

WHAT IS WRONG WITH THE TEACHING OF FRENCH?

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FEW countries in the world offer such incentives to learning French, and such potential opportunities for doing so, as exist in Canada. Three million Canadians speak French as their native language. Three hundred and two current Canadian publications appear in that language. Broadcasts in French are always available. Even the wrappers on products sold in Canada bear directions in French as well as in English.

Such conditions should be favorable to the production of a bi-lingual people. It is surprising, then, to find that among the English-speaking part of the population bi-lingualism is practically non-existent. A thorough, usable knowledge of French is a rare thing among English Canadians. Even an easy reading knowledge of the language is far from common.

This state of things is doubly surprising in view of the amount of time and energy devoted by Canadians to the study of French. Every Canadian high school offers French as one of its main subjects, and in many schools French begins with Grade Seven. High school enrolment in French surpasses that in any other language. The same is true of colleges and universities. French is taught everywhere, and a majority of students register for it. They even have opportunity to do more, for in French Canada are two universities and several colleges where, if they choose to do so, they can study for a time in a completely French environment, thus acquiring the fluency in the language which comes only from constant practice. Several important summer schools where only French is spoken are conducted for that express purpose.

With such an imposing institutional scheme for the learning of French, and so much time and effort devoted to it, does it not seem strange that results are so unsatisfactory? In France, in Germany and in most countries on the Continent, six years of *lycée* or *gymnasium* are deemed sufficient to learn very thoroughly *two* modern languages. Their mastery (or a corresponding mastery of ancient languages) is in fact required for admission to the universities. In Canada, our high school pupils study French from three to five years, many of our college

students bring the total to seven, eight, or more. Still one hears business men complaining all the time that it is practically impossible to find persons with high school or business school record who can handle French with any degree of practical efficiency. Numerous are the college graduates and even the college professors who lament that they don't know French. One might wonder whether there is in Anglo-Saxon minds some insurmountable reluctance to learning any but their native tongue.

In point of fact, I believe that our failure to learn French is due to other, and fortunately more remediable, causes. Several years of study of the conditions of foreign language teaching, both in Canada and elsewhere, have led me to the following conclusion: the majority in Canadian schools and colleges fail to acquire an effective knowledge of foreign languages in general, and of French in particular, because in the main foreign languages in Canada are very badly taught. This bad teaching, in my opinion, results from two main causes, which are closely inter-related. The first is an insufficient mastery of the language on the part of most of the teachers. The second, which is partly responsible for the first, lies in an almost complete failure to utilize the newer and more effective methods of foreign language teaching; a failure for which provincial education departments, normal schools, and colleges must be held chiefly responsible. Let us examine these deficiencies in turn.

It is evident that the first requisite to good language teaching is a thorough knowledge of the language on the part of the teacher. If his acquaintance with it is only approximate, if his spoken French is halting and incorrect, his pronunciation deficient, not only will his pupils inherit his defects, but he himself will lack the assurance and the ease necessary to make his teaching vital and effective. Judged by this first essential, most of the teaching of French in our public schools must be considered defective. Only one province, Quebec, claims to use "specialists" for its teaching of French, and even that claim applies only to high schools. As French in the Province of Quebec starts with Grade Three, this means that, even there, non-specialists teach the language during the first four years of study—just the time when habits of pronunciation and handling of the language are being established. In the other provinces specialists, non-specialists and semi-specialists share the field in various proportions. No department of education anywhere outside Quebec makes the claim that its French teachers as a

whole can speak French fluently. In some provinces, the number of those who can do so, as estimated by the respective education departments, is extremely low: forty per cent in British Columbia, ten per cent in Prince Edward Island, three or four per cent in Nova Scotia, fewer in New Brunswick. It is evident that in our high schools the first requirement of good French teaching is rarely fulfilled. A large majority of our teachers are not French specialists, and their knowledge of French is inadequate. How inadequate in some cases can be realized only through personal acquaintance with some of the teachers. It has been my experience while teaching in summer school to find that classes made up largely of teachers were usually unable, at the beginning of the session, to understand a single sentence of French unless it was written out. I have also met public school French teachers who had no inkling of the way French should be pronounced. Realizing their deficiency, they made their pupils spell the French words instead of pronouncing them!

