

Dictation and Composition in Modern Language Teaching

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The *Rimed Chronicle* of the Cid is a fragment, consisting in prose and verse, of about 1200 lines. Its contents include a condensed chronicle of the affairs of Castile from Pelayo to Ferdinand I, with accounts of the genealogy of the Kings of Castile—and of Rodrigo of Bivar, the Cid, and a more detailed account of deeds and adventures done by Rodrigo in the service of the King Ferdinand. The relation is most fanciful—and the story ends abruptly in the midst of the account of Rodrigo's fabled war upon the Pope and the King of France.

The determination of the date of the fragment rests on various internal considerations, which are, in general, of a text-critical and exegetical nature. (1.) The text is very corrupt. It abounds in glosses and lacunae and offers every sign of an extensive remanipulation. (2.) Though the language is in the main that of the end of the XIV century, it presents very numerous traces of a much earlier Spanish. (3.) The metre is extremely rough and irregular, and is occasionally entirely lost. (4.) In design it was a fourteen syllabled verse, with long, irregular divisions of á-o, é-o and ó assonances.

The foregoing considerations lead to the conclusion that the monument itself is much older than the manuscript; the various historical or quasi-historical references of the text all point to the first half of the thirteenth century as the probable date.

26. "Dictation and Composition in Modern Language teaching." By Professor Edward S. Joynes, of South Carolina College.

[For want of time read by title.]

The Report of the Committee of Twelve of the Modern Language Association on the subject of Preparatory Requirements in French and German marks a new epoch in modern language study in this country—or perhaps I may say, the close or consummation of an epoch dating from the organization of the Modern Language Association itself in December 1883. The latter event signalized the formal admission, into the broadening circle of liberal education, of a new discipline which till then, with increasing but unorganized force, had been struggling for recognition. It was the first organized expression in this country of professional consciousness and co-operation—the first corporate self-assertion on the part of modern language teachers as co-laborers and colleagues in a common work. As such its influence has been wide and profound. The Modern Language Association has given direction, inspiration, purpose, and expression to the wonderful progress which has since ensued; and, for its actual results as well as for the profound foresight of its conception and its admirable management, it will stand—long after his own noble work shall have ceased—as a monument of honor to its father and founder, Professor A. Marshall Elliott. It

is the Modern Language Association that not only created, but made possible, the Committee of Twelve, whose Report, as I have said, marks a new and higher stage of professional progress, and of promise for the future. As I read that document, with its wealth of learning and professional skill, as I note the names of the able men,—many of them young men, representing the foremost institutions of the country,—who constitute the Committee, as I see the wealth of the material on which they have been able to draw, in their recommendations and suggestions, as I mark the confident yet modest tone in which they set forth the now-assured claims of our department in education, and as I contrast all this with the conditions of my own earlier professional life, I feel that I may be pardoned for expressing the personal sentiment of thankfulness that I have lived to see this day. As I recall the beginning of my own work, in 1866, when I was one of the very few titular professors of modern language in the country whose work was yet recognized in any degree of liberal arts; as I remember my own timid pleas,—first in the *Educational Journal of Virginia*, in 1869, and later in 1876 before the National Educational Association, for the recognition of Modern Languages in the scheme of higher education; as I think of the meagre and inadequate materials on which we could draw for our teaching at that day, and especially of my own imperfect efforts to enlarge these, I feel that the key-note of this paper should be that of gratitude and congratulation,—and such, indeed, it is intended to be. I think no one could rejoice more heartily than I do—for few can so keenly realize the facts—in all the progress and promise to which this Report bears testimony; and most heartily do I congratulate my younger colleagues upon the improved conditions and opportunities under which it is now their privilege to work. What has been done is only the prophecy of what they shall do.

