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American officers — and civilians — now learn
difficult foreign tongues in a few weeks

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Teaching Languages in a Hurry

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THOUSANDS of Americans — many of them in uniform — are learning plain or fancy foreign languages four times as fast as was thought possible before the war. We're doing this because we have to.

Naval units need officers who can speak Japanese, Malay, or what have you; on land we need men able to get along in Fanti, Hausa and a dozen strange tongues Americans never knew existed. We need linguists for lend-lease missions to Russia and China, for technical undertakings in Iran and Iraq.

When war broke out we were dangerously short of linguists, even in Spanish and Portuguese, which are among the easiest languages for us to learn. The Board of Economic Warfare, for example, combed the nation for trade experts who also spoke Spanish, and dug up only 115.

New teaching methods are overcoming this shortage with dramatic speed. After nine weeks of intensive instruction in the language school at Laramie, Wyoming, one graduate was sent on a mission to South America. Two months more in a Spanish-speaking country, and he was giving

a course of lectures in Spanish on United States civilization.

Inspecting a class in Siamese at the University of Michigan, an army colonel who had spent 22 years studying languages in the Far East found the students in a brisk give-and-take conversation. They had been in the class only three months. "I don't believe my ears," he said. "They're talking like native Siamese!" An educated Russian, visiting a six-weeks-old intensive Russian class at Yale, exclaimed: "How gifted Americans are at languages!"

Of course, we are not gifted. The success of these classes is the result of hard work and keen interest, harnessed to a method which combines science and common sense. The method includes the use of a native as well as a teacher in the classroom. The native often knows little English. His job is to give sounds and words for the students to imitate. Later the native is questioned and tells stories, just as if he were a Japanese prisoner or a Swahili chieftain and the students were members of an American expedition — which is exactly what they may be when the course is over.

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The teacher guides the class, shows how vocal cords can be made to produce difficult sounds, explains only as much grammar as is necessary to speed progress. The object of these courses is not to pass an examination but to understand natives, and be understood by them, as rapidly as possible. In an intensive course at Columbia last summer, students mastered 2000 Persian words and phrases in nine weeks.

Hausa is a language spoken by some 5,000,000 people in West Africa. Last autumn, only a few weeks after Professor Zellig S. Harris had started his intensive course at the University of Pennsylvania, a new native teacher arrived and called him up. The professor was out, and a student answered the telephone. During a 15-minute conversation in Hausa, he was able to give the native all the information he wanted.

You never hear exercises like "The nephew of my aunt walks through the good baron's garden" in these practical classes. Visit the University of Pennsylvania class in Fanti, the African commercial language spoken on the Gold Coast. You will find one student pretending to be a farmer, while a second is looking for a job. They are bargaining with each other in Fanti. At another university the native speaker assumes the role of a landed proprietor, a student that of an American task force officer. They have a lively argument in Arabic about buying food for transport pilots.

A cynical scholar has said that Americans may possibly learn Japanese before the outbreak of the *next* world war. Memorizing several thousand pictographs is, of course, almost a life's work. But speaking the language is a different story. Its structure is simple. Within the past year American students have gained a good working knowledge of spoken Japanese in three months or less.

Here are 20 students of Japanese in a room with a native speaker and an American professor. The professor begins the first class by making the students pronounce a short list of words that contain all the sounds in the Japanese language. Only two of these do not occur in English. The professor has the native repeat the two sounds over and over, and the students mimic him.

In the second or third lesson the students begin to memorize simple tool sentences, like "What is the word for that in Japanese?" These sentences, memorized until they are second nature, enable the learning process to proceed largely in the language being taught.

After six weeks of an intensive course a teacher sprang the following test without warning. "You are now in the Solomons," he explained, "and have just captured a batch of Jap prisoners. You are to question one of them. The native speaker will act as your prisoner. Go ahead!"

After a 15-minute grilling in Japanese the students reported: "The prisoner says they have no tea, meat

or vegetables, but there is some fish. However, it is in the river and we will have to catch it ourselves. There is a mountain which must be crossed to get to the Japanese airfield. There is a road, impassable for a car, but practicable for a horse. We went to the top of the mountain," the students continued, "and sighted ships, which the prisoner identified as Japanese. He also told us the size of the army facing us — 500,000 men."

Under the auspices of the Inter-American Training Center, 1200 government employes in Washington are learning Spanish from native speakers. The list ranges from army officers to stenographers, and includes experts from many government departments. Here you may study a language four hours a week or 15 hours a day, according to your need.

All children master the fundamentals of a language by the time they are five. Which suggests there isn't anything very abstruse about language learning. They all learn to speak before they learn to read. In traditional language courses, about three fourths of the student's time is spent learning rules of grammar and applying them by conscious logic. This leaves far too little time for practice. The habit of searching

in the files of one's mind for rules kills both interest and native linguistic ability. In learning a language, everlasting practice and repetition are the most important factors.

These war courses may well revolutionize language teaching in American colleges. They've already begun to do so. For instance, in the new "Foreign Areas" program at Yale all language courses are taught by the new method.

Students from the intensive classes go right on learning in their leisure hours. Many practice on each other at meals and invite the native speaker to join them. Last summer the boys at Penn took their Moroccan on a tour of Philadelphia, explaining the mysteries of a night club to him in Arabic. In a student hangout near Brown University, a professor found most of his class drinking beer and lustily singing the Japanese version of *Mademoiselle from Armentières*.

Graduates of the intensive courses are demonstrating that they can talk and be understood by natives in any corner of the world. They are giving us new weapons to help win a global war. And when the time comes these weapons will be even more valuable in winning a global peace.



Few of us can stand prosperity. Another man's, I mean.

— Mark Twain