Though it does not always go to such lengths, an inadequate knowledge of spoken French is, then, fairly general among our school teachers. This seems entirely unnecessary since Canada, a bi-lingual country, contains a large number of people for whom French is the mother tongue. It is always surprising to find how few of the teachers of French in Canada are French-Canadians. Quebec employs a great many, Ontario sixty-five, but outside these two provinces their number is insignificant. This is true even of provinces which have a large French-speaking population, like Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. If education departments and school boards realized clearly the importance of a thorough knowledge of French for all French teachers, we should find many more French-Canadians teaching their language in our schools, since, with few exceptions, they are the only people in Canada who really know French. The reason often given, that the French of a good deal of the French-speaking population is very poor, hardly a dialect, full of anglicisms and incorrect in pronunciation, does not seem very convincing; for this applies only to the French spoken by the uneducated members of our French-speaking communities, among whom we would not be likely to choose our teachers. No doubt even good Canadian French is not Parisian French. But neither is good Canadian English Oxford English, and yet it is the English taught in our schools. As things are, the French of educated French-Canadians is infinitely superior to the wooden and

strongly anglicised French of the majority of our English-speaking French teachers, and a vast increase in the effectiveness of our French studies could be achieved if French-Canadian teachers were widely used for teaching French in our schools.

If it is asserted by some that religious and cultural differences make such a proposal impracticable, it can only be said in reply that if such is the case, then Canada is allowing sectional misunderstandings to interfere with the effectiveness of its educational system and the development of its national culture. Not only language study, but the unity and moral tone of the country as a whole would gain by the cultivation of greater tolerance and cooperation between the two basic language groups of which the nation is formed.

Increased mastery of the language on the part of those who teach it is, then, a first requisite to a more productive study of French in Canadian schools. But there is a second requisite, equally important: teachers must also have a working knowledge of the psychology of languages and of recent methods of language teaching. French-born or French-Canadian teachers, for instance, often fail to teach efficiently the language which is their native tongue because of a lack of understanding of the mental processes involved in learning a new language. Ignorant of the difficulties which confront their pupils, they fail to isolate and elucidate them. Their teaching tends to be unsystematic, and rarely to synchronize with the level of development of the class. On the other hand, English-speaking French teachers, who also lack a knowledge of the basic psychology of languages, are given to err another way. They are only too conscious of the particular difficulties involved in the learning of French. But since they have given no study to the fundamental nature of language as spontaneous utterance of thought, their teaching is likely to consist in the main of drills on the abstract structure of the language: their pupils experience French only as a slow matching of words on an abstract canvas of grammatical rules, never as a medium of expression. Teaching a language is not only an art requiring mastery of the subject taught, but also a science based partly on researches and experiments of its own, partly on the findings of related sciences like the psychology of speech and the psychology of learning. During the last twenty or thirty years, experiments in the field of language teaching have been extensive, and have yielded rich positive results. An acquaintance with the various methods and teaching devices which have been found successful is indispensable for maximum

teaching efficiency. It will allow teachers to choose methods best adapted to their particular conditions, to select material most in line with their special objectives, and to use such material understandingly for best results. In fact, a good knowledge of methods can help to compensate, in part, for insufficient mastery of the language itself. A teacher deficient in pronunciation but well versed in method will know, for instance, how to choose and use good gramophone records for the purpose; one who lacks fluency in speaking will know that by providing his classes with an abundance of easy extensive reading, and thus developing to the maximum their "passive knowledge" of the language, he will bring them further on the way toward language mastery than by clinging to conversational methods for which he is unfitted.

The relative efficiency of our teachers in this second requisite of good teaching, a knowledge of how to teach, is more difficult to ascertain than their knowledge of the language itself. But in this case also one can affirm that although all our teachers are getting an increasing knowledge of educational theories in general, very few of them have much knowledge of the special pedagogy of language teaching. Among all our colleges and universities, there is only one French department which has a course in "Methods of Teaching." This is the McGill Graduate School, where few of our high school teachers are likely to go, since entrance requirements are far above the level of the average school teacher. The same applies to summer schools. McGill Summer School alone offers a course in "Modern Methods of Teaching French." In the education departments of our colleges, universities, and normal schools, we find courses in general methodology, and here and there courses in the methodology of the various high school subjects, including modern languages. These, however, being new and as yet not very general developments, have not had time to influence deeply our teaching practice. They should eventually lead to better teaching if their importance is increasingly recognized by students and educational staffs. As things stand now, a very small proportion of our high school teachers have had any training at all in the special pedagogy of language teaching, or possess any knowledge of its latest developments.