It would be superfluous—even impertinent—for me to say that the Report of such a Committee is admirable and most valuable. As an embodiment, and even an anticipation, of the best thought and practice in modern language teaching, it will long stand as an epoch-making document, for guidance and for inspiration. Especially it seems to me to be masterly in its exposition of *method*, both in its analysis of the several methods and in its estimate of the nature and value of method itself. It conveys, without offense, a warning against that domination of mere method, or of contending methods, with which we have been threatened. It recognizes that method is, after all, only a means—a medium or instrument for the expression of personality;—that no single method can be essentially or altogether the best, nor any method equally good for all teaching; and that the best method, indeed, is made of all that is best in each and best adapted to the actual character and condition of each teacher or class. Yet not the less is the analysis of the various methods, as presented in the Report, most instructive and helpful. There are also other passages which might be selected for special commendation. But this is needless. The Report, as a whole, will speak for itself to all thoughtful teachers.

If on a single point I venture upon criticism, it is only because I feel that I have something to say on a topic of importance which I think has not been duly considered by the Committee. In criticising the work of a Committee composed of gentlemen so far superior to myself in the opportunities and advantages of scholarship, I can appeal only to personal experience; for this is the sole ground on which I could possibly add anything to their store. In the 40 years—since 1858—that I have been teaching modern language, there is hardly anything in the way of method that I have not tried, in the constant effort to do better. At any rate, this personal experience is all I have to offer. Tested as it has been by long and constant effort, it is possibly worthy of consideration. At least this must be my apology for the personal tone of the following remarks. By compensation I promise they shall be brief, and though other topics, closely connected with my main thought, tempt to occasional criticism, I shall confine myself strictly to the subject indicated in the title of this paper.

My thesis is: 1. That writing by dictation should have a much larger place in modern language teaching than is accorded to it by the Committee of Twelve.

2. That this larger place should be found, in part, by substituting such writing by dictation, largely if not wholly, for composition, or written translation into the foreign language, during the earlier stages of instruction.

Only small importance is accorded to dictation in the Report of the Committee. Under German it is merely mentioned as “helpful in learning to spell” (p. 1413), and discontinued after the first year. Under French it is mentioned as the last item of “the work to be done” in the elementary and the intermediate courses; but in no case are its results included in “the aim of the instruction.” Nowhere is its importance stressed, or the value of its discipline expounded, or even suggested. Indeed, by implication, it is even discredited. On p. 1422, in what seems to me a rather extreme concession to “the demand for more spoken French in the class-room” the Report says: “In reproducing French sentences, several can be spoken in the time needed to write one.” This truism, if taken seriously, discredits of course all written exercises; but it is hardly meant to be taken seriously. Indeed it is stated by the Committee only as a part of the claims of the special advocates of colloquial work in the class-room—whom I take to be mainly the natural methodists and their disciples. Such colloquial exercises, as it seems to me, unless under exceptionally favorable conditions, must be either very meagre or very superficial, and hence have but little educating value. So far at least as I have had opportunity to observe results, they do not correspond to the claims here made; still less is it clear that “the rapidity of speech” is favorable, as is claimed, to either the “exact perception” or the “vivid conception” of literary form. The case in favor of such oral exercises, however strong in itself, cannot be made out by contrast with the worst features of slovenly and inexact translation, as here seems to be attempted.

But the same context fortunately supplies the antidote to the erroneous view here suggested. It is true that "tongue and ear are most efficient aids to memory," and that it is false "to depend on the eye alone." But it is equally false to exclude or to depreciate the value of the eye, which under our conditions has largely—perhaps too largely—become our chief medium of contact with language and literature. It is precisely here that we find the strongest argument in favor of dictation as a philosophical process. In dictation we have the most perfect combination of faculties and functions. There is the accurate tongue, speaking to the listening and discriminating ear; there is the reproductive hand, bringing back to the intelligent and critical eye that which the mind has heard by the ear:—all the faculties of perception, conception, and expression are alert and in harmonious coöperation. I can imagine no method that could appeal more strongly to the attention or to the intelligence: I think I can say from experience that none more powerfully arouses the interest, the zeal or the pride of the student. (I may add that, even in teaching English, I think no method is more stimulating or helpful to young pupils.) Its value includes not spelling only—tho' this is no small matter—nor word form only, whether orthographical or grammatical; but all that belongs to grammar, phrase, or sentence, from the closest transliteration for beginners, through progressively freer paraphrase to original expression. All that is possible in composition or retranslation—whether in grammatical sentences or by paraphrase—is equally possible in dictation;—to which must be added that as an aid to accurate pronunciation, as a stimulus to alert attention, and as conducive to that *sprachgefühl* which rests so largely upon the quick apprehension of the significance of the spoken language, it presents distinct advantages which no form of written composition can possibly secure. It is my earnest hope that this statement, which rests upon very large experience, may induce some of my colleagues to test the question for themselves—not only in French but in German—at least through the earlier stages of work.

