

*Language Teaching in*  
**WISCONSIN**  
**Public High Schools**

1941-1942



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to  
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## CHAPTER IX

### THE IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGES IN WAR AND IN PEACE

In the preceding chapters the picture of language teaching and language teachers in Wisconsin—even when obtained through so objective a medium as a questionnaire—has been, on the whole, a favorable one. The teachers are well prepared academically, and the teaching of languages may be said to be of fully as high quality as that of any other subject in the curriculum. Some writers point to such possible results of language study as beneficial influences on the understanding of English vocabulary and usage; and they allege also commercial benefits, in addition to the intangible values. Why is it, then, that in a state so rich and with such unique advantages for language study as Wisconsin, only 13 per cent of the total high-school population was studying languages in January, 1942; and why was it that the number during 1943 was expected to be even smaller?

It would be unfair to blame the present war emergency exclusively, although its strong influence on *high-school* offerings can not be denied. As a matter of fact, languages, in common with mathematics and history, have had rough sailing in high schools for almost two decades.

Among the reasons which may be advanced are these: (1) a phase of the pre-war national philosophy of education and its war counterpart; (2) still continuing reformulations of the secondary curriculum in terms of functionalism and social living, in which, unaccountably, languages were slighted; and (3) the alleging by some teachers that pupils claim "languages are too hard and too much work in comparison with other subjects."

The dollar-and-cents philosophy among, happily, a small number of American educators, and the pre-war tendency toward isolationism, are two aspects of the first of these reasons. Though we may deplore both, it is possible to understand their causes. The United States as a young and vigorous country is less bound by traditional ideas of education than Europe. Moreover, the predominantly industrial character of America makes earning a living, especially in the industrial pursuits, an important concern. Because of this, during the past few years, preference has been increasingly given to school subjects with a surrender value; i.e., an immediate money value in a vocation. (*Academic subjects*—among which languages are foremost—were, in some instances, taken only if required.) During the war emergency, this utilitarian tendency has become even more prominent, though now applied to immediate returns in "winning the war"; and

so, at present, mathematics, the sciences, typing, and mechanical skills have come into high favor. It should be noted that the first two of these, shunned, like languages, in peace times heretofore as being "too difficult and too much work", have, since the war showed a need for them, become quite palatable.

### WHAT ADMINISTRATORS AND TEACHERS CAN DO

If administrators and teachers, themselves, get clearly in mind just what the values of languages are, they will be able to convey these to others and to make them clear to parents and pupils alike. It may not be amiss, therefore, to remark briefly on these values, here.

Languages are unique in that they do not concern only a part of a human being's life and experience; they give expression to life and experience, and therefore they concern the whole person. Thus, they cooperate with Social Studies, English, Speech, Art, Geography, History, Home Economics, and others; that is, they cut across all departments and yet complement instead of competing with the others.

It can be shown through a study of translations that expressions in no two languages are exactly equivalent. Languages, therefore, do not really duplicate one another; the student, in effect, adds a new world to his world of concepts with every new language he learns. Thus, he, himself, becomes more than the person he was. The ability, then, to speak and understand more than one language is a possession to be prized. If administrators and teachers uphold such values and praise the students who have language opportunities at home, the treasures of foreign-speaking populations in America may be brought to light and given social standing, without, in the least, lessening the predominant standing of the American tongue.

There has been in the past a reasonable amount of support of language teaching by parents and communities; and the enthusiasm and ingenuity of the best teachers has stimulated and motivated pupils. Let more teachers win over pupils in this way, not sacrificing standards, but interpreting them in terms of their pupils' interests, needs, and intellectual capacities; and the pupils will be the best proofs of the values of the teaching. New methods and effective and stimulating techniques are thus worth the trouble to learn. The use of standardized tests, too, whenever possible, will be a demonstration of attainment. Evidence in black and white is the kind of proof which speaks for itself.

On the other hand, administrators co-operating with the teachers and thereby allowing no basis for lowered morale, can help to improve the achievements and results. Wideawake administrators know that teachers need not only oral facility but a firsthand knowledge of the literature, geography, history, and customs of the country whose language is taught. If foreign travel is not possible, the Western Hemisphere (and some special language schools in the United States) offer, at comparatively little cost, splendid opportunities for improving speaking ability in certain languages; and Wis-

consin, in particular, offers a rich field for practice, because of the variety of the peoples represented here. The granting of travel allowances might be seriously considered; and travel by language teachers for improving speaking ability might be rewarded by increases in salary, just the same as study for an advanced degree.

Keenminded administrators know also that two years of the *usual type* of language study is insufficient to equip students with the quality of language tools needed in the post-war world. For one thing, in the future increased oral mastery of a language is likely to be more desirable than in the past. Thus, either intensified study or a longer term of study might be considered as a possibility.

The development of the individual emerges anew at the present time as of the greatest importance. The matter of individual differences, then, is becoming ever more important in the war and post-war society. In languages, as in other fields, therefore, provision can and should be made for pupils of varying abilities. It is reasonable to expect that even pupils of lower linguistic abilities will be able to obtain markedly valuable benefits from *flexible* programs in foreign languages.

#### THE NEED FOR LANGUAGES IN WAR AND PEACE

During the war, persons skilled in language are needed in military, economic, and political warfare. There is a demand for censors, translators, interpreters, etc., for which a thorough training in languages is the prerequisite. Classification centers at induction stations are on the lookout for recruits with a knowledge of language; and the same is true of the various women's military organizations. So pressing is the need of language-speakers in the field and in intelligence services, and the like, that the government has a very large program of intensive training in unusual languages as well as the usual ones; one branch of this program is the intensive instruction of military personnel in European languages at the University of Wisconsin.

While the war may not directly affect the language needs of pupils now in high school, and regardless of whether or not they plan to attend college, they will be citizens of post-war America, with the opportunities and responsibilities which the term "citizen" implies. Secondary schools now more than ever before have a chance to be instrumental in shaping the coming forms of civilization. In more than one respect can the high school be considered a training ground of citizens of the post-war world, who are to be endowed with the human and social qualities required of the builders of such a world. More intimate personal contacts between teachers and learners than are possible in college,—i.e., educational and moral guidance at a time when it is most fruitful—are an instrumental phase of helping to develop creators of a happier tomorrow.

In peacetime, when it comes again, there will still be the cultural, the travel, and the business needs and uses of languages. But the

main uses will be in meeting the needs for the rehabilitation of countries and peoples. It is hoped that in the post-war world isolationism and the proverbial American provincialism will have no place.

The hope of understanding other peoples in a world made small by post-war means of communication and transportation rests on the hope that more persons than ever before will know languages other than their own; and through those become acquainted with the manners and customs, the psychology, the spirit, the ideals, and the aspirations of other nations. The new methods in teaching emphasize the role of language as an art, and its influence on human relations. It is the basis in the field known as the Humanities. Science, as such, is impersonal and unmoral. It may be directed to good ends or to evil ones, depending on the ethics and morals of those who use it. Thus, the Humanities are the subjects which leading thinkers everywhere are now emphasizing as the influences which must guide science into constructive and beneficial channels. They are the subjects which must make and keep mankind "human". As the custodians of mankind's beliefs, dreams, hopes, and aspirations, the Humanities—and chiefly languages—must not only be revived and kept alive, but our faith in them must be clarified and strengthened.