separate compartments. All have great cultural values. But considering the essential values to Nova Scotia in particular, we may sum up their respective merits by saying that we have a primary and patriotic need for French, a scientific need for German, a commercial need for Spanish, and a cultural need for Italian. Yet none but specialists could or should study all of these. It is for the individual student to decide which he particularly needs. But when such a student, with all the facts before him, has made a decision in this matter, he should be given every opportunity to study the language or languages of his choice.

While great strides have been made in education during the last few years, the opportunities for learning modern languages in Nova Scotia are very slight. The leading cause has been lack of concern on the part of the public. People are not generally aware of their own immediate interests, still less of their wider and less apparent duties as parents and citizens. I do not say this acrimoniously. The complaint is as natural as it is universal. Living as we do in the early dawn of civilization, a scheme of education and a public attitude entirely commensurate with our present rapidly changing cosmopolitan needs is in no wise to be hoped for. While it is evident that the World War, fast growing centres of populations, and revolutionizing inventions have, in a few years, completely changed our economic life and social relationships, our fundamental ideas on education, in practice at least, have hardly changed at all.

Other reasons for this lack of opportunity for learning modern languages are corollaries of the first. There is undoubtedly a shortage of qualified teachers, and there is a super-abundance of subjects on the curriculum. But awakened public interest will

supply the funds required for the securing of better teachers, and will also find a way to re-adjust the curriculum so as to include the essentials at the expense of non-essentials. A great deal has been written on the matter of revised curricula, and I should like to be able to quote at length from the best authorities. But to save space I shall only draw up a table of subjects for high school grades conforming as closely as possible to the most generally approved recommendations, and *having special application to rural Nova Scotia.*

(I give this plan after much hesitation. For I know my omission or insertion of certain subjects will be variously assailed. Nor can I very well give all the *pros* and *cons* on which each choice is based. But my present purpose is merely to show how time for modern languages may be provided for, without loss to other essential subjects.)

Grade IX.

1. English.
2. French.
3. Agriculture, (practical).
4. Geography, (local, with survey of industries).
5. Mathematics, (general, with elements of alg. and geom.).
6. Music and Art, (drawing, etc.).
7. Physical Training.

Grade X.

1. English.
2. French.
3. Agriculture, (for boys); Household Science, (for girls).
4. Geography, (general).
5. History, (Canadian and Civics).
6. Elementary Science.
7. Music and Art.
8. Physical Training.

Grade XI.

1. English.
2. French.
3. Agriculture, Scientific, (for boys); Household Sc. and Motherhood, (for girls).
4. Geography, (Astronomical and Commercial).
5. History, (British and Civics).
6. Elementary Science.
7. Physical Training.
8. (Optional), Geometry, Algebra and Higher Mathematics.
9. (Optional), Latin, or German, or Spanish.
10. (Optional), Music and Art.

Grade XII.

1. English, (with survey of foreign literatures).
2. French.
3. Geography, (Social, Racial, Religious, Philological).
4. History, (World and Civics).
5. Physics and Chemistry.
6. (Optional), Higher Mathematics and Trigonometry.
7. (Optional), Latin, German, or Spanish.
8. (Optional), Music and Art.
9. (Optional), Practical and Scientific Agriculture, (with chemical analysis); Household Sc., (for girls).

According to this outline, French is to be compulsory throughout the four grades. Whatever its merits, to make it so is nothing but national justice. On the other hand, Latin is at no time to be compulsory. It is indeed quite impracticable and psychologically unsound to teach Latin and French in the same year. One language at a time is all a pupil can properly assimilate. Let it be the most important one. Moreover, it is essential that a modern language be taught as much as possible conversationally, and this is most effectively done before the vocal organs are set. After the age of sixteen it is difficult to acquire a good pronunciation. Latin may be easily learned later by the few who really require it. When one has thoroughly mastered a first foreign language, a second one is more easily studied. And it has been my experience that a good knowledge of one language is sufficient incentive to learn another.

