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"LEARNING LANGUAGES IN A HURRY"—BUT NOT BY MIRACLES

By
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CHARLES RUMFORD WALKER's interesting article, "Language Teaching Goes to War," in SCHOOL AND SOCIETY (April 3, 1943) and its condensed version, "Learning Languages in a Hurry," in *The Reader's Digest* (May, 1943) have stimulated widespread interest in the Intensive Language Program of the American Council of Learned Societies, the organization that is largely responsible for the progress described by Dr. Walker, although it is mentioned only in passing in the original article and not at all in *The Reader's Digest* condensation. But the praise Dr. Walker has given the intensive language approach has had its drawbacks. I refer particularly to the impression apparently created in the minds of not-too-careful readers that through certain miraculous new methods we have almost completely if not completely eliminated the necessity for the investment of time, effort, and good old-fashioned mental perspiration in order to master a foreign language. As chairman of one of the ACLS committees that sponsored this program and as director of the Washington Inter-American Training Center, to which Dr. Walker refers in his article, I have been literally deluged with requests for information about the "miraculous new methods," and I am sure that J. Milton Cowan, di-

rector of the Intensive Language Program, has received even more inquiries.

Many of these inquirers have apparently overlooked these significant words in Dr. Walker's article: "The success of these new classes is the result of hard work and keen interest harnessed to a rigorous, original method. . . ." The "Report of the First Year's Operations of the Intensive Language Program of the American Council of Learned Societies," moreover, defines the course as follows: "By an intensive course the committees mean a course which occupies the full time of the student, generally computed at about fifteen hours of drill with native speakers, and from twenty to thirty hours of individual preparation per week. Two or three six-week sessions of this character, separated by short intervals of rest, seem to yield the best results in the shortest time." Later on the report refers to the necessity for "incessant drill-work."

All this is very far indeed from the idea that some linguistic miracle-worker has discovered a "quickie" method by means of which all that is required is a linguistic expert, an educational hypodermic needle, and a willing "subject." One can imagine the picture as currently misconceived. The colonel calls in the

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"language shark," and says, "Here, Lieutenant, inject some French (Spanish, Italian, German, Polish, Bulgarian, or what not) into this fellow—he's got to go abroad in a week!" And in a week, presto! a fluent master of French (Spanish, Italian, German, Polish, Bulgarian, or what not) appears in the colonel's tent, fresh as a daisy, full of French (Spanish, Italian, German, Polish, Bulgarian, or what not), and "rarin' to go!" Such seems to be the linguistic pipe-dream inspired, in some quarters at least, by "Learning Languages in a Hurry."

The pity of it is that we Americans seem to be so gullible in matters of this kind—witness the vitamin-pill fad, or the various "get-rich-quick" methods for learning to play the piano, to make yourself a social lion, or to influence people, or for acquiring the equivalent of a college education in short order by reading just a few minutes every day. Foreign languages in particular have always suffered from the extravagant claims of "speak-easy" language schools and "methods."

It is especially regrettable that the Intensive Language Program of the American Council of Learned Societies, the success of whose program in the unusual languages has been primarily due to careful analysis of the language, the use of native "informants," strict limitation of objectives, small classes, and insistence on hard, concentrated effort and *practice, practice, practice*, should have been misinterpreted as another educational "quickie" or "get-educated-quick" scheme.

Certainly Dr. Walker cannot be blamed for the misinterpretation. If blame is to be fixed, it belongs, if anywhere, on the ambiguous title chosen by the editors of *The Reader's Digest*. I think a young man in one of the Army's Specialized Training Programs would be more likely to characterize the system as "Learning Languages through Long Hours and Hard Work." Here is a typical weekly program in one of the Army Specialized Training Program schools: Russian, 17 hours per week; Russian area studies, 10 hours per week; military lectures, 3 hours per week; gymnasium and drill, 10 hours per week; compulsory study-hours, 7 to 9 P.M. and all free periods during the day. This does not sound like miracle-working; it does suggest hard, consistent work, "incessant drill," and concentration.

Here is another description, reproduced from Drew Pearson's account, in his "Washington Merry-Go-Round" column, of the Navy's Japanese School:

Officer-candidate schools have a reputation for being tough, but the Naval Intelligence Japanese Language School at Boulder (Colo.) sets a new record. Handpicked candidates from colleges and graduate schools pore over Japanese *Kanji* (word pictures) 16 hours a day, 6 days a week, for 14 months.

These 800 students are given intimate high-pressure instruction in classes of only five men each. The faculty consists of 150 Japanese-Americans, former professional and business men, recruited from the East and West Coast Japanese colonies.

