

MY TONGUE'S USE.¹

By MRS. DERMOD O'BRIEN.

A very small boy sidled up one day to his mother and murmured in her ear: 'I bited Moya.'

'Oh, Brendan! how could you do such a thing?' said his mother in a shocked voice.

'I did it on porpus,' he explained, and turned away gloomily as if that were a sufficient reason, if not an excuse, for his behaviour.

If I now fling a controversial paper into the *Parents' Review* my excuse must be that I am doing it 'on porpus.' If I bare my teeth, it is because I want to see an answering gleam and hear an answering growl; if I trail my coat, it is because I wish it to be trodden on. My only quarrel with the *Parents' Review* is that it is not sufficiently combative. I should like it to make a ring and summon disputants from schools and colleges, as well as a large contingent from the ranks of the unlearned and ignorant, and let them try their strength against each other. When the fight is over let them shake hands by all means (what is left of them), but let them have it out first.

My mother once employed a cook whose wars with her fellow-domestics were 'bitther and constant.' Her self-criticism was, 'It's too agree'ble I am.' Now, without the extenuating circumstances, that might be said of the contributors to the *Parents' Review*. 'It's too agree'ble they are.'

My thoughts of aggression began to stir in me one day, some time ago, when I was taken by a daughter-in-law on a
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tour through a district in Surrey in search of a preparatory school which should possess all the superlative qualities considered necessary for the education of a six-year-old grandson. I must say I was amazed at the number of admirable preparatory and pre-preparatory schools there are in that part of England.

While visiting one of these, for which my grandson was too young, I happened to mention to the headmaster that Michael and his little sister had a German nursery-governess and were beginning to speak that language quite fluently. I expected commendation, but to my amazement he told me that in his opinion this learning of languages in the nursery not only did no good but was positively harmful. He said that in later days this fluency would come against them in examinations, and gave me to understand that the way in which a language should be studied so as to be useful was by the old-established medium of grammar and dictionary.

We had to leave before my bewildered brain could collect the arguments with which to defend my own point of view; and I was still opening and shutting my mouth helplessly, like a fish, while being escorted courteously to the door and firmly shut into a car.

It is true, as I realized on reflection, that a nursery-taught language, especially if that language be French, has come against children when they went to school. I know that boys have been derided by their school-fellows for possessing a correct French accent, the French 'r' being considered superlatively ridiculous. I have heard of boys who were shamed into adopting the accepted school accent and who refused in holiday-time to revert to their nursery style of speech.

I have also been told how some young cousins of my own, little girls this time, got into trouble at school for the idiomatic translation into French of an English sentence. It was argued that they could not have known how to turn the sentence unless they had been 'helped.' Their defence that 'that was the way it was said' was considered to be inadequate.

Again, I have known a student at a university taken to task because she could not give a precise reason for her rendering of an English phrase into French. She had taken it in her flight as

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a bird lights on a branch, instead of climbing up to it by a ladder; but the climbing process was considered to be the correct one, though some people might argue that it interferes with the use of the wings. There is a legend in the same university that a young Frenchman, taking a course there, failed in his French paper, scholastic and examinational French being quite different from the language spoken in France.

When we are about to study a foreign language, or to induce someone else to study it, after we have made up our minds what use we are going to make of it, one of the first questions we should ask ourselves is whether the language in question is alive or dead, so as to determine our way of approaching it. Now it is generally allowed that the classical languages are dead, dead as the people who used them long ago in everyday speech. We cannot pass the time of day with native speakers of Greek or Latin; we cannot sing songs with them or read their newspapers, or listen to their political views or induce them to listen to ours. Their literature is magnificent, as we are all agreed, even those of us who have no first-hand knowledge of it, their science and philosophy are well worth studying; but the approach to these treasures of literature and learning has to be made through the medium of books, and in order to master the contents of these books our children are provided with grammars and dictionaries and are taught how to call a table to their assistance in time of need.

But the languages now spoken on the Continent are not dead; they are very much alive, and the people who make use of them are far from being dead. Their ideas have not been embalmed and put away in museums and libraries; they are living and working and being expressed in forcible words which sometimes reach us through the radio 'full of sound and fury,' but to us too often 'signifying nothing.'