This brings me to the second point of my thesis:—that dictation should be substituted for composition, largely if not wholly, during the earlier stages of instruction.

This proposition rests not only upon the alleged advantages of dictation as above indicated, but also, distinctly, upon the disadvantages and difficulties of composition, for beginners. Whatever form of composition may be adopted, whether by grammar sentences illustrating form or idiom, or by text paraphrases (and it seems to be conceded that, while either method may be abused, both are useful), its progress must needs be slow. The work of seeking for forms of expression in an unfamiliar language is essentially difficult; for it is a reversal of the natural order of thought, which is to express the unknown in terms of the known:—even the brightest students find this work difficult and burdensome at first. Now the slow and laborious progress thus enforced comes to the beginner at the very time when sound teaching requires that his progress should be most rapid. Whatever

general method may be preferred, it seems to me that all teachers would agree that the student should be brought, as quickly as possible, to feel the foreign language *as language*—to feel, as a pupil of mine once said, “that it means something.” For this purpose the essential elements of grammatical form should be learned at first—not thoroughly indeed—but as rapidly as possible. To a great extent this should be done not even by systematic and progressive lessons, but by anticipation of most essential topics, in a cursory view. As little time as possible should be given, at first, to the recitation or classification of paradigms. All that is now necessary is that the pupil shall recognize the forms when he sees them. Just as soon as possible, he should be brought into contact with the language *en masse*, in the form of actual, significant, interesting discourse, whether in a graduated Reader or in other easy text. Till this is done all is dreary work of memory which no skill can illuminate:—the only remedy is to shorten it. Now it is right here that the requirement of composition in any form from the beginner becomes, in my opinion, a positive disadvantage, from its necessarily slow and laborious progress. It has been, I believe, the traditional custom,—derived perhaps from traditional methods in Latin and Greek, which I think as bad there as in the modern languages,—to require a composition exercise, from the first, *pari passu* with each lesson of translation into English. Such method seems to be indicated in most of our grammars. For myself I confess that, following what seemed to be the prescribed authority, I followed it for many years, yet under gradually stronger protest. Now, for many years, I have discarded composition entirely from early study; and I find from experience that the preliminary work, introductory to connected reading, can thereby be greatly accelerated and shortened. Such a preliminary view of grammatical form may be accomplished, for French or German, in from twelve to twenty lessons, according to the grade of the class;—but not so if the successive steps in the early study of the grammar must be accompanied by composition exercises. In this view I should have the sympathy of my friends, the natural methodists. “Nature” does not require that any process shall be learned exhaustively before another step is taken. I certainly have the authority of our great and immortal master, Prof. W. D. Whitney, whose preface to his *German Grammar* (1869) is a document not less epochal and monumental than the report of the Committee of Twelve. He says: “After enough reading to give some familiarity with forms and constructions, I would have the writing of exercises begun.” Now it is during this early period of rapid grammar study and of easy reading that I find dictation so helpful, in lieu of composition. This period will be longer or shorter for different classes. At least, however, it should be prolonged until the first view of grammatical forms and facts is completed, and the student is prepared to begin a systematic and formal review of the grammar; and still further, in my opinion, until by actual reading and by writing from dictation he has gained some familiarity with the form and meaning of words and of sentences in the foreign language. Then,

when composition is begun, it will be an intelligent handling of living forms,—not the laborious piecing together of dead fragments of speech. During all this period the work of writing from dictation is full of interest and of instruction. Employing both the ear and the eye in harmonious coöperation, and exhibiting grammatical forms in connected sentences instead of mere paradigms, it both quickens the power of comprehension and is also an effective aid to the memory.