In a recent report of the "Committee on the Position of Modern Studies in the Educational System of Great Britain" special emphasis was laid on the need of learning one language well before attempting to learn another. One of the most significant passages on this question runs as follows:

Whether for training of the mind, or the taste, or the artistic faculties, or the character, or for the increase of knowledge, the full discipline of language does not come into operation until the rudiments have been left behind. Further, it is far better to get the higher discipline of one language than such training as can be given through the rudiments of three or four, and we shall be justified in laying it down as a principle that no pupil in any school should begin a second language until a good prospect is disclosed that he or she has the capacity, and will have the time, to make adequate progress with the first. Adequate progress in a living language may be said to have been made when the pupil is able to speak the language with accuracy and fluency on familiar topics, to read the best authors easily and with pleasure, and to write satisfactory exercises of any simple type. If the principle here laid down were observed, fewer languages

would be learned by the majority of pupils; but many would come under the higher discipline where few at present get full benefit even from the lower.

In S 87 the committee urges that a modern language be studied first, for "living languages open more gates, and are more likely to be pursued in after-life." And from S 88, to quote one more significant passage bearing on this important question: "We find that Latin is no longer considered necessary for any of the professions, except the clerical; and we hold that it should not be compulsory even for an Arts course at any university." Such a report, drawn up by sixteen eminent English educationists, can hardly be ignored.

German and Spanish are now on the Nova Scotia high school curriculum. But as long as the present arrangement, whereby these subjects are to be taught in three successive years, is in force, few will avail themselves of what rare opportunities there are of learning these languages. Nowhere in Nova Scotia are there enough pupils taking German to justify separate classes for tenth, for eleventh, and for twelfth grade pupils. For German and Spanish there should be only one class and two grades. The scheme is as follows: Tenth and eleventh grade pupils join the first year class. They meet for two one-hour lessons per week. The work now prescribed for grades ten and eleven is covered as well as may be. The following year, as eleventh and twelfth grade pupils, they review the work from the beginning, along with a new set of first year pupils recruited from grades ten and eleven. The brighter ones of the second year can help as monitors. As such classes usually meet in the afternoon, it may be arranged to give an extra half hour after each lesson to further readings and conversation for the second year pupils. This system, in practice, works out very well.

Italian is, like Latin, a university subject, and much more than Spanish and German is for the specialist only. No serious attempt has yet been made to start a department of Italian in any of our universities. But the universities are not entirely to blame. The incoming students are for the most part ignorant of the merits of the language. When a course is offered, they show only the mildest curiosity. Yet the universities could help to popularise Italian, first, by having an extension lecturer speak on the respective merits of the various languages; secondly, by offering a comprehensive course.

Much has been said in recent years of the direct method of teaching languages, especially modern languages. Indeed the

constant intervention of English words in the study of, say, French is a distinct handicap. In no small measure it causes broken chains of association. In the direct method, which is almost unknown in Nova Scotia, nothing but French is spoken—just as a child would learn French in France. But in this direction we do well to move warily. In the first place, there are very few teachers in Nova Scotia properly qualified to use the direct method to advantage, for it requires a speaking knowledge of the language. Secondly, the direct method has, even under most favourable conditions, many serious defects. The value of studying a language in its grammatical aspect can hardly be over-estimated. It teaches us to become more conscious of our own language, increases our vocabulary, and makes us more careful in our choice of words. Then, learning a language grammatically is good discipline; it develops systematic habits of thought, and renders a student qualified to study any other language more easily, if he should require to do so in later life. Again, it is well to learn to translate readily from one language to another, for to be able to do so is often the chief end of linguistic studies. Lastly, with the direct method, the teacher does all the work; the pupil does practically nothing. As no homework can be assigned to him, the pupil in the end covers far less French than he would when he has passages to translate, idioms to learn, vocabularies to memorise.

