COMMENT

What Went Wrong with Foreign Language Teaching in High School?

JOSEPH M. VOCOLO*

IN 1957 the USSR had catapulted Sputnik I into space. A shocked nation asked what went wrong with our schools and demanded answers. Conant [1] and a whole host of others were ready; they said that, in our eagerness to provide for all youth, we had tilted the balance of secondary education. Too few pupils were being challenged sufficiently and the answer was a call for excellence which, when translated into programs, meant more science, mathematics, and foreign language. The science was chemistry and physics; the mathematics, algebra and geometry; and the foreign language, four years of a modern language.

Thus was born the NDEA Title III, the National Defense Education Act, the instrument of the government in direct response to Conant's report and the threat of Soviet supremacy in science and technology. Billions of dollars were committed by the federal government to restore the triumvirate of science, mathematics, and foreign languages to a place of prominence. For foreign languages it could not have come at a better time, for just then foreign languages seemed to be on the verge of disappearing from the high school curriculum. Latin, since it is not a modern language, did not benefit, and continued its tailspin through the sixties and seventies and has now virtually vanished as a high school subject.

The decade of the sixties and NDEA is past. It has been superseded by ESEA, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. ESEA is the 1970's answer of the federal government to current demands and needs of secondary and elementary education, and foreign language is indeed foreign as far as this legislation is concerned. If NDEA was concerned with excellence, ESEA is concerned with remediation. Its focus is remedial reading and remedial mathematics. When foreign languages shared the pedestal with mathematics and science it received one-third of the monies allocated by the federal government. Virtually none comes from ESEA.

[1] James B. Conant. *The American High School Today.* New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1959. pp. 47-59.

* *Joseph M. Vocolo, Director of Foreign Languages, Board of Education, Buffalo, New York*

The results have been predictable; foreign language enrollments, which soared through the sixties, have begun to decline noticeably in the past years. This trend hit hardest at the college level with the dropping of the foreign language requirement both as an entrance and a graduation requirement. If you do not need foreign language to get into college then what other reason is there to study a foreign language, argue the high schools. Result: high school enrollments in this field are sliding downward and many say, like a snowball gathering momentum, worse is yet to come. And this brings us, once again, full cycle, back to 1958 and before Sputnik, before Conant's study, and before NDEA.

Balance in the Curriculum

As the role of the high school changed to meet the needs of American society, the constant subjects in the curriculum such as English, mathematics, and science adapted to these changes in focus in order to better serve their student clientele. Foreign language has not proved so flexible. From the days of the academy and throughout the development of the public high schools in the United States, foreign language has always catered to the academically inclined and college-bound pupil. This was no different throughout the glorious decade of the sixties. There is serious doubt that foreign language teachers believe the study of foreign languages should be made available to all pupils in today's secondary school. While many teachers of foreign languages may protest that this is a harsh statement, secondary school administrators and guidance counselors are convinced of this, and as a consequence curriculum patterns are constructed and pupils are selected for foreign language study clearly in reflection of this point of view.

The unfortunate aspect of this situation is that the golden opportunity provided by NDEA during the past decade, when school administrators were pressing for foreign language programs, was squandered. It will be recalled that the National Association of Secondary School Principals, in a thorough and very influential report, championed the cause of foreign languages.[2] This report recommended that all pupils, whether college bound or not, should have the opportunity to elect foreign language study and continue it as long as their interest and ability permit. Note that their statement said *all* pupils and implied a sequence of study to be determined by the interest and ability of the pupils. Yet, we know all too well that we never did reach any more than 30 percent of the nation's high school pupils, and less than six in 100 stayed on for four years of study.

"The values we ascribe to foreign language study are simply not in harmony with programs which evolve as courses of study in secondary education."

Values of Foreign Language Study

It is evident from Conant's report, the intent of the NDEA legislation, the report of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, and the pronouncements of the various foreign language teachers organizations that the study of a foreign language could be a valuable school and life experience for high school pupils. Let us examine for a moment some typical statements of values for foreign language study.[3]

Stimulus for growth in the language arts through the study of another language

Enrichment of pupils' knowledge of the world they live in, thereby broadening their social understandings

Increase in the knowledge and appreciation of the American heritage by an awareness of the contributions of different peoples to national growth and development

Promotion of international understanding

[2] National Association of Secondary School Principals. "Modern Foreign Languages in the Comprehensive Secondary School." *Bulletin of the NASSP* 43 (248): 4; September 1959.

[3] Bureau of Secondary Curriculum Development. *French for Secondary Schools*. Albany, New York: the Bureau, 1960. pp. 9-10.

A recognition of the universality of human experience

A sympathetic comprehension of the foreign people through insights into their values and behavior patterns.

As one reads these aims or values, it is clear that they are in accord with those outlined in "Modern Foreign Languages in the Comprehensive Secondary School." [4] It is also quite obvious that these are universal values, in harmony with the overall program of secondary education. The question again remains, for whom these values? For all secondary pupils who desire them or for selected pupils who can succeed? How do you determine who partakes of these experiences? These are not new questions. Strange as it may seem, and although many foreign language teachers will argue the question, this problem has not been satisfactorily resolved.