If we now turn to college teaching, we find the situation little better. To be sure, most teachers of French in colleges know the language well. They are specialists. Many of them, indeed, are scholars who have explored deeply some literary or

linguistic aspect of their subject, but very few of them have any training in education. Their interest lies in related problems of philology or literature, rather than in the development of effective methods of teaching the language itself. Indeed they frequently bemoan the fact that so much of their time has to be spent teaching the elements of the language to students who should already know them. Under such conditions their teaching tends to be traditional rather than scientific, conservative rather than progressive. They teach as they have been taught, and since our school superintendents and inspectors, as well as our high school teachers, are largely the product of our colleges, this general tone of traditionalism and conservatism in teaching practices spreads from the colleges to the whole field of language teaching. College French departments are thus largely responsible for the second main cause of the bad teaching of French in Canada: the failure in most quarters to profit by the very significant advances made in the methodology of language teaching during the last few decades.

The net result of this situation is that for the most part French is taught in Canada by methods current thirty years ago or more, methods absolutely out of harmony with the present spirit of education and in complete contradiction to all the findings of the psychology of learning. As far as learning French is concerned, Canadians on the whole are still at the stage of riding, not even a buggy, but a hard, creaking, unupholstered wooden cart. And though, no doubt, a hard wooden cart has its points in developing endurance and fortitude by mortifying the flesh and the spirit, it does not get one where one wants to go as effectively and as pleasantly as a well-conditioned modern car.

That this conservatism, this clinging to out-of-date and generally condemned methods is a fact, I hope to prove later by an examination of the programs of study followed in many of our high schools and colleges. First, however, in order to indicate better the gap between our teaching practice and what could and should be done, I shall summarize briefly the main conclusions reached by investigators in the field of language teaching during the recent period and generally accepted now by educators.

The first is a condemnation of grammar as a starting point in the learning of French, and a warning against its emphasis at any time. "Teaching a language by the grammar method" says Huse in *Psychology of Foreign Language Study*, "is like

teaching how to swim through rules for the coordination of the muscles and then throwing the student into ten feet of water." Emphasis on grammatical study is condemned for two main reasons: it creates habits of analysis and detailed observation of the elements of the language which are opposed to comprehension, quick reading and spontaneous expression. It makes language learning unnecessarily hard and uninteresting.

Harold Palmer, in enumerating the conditions unfavorable to language learning, says that conditions for learning are bad ". . . when the student is encouraged by his teachers to learn by the medium of his eyes, to base his knowledge on spelling and in so doing inhibit his ears from fulfilling their natural function . . . when he generally focuses his consciousness, pays attention to details, studies rules and practises analysis . . . When he constantly establishes comparison between the foreign word and the nearest equivalent . . . When he has few or no opportunities of hearing the language used, but has to use it himself, to forge out sentences as best he may" . . . Those are the very conditions fostered by the grammatical method. A great wealth of quotations to the same effect could be gathered, together with records of numerous observations and experiments showing that a knowledge of formal grammar does not coordinate with quick reading, comprehension or spontaneous expression. The general consensus of opinion is that far too much place has been given to grammatical studies in the past; that grammar should simply be a tool, used only when needed, that is to say inductively and very sparingly during the first two years of the study of French. Only later, when the student already has a large acquaintance with French, will formal grammar be found useful for generalization and increased exactness of expression.

Along with formal grammar we find another important phase of language learning decisively condemned in modern methodology. This is translation. Translation may be tolerated as an occasional help to the understanding of a word or sentence, or as an exercise for advanced students. But as a current class practice, translation is felt to be harmful because it tends to tie French constantly with its English equivalent instead of allowing its own forms to develop, and because, like grammar, it focuses attention on words and constructions instead of focusing it on the thought. Every writer on the subject agrees that a habit of translating the French text inhibits the development of good habits of reading and often inhibits comprehension. Experiments have also shown that translation into English

is not necessary for testing comprehension. Questions, exercises using true and false statements or incomplete sentences, etc., are just as effective. Moreover, by keeping the pupil in the French medium these methods encourage habits of thinking and speaking in French.