It is best for each teacher to combine the old with the new method, according to his ability and circumstances. With the amount of French, German and Spanish at present prescribed for the schools of Nova Scotia, and where only three hours are available each week, there is hardly any time for conversational practice. But where an extra hour or two could be secured, such time, if the teacher were qualified, might be given to conversation and easy readings. The benefits in such a case would be great. Even with only three hours available, some teachers will find it greatly to the advantage of the class if they give up trying to cover all the work prescribed, and allot part of the time to conversation.

One question has still been left unanswered. Where are qualified language teachers to come from? In the past it has been the custom in England as well as here to count chiefly on foreigners for our universities and colleges. The initial cost and bother of such importations, however, has been found burdensome, and has seldom been justified by results. It is one thing to know a language, but quite another matter to be able to teach it. These imported teachers, moreover, seldom understand the position of their pupils. They cannot go to the source of their difficulties;

for in the first place, they expect too much, in the second place, they very rarely manage to win the confidence of the pupils, and are therefore no source of inspiration. To remedy this difficulty it is becoming customary in England to employ foreign language teachers as assistants only, and to engage Englishmen as heads of the departments, who, needless to say, must be linguists with exceptional qualifications. They are therefore difficult to find, and only our universities and colleges can afford to engage them. Our high schools, however, can at best employ only one language teacher. And while he need not be a linguist of exceptional merit, still he should be able to teach the rudiments of French, German, and Spanish, and to impart a good pronunciation. We must look to our own universities for the promise of students qualified to take up this work. If sufficient encouragement were offered, many would specialize with that end in view. I have often urged those showing marked linguistic abilities to take up the study of languages seriously, and look forward to the position of teacher of languages in a Nova Scotia high school. The need is great, but the response is small. Invariably there comes the same answer: "I would very much like to do it, but there's not enough money in it for me." Our university students are very practical. Their first concern in life is a good, comfortable home, and a reasonable amount of independence. And who can blame them?

In the meantime our Summer Schools are doing much good work. There, the teacher who has to teach French as one of several unrelated subjects is given an opportunity to acquire a good elementary knowledge of pronunciation. Not a few are taking full advantage of the facilities offered, and more and more each year are joining the classes. But this advantage should be followed up. An inspector of modern languages should be appointed for the schools of Nova Scotia. Such a one could give the teachers further help in pronunciation, grammar, and class-room method. He could briefly address the pupils on the respective merits of modern languages, and could, by the means of lantern slides or films, stimulate their interest by showing them pictures of French-Canadian districts, and, in general, of countries where French, German, or Spanish is spoken.

"But what is the use, trying to learn French and other languages?" some people will say: "English-speaking people are poor linguists; they are so by nature; languages just don't come natural to them." This belief is very widespread, but is not based on fact. The English are probably the greatest linguists on earth. English, being a mixture of so many forms of speech, contains a

greater variety of sounds than other cultured languages. Hence these languages are never quite unfamiliar. An Englishman, at least, learns French, German, Spanish, or Italian more easily than a Frenchman learns German or a German learns French. German Jews in America are very fond of claiming a knowledge of a dozen or more languages; but they never seem to be able to speak a single one of these correctly. Our own bi-lingual French-Canadians, with rare exceptions, speak English with a marked French accent. On the other hand, I have known a great many Englishmen and Canadians who were able to speak French or German so well that they could easily pass for natives of France or Germany. Many of the world's most outstanding linguists were English, and the greatest of them all, Sir John Bowring, had a fair knowledge of two hundred languages, and could speak one hundred of these quite readily.

No, we are not poor linguists, but we are inclined to be indifferent to other languages, and rather conceited as to the virtues of our own. This is natural in a conquering people. And now that the days of territorial conquests are over, we can still conquer markets, conquer nature, conquer intellectual heights. But for these conquests we must learn the languages of commerce, of science, and of culture.