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1963
Johannesburg College of Education
https://hdl.handle.net/10539/25562
Proctor, L. (1962/1963). A plea for the study of modern languages. Symposium: A Journal for Education in Southern Africa, pp. 38-39.

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A PLEA *for* The Study of Modern Languages

By LESLIE PROCTOR

THE growth in the popularity of Modern Languages in schools in England during the post-war years can only be described as phenomenal. The ease of cross-Channel travel in this "never-had-it-so-good" era, the popularity of continental films, improved methods of teaching—such as language laboratories, audio-visual aids and the advance of the direct method: these are some of the reasons that spring to mind for this advance. Not less impressive is the range of languages studied, both at Ordinary and Advanced levels of G.C.E.. The traditional stronghold of French and/or German has been under siege from newcomers in the field of language study, and now Italian, Spanish, Russian and even Chinese have breached the walls and dug themselves firmly in.

Nor is it only in the grammar schools that Modern Languages are gaining ground. The Cinderella of the British Education system — the Secondary Modern school — is beginning to be precocious enough to look to her French (without becoming an addict of the examination weed). There has even been recently a suggestion of French in the primary school, and a report of a class of ten-year-olds in Leeds reaching oral proficiency at their linguistic level within a few months made recent news. Do not let us forget, either, that French has been included in the preparatory school curriculum for many years.

In fact it is fairly safe to say that the traditional power of Latin and Greek, held for so many centuries, has been usurped by Modern Languages, with the obvious advantage they offer over the classics—living, spoken languages that can be practised on their home grounds without much expense or difficulty, and with a far more interesting and extensive literature. The proverbial insularity of the Englishman is gradually crumbling, and if Euromart and the Channel tunnel become realities, the process of demolition will be complete.

What then of the position of Modern Languages in South Africa, with her cosmopolitan population, her historical ties with many of the major European countries and her unique bilingual position? There is only one answer, and that to be given reluctantly —it is not very bright.

The first point that strikes an objective observer—and the present writer lays no claim to objectivity, having drunk the Hippocrene of French and German from an early age—is the artificial division (whose responsibility I have not yet discovered) between French and German. How many Afrikaans pupils are at the moment learning French in the Transvaal? What is the number of English-speaking pupils taking German? Are the Du Plessis and the Marais and the Du Toits and the De Villiers and the La Granges afraid to acknowledge the French origin of their names? Are we ashamed to admit the origin of viticulture in South Africa? Are the memories of the holocaust of the roaring forties so strong that English-speaking pupils dare not or are not allowed to savour the language and culture of a Germany that was flourishing two centuries before Hitler arrived on the scene? Surely the affinities between German and English are as strong as those between French and English. Could not the suggested rejuvenation of the education system be partly achieved by an exchange of the French/German hormone pill?

A further aspect is the decline of French in English-medium schools. How many schools, outside Johannesburg, offer French amongst the bewildering array of subjects to be chosen? Even in Johannesburg most schools offering French are girls' schools, and why French should be a feminine preserve is a topic worthy of research. The present writer heard recently of a well-known co-educational school, with a good record of French tuition, abolishing the study of French as from the beginning of next year. These are signs of the times, and very sad signs they are. It is time that the bias towards vocational education were righted—it is not the teacher's job to provide the kind of education that will enable a child to earn a living: it is his job to afford the child an opportunity for "part of the act of living", as George Sampson said.

At this point the critics will set their sights and let off great salvos, such as "Where are we to find the teachers?"; "Why learn the language of a country six thousand miles away? Why not Zulu or Sotho?"; "Why teach children a language they will never use?"; "In my experience the teaching of French has always been ineffective—we had a French teacher when I was at school whom we called Froggy, and the things we didn't get up to in his

class. "; "You linguists are parrots—mere imitators, incapable of original or deductive thought." Et al.

Granted that the year of residence in the foreign country, regarded by so many as essential in the training of a language teacher, is not easily achieved; (although bursaries are available, for example from the French Embassy) nevertheless not one of the above arguments is valid. Facilities for Modern Language study are available at universities and training colleges: the pity is that so few take advantage of them. (This year, for example, at the Johannesburg College of Education there are six students qualifying to teach French, of whom one is a fairly recent immigrant from Paris). No country is further away from its neighbour than the time it takes to switch on the wireless. Although it would be neither easy nor desirable to arrange a Congo fiasco each year so that school children could practise their French on unsuspecting refugees, there are opportunities for contact with natives of most European countries, for example the Alliance Française. Recent audio-visual aids such as gramophone, tape-recorder, television, have made the study of languages alive, meaningful and purposeful— and why should we not enlist the aid of these modern Lares and Penates in language teaching?

As for original thought, how many opinions are really our own in these days of mass media with their bull-dozer tactics?

The advantages of Modern Language study are self-evident, and there are times when the obvious should be restated. The prime aim in language study ought to be communication, in all senses of the word —not least of which is the passive sense of being communicated to by minds greater than our own, be they poets or nuclear physicists, philosophers or architects, mathematicians or dramatists. All praise be to many of the science faculties of our universities for insisting on even an elementary knowledge of a European language, so that the student can be a better engineer or architect or chemist through his knowledge of that language.

One of the by-products of language study is the expanding of one's intellectual horizon through making acquaintance with a new language, culture and history, and the breaking down of one's insularity and parish-pump mentality. How important this is in South Africa, where our views are all too likely to be limited to the banks of the Limpopo, needs no stressing.

The intellectual discipline of translation—of reproducing as closely as possible the original thought and atmosphere of a passage by the Goncourt brothers or of a poem by Baudelaire or Goethe is one worthy of cultivation, a discipline that brings immense satisfaction leading to a closer appreciation and understanding of one's own language. And the astonished gasps of admiration from one's friends who happen to overhear one conversing with a member of the touring French Rugby team are adequate compensation for all the labour and sweat involved in the learning of French.



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