Having thus dismissed from French courses what in the past has constituted their main and often their only practice—the study of grammar and the translation of texts—what does modern methodology propose to put in their place? In the Report of the American and Canadian Committee on Modern Languages, which from 1924 to 1929 made an extensive critical survey of the field of foreign language teaching, we read: "Since reading ability is the one objective on which all agree, *classroom efforts during the first two years should centre primarily on developing the ability to understand the foreign language readily through the eye and through the ear. The goal must be to read the foreign language directly with a degree of understanding comparable to that possessed in reading the vernacular. In order that students may attain this goal, reading experience must be adequate, and the results of all other types of class exercises must converge toward the same end.*"

This opinion has gained increasing support during the last ten years as experience has confirmed the premises on which it rests: first, that a reading ability is the easiest phase of language learning to acquire; that it can be achieved in two or three years of high school and thus certainly represents the best value in language learning for those who do not continue French beyond that point. Secondly, that the ability to understand French and the large passive knowledge that comes from extensive reading is the best basis on which to acquire an ability to speak and write the language and even to use its grammatical forms correctly. The ability to read French easily is therefore increasingly recognized as the first objective to work for.

By "reading" is meant direct prehension of thought from the foreign symbol, without transposition into English. As translation, which has previously taken the place of reading, is detrimental to the development of good reading habits, a new technique had to be evolved. In the course of the research and experimentation that lead to its development, one of the most important steps in the progress of language learning was taken: the application of the principle of "word frequency" to the vocabularies of the foreign language texts used for teaching. It is known that a relatively small number of words, words

of very frequent occurrence, form the basic stuff of any language, while a large number of other words are more rarely used. Words in the main western languages have now been tabulated according to their frequency of use in the language. It would seem normal, when learning French, to begin with the most frequent words, since they recur constantly, and gradually to extend one's knowledge to the less and less common ones. This, however, was never done until a few years ago, except in a haphazard, empirical way. Frequency now is the principle used in selecting the vocabulary of a large number of text-books, and series of texts have been created which lead the student gradually from a vocabulary limited to the most essential words to the vocabulary of the two or three thousand most useful words sufficient for ordinary comprehension.

It is evident that such books are far superior to texts with ungraded vocabularies. They concentrate effort on the essentials; they involve constant repetition and therefore constant review of the most basic elements; they integrate the known into the unknown, and the best of them do it at a rate which makes possible the gradual assimilation of new words without waste or drudgery. Only with books of this kind can habits of real "reading" be formed. In ordinary ungraded texts, the student is confronted in every new story, indeed on every new page, with too many new words; many of them are not very useful, some of them he may never see again. The greater part of his "reading" time has to be spent in looking up the meaning of these new words, which is of absolutely no profit for learning. Furthermore, he cannot assimilate such a large vocabulary as he goes along, which means that his power of comprehension lags far behind the text he has to read. Inevitably he translates and never reads.

After relegating grammar to the background, rejecting translation for reading, making the ability to read the first main objective of the French course and developing for this purpose an entirely new and far superior type of textbook, the new methodology has also something to say about pronunciation.

When learning to read French, it is advisable to learn to pronounce it, and it was found that French pronunciation is learned better when dissociated from written (non-phonetic) symbols. Therefore in a recently conceived French course, several weeks are given at first to purely oral teaching. Lessons in this period usually take the form of very simple conversation on concrete subjects and drills on various sounds. It is felt

essential that the pupils have their first contact with the language only through the ear. This method develops their power of direct oral comprehension, one of the most neglected phases of language learning under the old fashioned teaching. It also prevents the distortions in pronunciation that inevitably occur when students are presented with written symbols that are automatically linked for them with English sounds. Only when French pronunciation habits are fairly well established is the written material given.

To these recommendations of modern methodology can be added one more: the advisability of using French while teaching. To the largest extent possible, it should be the language of the class. We shall not stop to discuss this point, as it is generally accepted even in conservative circles. In practice, however, it is the most difficult to realize at present, since a large number of our French teachers cannot speak French.