Now that the nations are drawing nearer to each other, that the word international is becoming of supreme importance, it is surely necessary that our English-speaking peoples should be able to converse freely in at least two continental languages; not simply to know how to ask for bed and breakfast at a hotel, or to enquire the way to the railway station; but to be capable

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of carrying on a conversation, of exchanging ideas and of getting some notion of what the other person is thinking about.

And what the other person is thinking about matters very much to us. We have been inclined in times past to look upon foreigners generally as being of no great importance, sometimes as rather ridiculous people; more lately we have learned to think of them with a certain amount of anxiety, almost of fear, as of potential enemies. If we knew them a little better we might realize that sometimes we seem ridiculous to them; and, knowing them a little better still, we might come to look on them as potential if not actual friends.

If we could talk freely to our neighbours, inaccurately perhaps but without stumbling over carefully-constructed sentences, we might come to a real interchange of ideas and points of view, a clearing away of misunderstandings, a realization that all our ways are not necessarily and invariably the best; and at the same time we might be able to expound and defend those of our ways which, after comparison and argument, we still consider to be sound.

And with this spontaneous ease of speech there should be a similar spontaneous ease of writing. Our young people should be encouraged to carry on a correspondence in a foreign tongue, and this should not consist of carefully built up sentences which tend to make a wall of misapprehension; it should flow along spontaneously like a stream, and if some small irregularities make it sparkle a little, why so much the better.

Having made up our minds that this ease and freedom in speaking, reading and writing are desirable, the question we should ask ourselves is how they are to be attained. Is it by the well-worn stony route of grammar and dictionary?

In studying classical languages the approach is necessarily quite different from that of the study of living languages. No one can hear Greek or Latin spoken as they were in the times of their great literature. Very few people find it either necessary or desirable to use these languages as a medium for conversation. Miss Jane Harrison used Greek, as she tells us in her delightful *Reminiscences of a Student's Life*. The Wandering Scholars spoke Latin to each other when they met outside their

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own countries; but to those who spoke it was a foreign language on both sides, and they probably hated each other's accents. I think it may be taken for granted that the demand for conversational Greek and Latin hardly exists.

As for reading, there certainly was a time when every learned book, ancient or modern, was written in Latin or Greek, and it was necessary for every student to read Latin at least with ease before he could begin to study any subject whatever. But that is no longer the case; every child has more than enough textbooks in his own language to study. Again, in former times the politicians and theologians had to be able to write in Latin in order to carry on their controversies. They had to have a great mastery of language and, so far as can be gathered by the unlearned, of vituperation also. But this practice of the written word is now out of date, and politicians and theologians, scientists and philologists, say what they think of each other in good mouth-filling expressions culled from their own vocabularies.

So far as the classics, then, are concerned our children cannot hear them spoken, are not called upon to speak them, need not use them as a medium for study, and have little or no occasion to write in them. The two subjects for study that remain are literature and grammar, and of these I as an ignoramus am not qualified to speak. Still, even an ignoramus may sometimes wonder what is the actual result of all the years of study spent by so many young people in acquiring a classical education. When they have attained to riper years do they spend their leisure time in perusing Greek and Latin authors? If they do, it is one of the best-kept secrets of our time.

Of course there are scholars and professors who have set their feet on grammars and dictionaries and whose heads touch the stars. They not only have their own reward but hand down inestimable treasures to the unlearned. There is something divine about them, and they should be cherished as temple priests; but need the rank and file usurp their functions?

I remember once telling a friend of mine about an amateur company of young actors who used to go about from place to place performing plays for the benefit of the villagers. They observed that in one little out-of-the-way Irish town the play

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that appealed most to the people was the 'Alcestis' of Euripides, I believe in Professor Gilbert Murray's translation. 'I did the "Alcestis" during my last term at school,' said my friend, and he gave a little sigh as if the memory had not much charm for him. One could not help feeling that the villagers had got more from the play than he had.

Of grammar in the abstract, stripped of language and literature, I am not qualified to speak. I know it is a sacred subject, one to be approached with deference and spoken of in a hushed voice. I have heard strong men declare that they would be grateful all their lives for the discipline they had been put through in their effort to master the Latin grammar. Still, I have sometimes wondered if the old-fashioned plan of putting a grammar into the hands of an eight-year-old boy and expecting him to write the exercises set down in it was really the best way of attacking the mysteries.