Perhaps I may be pardoned for a word as to my own practice in dictation. I begin it with the very earliest reading in the grammar. At first from each lesson I select a few sentences for exact transliteration. A section of the class goes to the blackboard—the others write at their seats. I then correct, and grade, the exercises on the blackboard, while the others correct their own exercises from these models. Next time another section goes to the blackboard, and so on. Ten minutes at the close of each lesson suffices for this work; and there are no papers to be corrected. Soon I introduce slight paraphrase: a sentence in the singular will be dictated in the plural; or past will be changed to present tenses, and *vice versa*; or direct to indirect speech, etc.; and so on progressively, until finally very free paraphrase, or original matter, can be introduced. My testimony is that no exercise that I have ever tried—and I have tried almost everything—has been found to be so stimulating and so helpful for the beginner;—and further, that the postponement of the work of composition until the beginner's course of grammar, reading and dictation has been accomplished, is not a loss, but a gain rather, to the composition itself. This does not imply that dictation should be discontinued after the early stages. Rather I think it should still be continued, along with composition, throughout.

I trust that the Modern Language Association, and the still wider circle of my colleagues who may read this paper, will pardon this effort to contribute of my own experience to the success of our common work. Some, I hope, may be induced to try for themselves the experiment that is here suggested. These views are offered not in derogation of the Report of the Committee, nor in opposition to any method, but only as an additional contribution to our helps in teaching. It is truly said by the Committee that our department awaits only better teaching, and better teachers, for its fullest recognition as the peer—not the rival—of classical study in liberal education. To contribute anything to this result would be felt by me as a great privilege and a great reward at the close of a long life of teaching under many discouragements. In conclusion, I again congratulate my younger colleagues upon the more hopeful conditions which surround their work, and I wish for the Modern Language Association increased zeal, influence, and usefulness.

The remaining hour of the session had been reserved for the final discussion of the Report of the Committee of Twelve (see *Proceedings for 1898*, p. xxiii); but it was found that the

Association was prepared to adopt the Report without further discussion, and without changes in the printed text. It was briefly argued by Professors Calvin Thomas, W. T. Hewitt, and H. C. G. von Jagemann, that the Report in its present form was admirably adapted to suggest experimentation, and that its revision into more definite expression on several subjects should await the experience of the next five or more years. The motion, therefore, offered by Professor Calvin Thomas, to accept the Report as printed (see *Proceedings for 1898*, p. xxiv), and to discharge the Committee was passed by a unanimous vote of the Association.

The Secretary presented the following letter, from the Secretary of the Irish Historical Society of Maryland. Time could not be allowed for the reading of the entire letter; it was therefore decided to defer the consideration of the letter.

THE REVIVAL OF THE GAELIC LANGUAGE.

The President and Members of the Modern Language Association of America,

Gentlemen:—Through the kindness of your courteous Secretary, Professor James W. Bright, I am permitted to call your attention to the efforts being made for the preservation of the Gaelic language (the native language of the Irish Celts) as a spoken language.

Owing to circumstances which I will not enlarge upon, the language has been slowly dying since the 16th century, being gradually superseded by English as the spoken language of the Irish race.

Notwithstanding the fact that the most rigorous laws were enforced against the use of the Irish language, and that it was forbidden to be taught, the Irish race clung to their language with wonderful tenacity (when circumstances are considered), and it was not until this century that the Irish became, as it were, alienated from their language.

Slowly but surely the dominant influence of the English people over Ireland, resulted in the discontinuance of Irish as a spoken tongue; English became the language of everyday life, was taught to Irish children in the so-called National Schools (corresponding to our Public Schools), was the medium of printed matter, and finally the Irish language became a curiosity in many parts of Ireland. The class which held to it most tenaciously was the agricultural population of the west of Ireland which had least come in contact with English-speaking people.

There were always in the dark days of the last three centuries, scholars who loved the old language and studied it reverently; and there was never