To summarize, a course for learning French which utilized modern principles would be conceived somewhat as follows. The first few weeks would be given to acquiring good habits of pronunciation in the manner indicated above. Then books would be given to the class, and the main first objective—the development of power to understand oral and written French—would be seriously attacked. This would be done mainly through intensive reading of well graduated texts, the effort being always to get the meaning directly from the foreign symbols, and therefore the material used would be always only slightly above the power of comprehension of the pupils. Supplementary extensive reading would be done by pupils in varied amounts according to their ability and zeal. Translation would be used very sparingly, grammar only as necessary for understanding. Testing of comprehension would be done through questions and oral and written exercises. Other exercises in French would serve to focus attention on special difficulties of vocabulary and syntax. Exercises and questions would gradually bring the student to the habit of actively using his knowledge. However, active reproduction would not become a main objective until the students had mastered the basic passive vocabulary of about two thousand words necessary for general comprehension; that is to say, until they could read French easily. This stage can be reached at the end of the second year. From then on, easy and correct expression in French would become the main class objective, while reading would continue in an always enlarging field as a background

activity. During this second phase, composition, practice on syntax, conversation on various subjects, exact and even literary translation would have their place. Those activities could begin at a relatively high level, and progress rapidly, because they would develop on the basis of an extensive acquaintance with the French language, and on habits of receiving and expressing thought through it.

Such a course may seem to many readers completely theoretical and utopian, a very unnecessary turning topsy-turvy of the good old way *they* learned French. Courses essentially along those lines, however, do exist in increasing numbers and have proved their worth. They are multiplying rapidly in the high schools of the United States; they are found also in some colleges of that country, as well as in some secondary schools in England. For the last five years they even exist in the public schools of two of our Canadian provinces.

If we open the Modern Languages Course of Study issued by the Department of Education of Ontario, we read the following about the French course for Grade IX:

"Reading for enjoyment and understanding should be the first and constant concern of the pupil. He will learn to read by one method alone and that is by reading, and he should be given every encouragement by being supplied with interesting and well-graded material . . ."

"Before using this text book in the class-room, the teacher should spend about four weeks acquainting the class with the method of forming French sounds. The names of class-room objects as well as expressions used in the class-rooms should be taught by the direct method, and these should be incorporated into the exercises on the sounds . . ."

"The attention of the teachers is called to the fact that a new method of approach is necessary. As little translation as possible should be used in the first few lessons, and this should rapidly diminish until only the occasional word will be translated . . ."

"Instead of making grammar an end in itself, it is proposed to make it a means to an end. Comprehension should be the primary objective, and at the outset only sufficient grammar should be taught to make this achievement possible . . ."

Passing now to Grade X, we read:

"It is again emphasized that the objective in reading is comprehension. By the end of Grade X the pupils should be able to read simple French with pleasure; there should be no occasion for the laborious effort of fitting together individual words. The stories to be read are so carefully graded, progressing so slowly

in vocabulary, idiom and construction, that translation of the text would be a sheer waste of time and would actually retard the development of the pupil's power of comprehension . . ."

And in Grade XI:

"In Grades IX and X the teacher's efforts have been directed toward enabling the pupil to *understand* French. Now the special endeavor will be to give him the power to *express* himself in French. Translation from English into French will be introduced, and there should be some practice in the writing of free composition."

This certainly is a typical "reading method" course. In the *Program of Studies for the Junior High Schools of British Columbia*, we find essentially the same recommendations supplemented in this case by a parallel course in French and French-Canadian cultures. It should also be recognized that the Province of Quebec, probably because of its peculiar situation and because of the unusual duration of its French course, uses largely direct method practices. But outside the public schools of these three provinces, I think that I can affirm that the long discredited grammar-translation method still reigns supreme in the public schools of this country as well as in the great majority of its colleges. Thus teaching French by modern methods is still the exception, rather than the rule, in Canada.

An examination of the texts used in most high schools and in the first two years of most colleges is sufficient to prove the point. We find in nearly every case—exactly as we would have found in 1876, when foreign language studies were first introduced into the curriculum—that the books prescribed for the French course consist fundamentally of a grammar and one or several "readers." The grammars have improved somewhat in content since 1876, but to my knowledge all the ones used in Canada still follow the plan of the old-fashioned Latin grammars. They demand from the students the learning of rules and of disconnected and ungraded vocabulary, the construction and translation of sentences: activities which, as we have seen, are unfavorable to the formation of good language habits.