I am no scholar, but the possession of a nephew drove me into a bowing acquaintance with the early Latin declensions. One day this nephew brought me the exercise he was preparing for school and said, with a puzzled expression, that there were some sentences he had to translate but he was not sure how to do so correctly. They were as follows, or something like it: 'You (Sing.) have a goat. You (Sing.) are building a wall.' 'Sometimes,' he said, 'I translated it "canto" and sometimes "cantare," but I don't know which is right.' That both attempts resulted in nonsense did not seem to trouble him. He did not expect to find sense in his Latin grammar, or in any sort of lessons, anyhow. But this is not my province, and besides my reminiscences are terribly out of date.

My contention is that in studying living languages we should not begin with grammars and dictionaries, but sit down at the baby's feet and learn as he learns. Gouin told us long ago about his desperate attempt to learn German; how he learned the dictionary by heart and went abroad and studied for two years, and then came home and found that his little nephew, whom he had left an inarticulate infant, was able to converse quite fluently and without apparent difficulty in his own language. He then set himself to evolve an elaborate system by which any lan-

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guage could be learned by means of conversations which were acted as well as spoken.

It is a long time since I read Gouin's book, but from my remembrance of it I do not think he went back far enough, and that he should have studied the methods of the infant rather than those of the little child. For a baby does not spend all his time making aimless passes with his hands and trying to extract nourishment from his toes. He observes a great many things and listens with concentrated attention to all that is going on, and before he is a year old, before he has learned to articulate, he will understand quite well all that is said to him. When he has reached this stage he will want to make himself understood and will try to imitate the language he hears. But his imitation is founded on scientific principles. He does not copy results, but methods. He is not content to echo the sound he hears, but he fixes his eyes on the person speaking and shapes his mouth and makes use of his muscles exactly as he sees these

movements made. The result is that the baby will pick up the exact intonation of the person who has taught him to speak.

If two languages are offered to him he will learn them both with equal facility, only they should be offered to him by different people. My experience was that my children would not talk French to me or English to their nursery-governess. I remember my three-year-old daughter sitting between us and talking to us alternately, each in our own language. Occasionally she would translate, saying to Mademoiselle 'J'ai dit à ma mère . .' and then explaining what she had said in free translation.

I believe, though this is outside my own experience, that a little child will pick up several languages at the same time without any difficulty at all, only that each language must be spoken by a different person. It stands to reason that when a child begins to think, to formulate his impressions and express them to himself in words, he will make use of the first language he has learned, which, it must be remembered, he has learned as a foreign language. If he has early learned two languages he will think independently in both of them and will not translate from one to another. This escape from translation is essential to the mastery of a language.
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I once watched a four-year-old son standing in his nursery and, flinging out his arms with a fine French gesture, exclaim 'Quel temps!' Then turning to an English speaker in the room he explained, in quite a different tone, "'Quel temps!' means 'It's raining very hard.'" What the remark really meant was that he could say what he wanted in two languages without any process of exchange.

Having learned to speak fluently in two languages, when the time comes for reading the process of learning will be as easy for one as for the other, and the same holds good for writing. Grammar comes last, but to analyse a language which one can speak and read and write is interesting and amusing. Having built the walls of the house we are quite willing to put on the roof.

The older person who wishes to tackle a new language might do worse than follow the sequence of the baby's method: first to listen, then to speak imitatively, then to read, then to write and finally to study grammar. Of course those of riper years can work at reading, writing and grammar simultaneously, but a certain familiarity with a language is very helpful towards the understanding of the rules.

The old-fashioned schoolroom method is the exact inverse of the baby's way of doing things. It begins with the learning of rules, goes on to writing exercises, then to reading haltingly, then to laboured speech tainted with translation, and when at last the pupil arrives at listening to the spoken language he will probably find that he does not understand it at all.