The course is intensive, and the students are given no job except the principal one of learning the difficult Japanese language. Unlike other officer candidates, they have no guard duty, KP, or night bivouacs. Their job is to learn Japanese, learn it quickly, and learn it well.

And a member of the same school, writing in the *Middlebury College News-Letter*, says:

Many teachers among the alumni would probably like to know about the teaching methods used here—methods which succeed in doing the "impossible"—teaching an Occidental the Japanese language from the cradle to college level in less than a year.

As I said previously, memory by rote is the mainstay of the system limited by time. We have eighteen class-hours a week, plus a weekly three-hour exam on Saturday mornings. Most of us average at least six hours a day of outside preparation, more than twice the time I spent in Middlebury. Weekends are relatively free except for those who took a night off during the week.

Classes are in five- or six-man sections. The schedule is divided into reading, dictation, and conversation classes and each section has six different teachers for the work, including one main reading teacher who covers the lessons in the textbook. These books, a graded series, are supplemented by lists of idioms and materials for drill, as well as by daily written exercises on the work of the day. The oral method is followed mainly, but we are bombarded by teaching from every angle. First, the reading teacher goes over the lesson and we learn by ear, then recite. The following day the dictation teacher will dictate to us at the board where we are closely supervised. Next hour, we speak the language in conversation class, each student drilled individually.

You can see how individual the instruction is, with the result that throughout the year most stu-

dents average over 90 per cent in the weekly translation exams. Yet there are great difficulties in applying this method or any part of it to the high-school teaching of languages. However, as far as time and class-size will allow, it would profit those interested to apply a reading-dictation-conversation system, especially to increase use of the spoken language in classrooms as an aid to beginners. Our texts are based on the child-learning theory: that the child first learns a language through the ear, then through the mouth, and much later, consciously, through grammar forms.

This, again, suggests not miracle-working, but well-planned, concentrated, hard work. Not that it is all drudgery by any means, for instructors in the "area-studies" courses sometimes complain that the students put in even more time than is required on their language work, with corresponding neglect (relative only) of their "area-studies" preparation. But it is obvious that no one goes through such a program without realizing that he is working—hard—as he never has worked before at any intellectual task.

Emphasis upon hard work and concentration, however, by no means implies that the particular method followed in the Intensive Language

Program is not new and important, for it is. But we should not overlook the equally important point that small classes, long hours, consistent effort, rigorous preparation, even "incessant drill" and "rote memory-work" (those bugbears of some educationists) are crucial elements in the over-all method in this instance.

The ACLS Intensive Language Program and the Army Specialized Training Program will doubtless make a definite contribution to the improvement of foreign-language teaching at all levels. That contribution, however, will be along common-sense lines, such as use of the psychological factors involved in the conversational approach, careful planning and strict limitation of objectives and materials, small classes (perhaps!), concentration on the language alone (perhaps!) for a year or a semester to the exclusion of all other unrelated subjects, greater use of phonograph aids and of "native" teachers where available, and doubtless in other aspects of the language-learning problem—but without miracles. In the meantime, it would not hurt to keep our feet on the ground and our heads on our shoulders instead of in the clouds, when we hear the magical phrase "Learning Languages in a Hurry."

Events . . .

THE STATE DEPARTMENT APPOINTS DEAN KEFAUVER EDUCATIONAL CONSULTANT

THE Department of State has appointed as its consultant on educational reconstruction in conquered countries Grayson N. Kefauver, dean, School of Education, Stanford University. This appointment is apparently an outcome of Dean Kefauver's pioneer leadership in the study of reconstruction problems, as evidenced particularly in organizing and directing the discussions of the International Education Assembly, which met at Harpers Ferry (W. Va.), September 13-17, 1943, and reports of which appeared in *SCHOOL AND SOCIETY*, September 25 and November 6.

The New York Times (December 12) states that Dr. Kefauver will serve the Department of State on full time under a leave of absence from Stanford University, and will continue as chair-

man of the assembly. Alonzo F. Meyers, professor of education, New York University, and chairman, NEA Commission for the Defense of Democracy through Education, is quoted by the *Times* as follows:

I am happy to learn that our State Department is apparently planning to become active in this field. Evidently the appointment of Dean Kefauver does indicate that we may expect rather vigorous and constructive action in the matter of international co-operation on educational matters.

THE TEACHING OF PORTUGUESE SPREADS TO THE SECONDARY SCHOOL

FOLLOWING the formulation of the Good Neighbor Policy, the colleges and universities of the United States increased their emphasis on the study of Spanish and, in some cases, of Portuguese. According to reports from several