The "readers", with very few exceptions, are no better, at least when considered from the point of view of their efficiency in teaching the students to *read* French. Only in a few of them is the vocabulary selected according to frequency. And these, instead of being used in series of increasing difficulty, are interpolated between other books with entirely different vocabulary contents, thus losing much of their value. As to the vocabulary

of ordinary ungraded readers, it seems often to have been selected according to the opposite principle, the principle of using as many rare words as possible. To give only a few examples: *L'Abbé Daniel*, by Theuriet, includes numerous descriptive passages that would tax the vocabulary of a French-born high school pupil; yet it is used frequently in first or second year college French. An examination of a much used high school reader, *Le Chien du Capitaine*, by Enault, will show on practically every page many words not included even in a list of the six thousand most useful French words! Labiche's plays, *Le Voyage de Monsieur Perichon* or *La Poudre aux Yeux*, though they confront us in nearly every list of texts either in college or high school, are so obsolete in vocabulary, idiom and syntax, apart from subject matter, that there can be nothing to recommend them unless it be the fact that they have been used as text books since 1891. Many more examples could be given. With readers of this type it is usual for students to spend more than an hour deciphering a single page, and rare are the class periods in which much of the time is not wasted in the tedious task of transposing the whole French text into English. The rest of the class time is usually employed in correcting the grammatical exercises. Thus is the grammar translation method perpetuated in its most authentic centuries-old form!

It is fair to acknowledge, however, that traces of efforts to pull the teaching of French into line with modern theories are noticeable here and there in the Directions for Teaching issued by the various Departments of Education. These efforts have resulted in some progress in the early grades. In them there is now, in theory at least, a tendency to minimize grammar and insist on the active use of French—this, of course, being largely nullified in practice by the fact that French in those grades is usually taught by the class teacher, whose knowledge of the language is rarely adequate for conversation. And in what concerns senior high school teaching, one cannot help getting the impression that the efforts of the Departments of Education to modernize their French course have been half-hearted and ineffective. Lacking conviction, or real knowledge of the psychology of language teaching, they stop in most cases with exhortations to the teachers, and do not furnish the means of putting those exhortations into practice.

Teachers are told, for instance, that their pupils should read a lot and learn to enjoy reading French, but to realize this end are given obsolete, ungraded readers which inevitably l . . .

slow translation. Elsewhere they are told that the Direct or Conversational Method is the most fruitful in results, but from Grade IX on they have to teach *Fraser and Squair* grammar, the most typical old-fashioned grammar, brimful of exercises and practices which inevitably discourage habits of self-expression. Everywhere active knowledge—memorizing of active vocabulary composition, translation into French—is insisted on from the first. Such exercises require painstaking effort, hence tend to monopolize the time and energy of teachers and pupils alike, and to leave little room for the activities recommended by the teaching authorities such as extensive reading, games, songs and conversation.

Most of our educational departments seem to be attempting to do contradictory things. They want to reach new goals without being willing to use new means. In terms of the simile we used before, they want a modern automobile but are trying to build it from pieces of the old wooden cart.

In the colleges we find more unity of purpose because, as a whole, conservatism there still reigns supreme: the good old ways of teaching French go on undisturbed by any breath from modernism. College teaching, in the main, continues to ride unperturbed, perhaps not in the plebeian wooden cart, but at least in a leisurely and aristocratic coach-and-four.

I hope the foregoing study has made it clear that there is room for much improvement in our teaching of French. The failure of schools and college French departments to get better results is not due to some insurmountable cause, but to an unwillingness to break with the past and adopt wholeheartedly better methods. We have poor teaching because we have not good teachers; and we have not good teachers because our teachers have been taught in an obsolete and wasteful manner which they in turn perpetuate. Only when the most efficient methods and the best books are used in our schools will there be any chance that our high schools pupils will come to college prepared to receive what college French departments are best prepared to give them, a cultural, linguistic and literary broadening of their elementary knowledge. Only then will the colleges be able to produce an abundance of well-trained specialists among whom the teachers of the future can be chosen.

As we have seen, two of our provinces, Ontario and British Columbia, are leading the way. It is high time for the others to follow.