Many foreign language teachers will say entry into foreign language study should be restricted to the bright and college bound. Some will say, let selection or election be based on prognostic tests, grades in English, and overall grade average. Most will argue that all pupils should be given the opportunity to study foreign language as long as they are interested and successful. The high attrition rate suggests that this last view is little different from the first two. Moreover, it is shattering to see the large percentage of pupils who experience failure and frustration as they exit from foreign language study convinced that this subject is too difficult, not important, boring, and a waste of time. Did not the survey reported in the *New York Times* tell us something when it was reported that 1,500 high school class presidents ranked foreign languages as their least favorite subject? [5]

Even more serious is the fact that these same students grow up and become parents and have views which are hardly encouraging as reported by a Gallup poll. Parents were questioned in order to determine what goals they had for their children in school. The results of this survey revealed a statement of 48 goals listed in order of importance. At the very bottom of the list was "the ability to read or speak a foreign language." [6]

A few teachers accept the values of foreign language study as universal and have attempted to develop approaches to reach out to all secondary school pupils. Hernick and Kennedy [7] have suggested grouping students according to varying language abilities and interests. The foreign language curriculum is conceived of as a continuum through which pupils may pass when they are able. All pupils are not forced to complete one year or Level I at the same time. This approach is based on the simple basic concept that some pupils need more time than others to reach the same levels of achievement. The positive results of this program showed a decrease in pupil failure and an increase in foreign language enrollment.

The McCluer Plan [8] is another attempt to get at the dropout and failure problem via individualized instruction, programmed materials, team teaching, and flexible scheduling. The stress of this program is on the recognition of individual difference among pupils and an attempt to adapt a program to meet the interests and abilities of each pupil.

In the ERIC Focus Report Number Four,[9] Fearing advocates nongraded foreign language classes not unlike the old-fashioned one-room schoolhouse. Students in this plan are grouped according to achievement in each of the various language skills. For example, any given class may have three or

[4] National Association of Secondary School Principals, *op. cit.*

[5] *New York Times*, July 1, 1962.

[6] *Parents' Reactions to Educational Innovations.* Princeton, New Jersey: Galley International, Inc., 1966. p. 21.

[7] Michael E. Hernick and Dora F. Kennedy. "Multi-Level Grouping of Students in the Modern Foreign Language Program." *Foreign Language Annals*, December 1969.

[8] Fred H. Wood. "The McCluer Plan: An Innovative Non-Graded Foreign Language Program." *Modern Language Journal* 54: 184-87; March 1970.

[9] Percy Fearing. *"Non-Graded Foreign Language Classes." ERIC Focus Report #4.* New York: MLA-ERIC Clearing House, 1969.

four pupils enrolled in Level IV, two in Level V, six in Level III, and so on. Furthermore, a Level II student may be working with Level III materials in reading and Level I in speaking and listening. In effect, levels only have meaning in terms of credit and enrollment while the instructional program focuses on the learner and the development of foreign language skills. The dropout or failure problem vanishes, because under this arrangement only success is experienced as the pupils progress through the program. The ungraded concept offers exciting possibilities for the development of meaningful and successful foreign language programs.

Another direction which offers exciting possibilities for the secondary school foreign language program is the interdisciplinary approach of integrating foreign language study with other areas of the curriculum. Keitel [10] described the development of a world history course taught in German to students who had completed two years of German. In the Buffalo, New York, schools, courses in Puerto-Rican culture, history, and literature are conducted in Spanish, and pupils may gain credit in language arts and history. Thus they satisfy graduation requirements via this novel alternative. In an article which appeared in *Foreign Language Annals*,[11] Ort and Smith presented descriptions of more than a dozen similar attempts at cross-curricular studies.

[10] Helmut A. Keitel. "Development and Dissemination of Materials for the Teaching of World History in a Foreign Language." *Modern Language Journal* 54: 112-15; February 1970.

[11] Barbara Ort and Dwight R. Smith. "The Language Teacher Tours the Curriculum: New Horizons for F. L. Education." *Foreign Language Annals*, October 1969. pp. 28-74.

Attitudes of the Foreign Language Teacher

A great deal of soul searching is going on in the foreign language teaching profession. "What went wrong?" is the question most often heard as we search for answers to dwindling enrollments and lack of federal, state, and local funds for support of foreign language programs. Many lay the blame on the audiolingual method, as others before them placed the fault on traditional methods. However, a calm and rational approach to the question will tell us that many teachers using either method were and are successful in developing a viable foreign language program.

The fact of the matter is that many foreign language programs are simply not meeting the needs of the larger community and its children. When less than 25 percent of our nation's secondary school population are in foreign language study and when only six percent of those remain long enough to profit substantially from the experience, then we can scarcely expect resounding support from the administration, the school board, and the taxpayers.

The programs which have attempted to individualize instruction are a step in the right direction but they will not be enough, any more than a new method or better materials will solve the problem. LAP's or FLAP's, like FLES before them, are doomed to be flops unless basic attitudes change. The question that the foreign language profession has yet to resolve is the gulf between words and actions; that is to say, the values we ascribe to foreign language study are simply not in harmony with programs which evolve as courses of study in secondary education. □

Future ASCD Annual Conferences

1974	March 9-13	Anaheim	*Anaheim Convention Center*
1975	March 15-19	New Orleans	*Rivergate*
1976	March 13-17	Miami Beach	*Convention Center*

Copyright © 1974 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.