The being suddenly overwhelmed by a flood of words not one of which one understands is decidedly bewildering, and does not often happen to an insular people. I have some friends who used to live in a Welsh-speaking district and could speak Welsh quite well themselves. It happened one day that they lost their dog, and it was not convenient for any one of them to go and look for it. An Englishwoman who was staying with them volunteered to do what she could, and with some labour and difficulty she learned the Welsh equivalent for 'Have you seen a little white dog?' and sallied forth. It does not seem to have occurred to any of them that it is one thing to ask a question in a foreign tongue and something quite different to understand
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what is said in answer. Murmuring her sentence to herself, she approached the first cottage by the roadside and enunciated it with confidence, but she soon started back in dismay, for though the response was immediate and voluble, it conveyed nothing whatever to her understanding. I believe the little white dog was retrieved eventually, but how this came about I never heard.

I was interested by being told by two French girls who came to stay with us at different times that to each of them the conversation that went on around them was at first an absolute bewilderment, but that after listening for some time understanding came to them suddenly as a sort of revelation. I suppose it can hardly have been a complete revelation at first, but they suddenly realized that there was a way through the chaos.

To those who wish to learn a foreign language I would say, listen—to the wireless, to lectures, to sermons, to plays; in fact, lose no chance of listening to the spoken word. When it comes to speech, the way pointed out by the baby remains the best to follow. A relation of mine was once asked how it was that he could make himself so well understood in France seeing that his knowledge of the language was decidedly limited. He replied that the secret was 'to make a noise like a Frenchman.' He had a good ear and an adaptable mouth, which made things easier for him: but it is not a very simple thing for an English-speaking person to make a noise like a Frenchman. He must first listen to the Frenchman and then imitate the way in which he makes his peculiar noises. He must learn to open his mouth and use his lips and find the exact place on his palate against which to roll his 'r,' and learn to distribute his emphasis over all the syllables of a word instead of dwelling heavily on one. In fact, he must do as the baby does, and the more closely he follows his model the more quickly and surely he will learn.

So far as reading is concerned it must be allowed that it is quite possible to forsake our infant guide and follow a line of our own. We can learn to read a language without being able either to speak it or to understand it when spoken. There are those who have read the *Divina Commedia* from start to finish and are hopelessly bogged when it comes to listening to an Italian lecture or responding to some old woman by the road-

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side who remarks upon the weather and wants to know how many children one has. Of course a small, if not presentable, knowledge of pronunciation is a great help; but, that being granted, the unorthodox method is the most satisfactory, and, casting away one's grammar and using a dictionary as little as possible, there is a great deal of pleasure and excitement to be gained in plunging boldly through some unfamiliar literature. We should battle bravely through the paragraphs, leaving mangled sentences behind us, never stopping to pick up the wounded, and after a time we shall find that the wounded have picked themselves up, and a return visit will prove that they are whole and sound and comprehensible. This kind of reading is of course entirely out of order and may be looked upon as a kind of debauch.

Writing must be treated with more respect. I do not think it can be approached without a familiarity with speech, and it will certainly before long find itself in need of grammatical help. But grammar, having come at last into its own, will take its important place and bind hearing, speech, reading and writing into one coherent satisfactory whole.

More attention to the writing of letters is now being given in schools, I believe, than used to be the case in my time. I remember being told by a friend of mine, who belonged to two nations by birth and to a third by marriage and was equally proficient in four languages, of how a number of midshipmen, whose ship had put into a Mediterranean port, were invited on

shore and royally entertained by a hospitable Frenchman. When they returned on board they were naturally anxious to express their gratitude to their kind host; but to their horror they found that among them all there was not one who could write a simple letter of thanks in French. I, of course, professed to be properly shocked at this ignorance, but having been brought up on orthodox lines, I was not quite sure that, given the same circumstances, I should not have [sic] experienced the same difficulties myself.

The object, then, in learning how to write in a foreign language is not to be able to turn a page from a classical writer into a travesty of his style in another tongue, but to be capable [p 27]

of corresponding with real living people about the ordinary happenings of everyday life.

Again, there is another reason for venturing early beyond the boundaries of our mother tongue. Besides bringing us in touch with our continental [sic] neighbours, the learning to speak a foreign language helps us to a better production, even a better appreciation, of our own. The English language is rich in beautiful words, words that it is a joy to repeat for the sheer music of them, but the English-speaking peoples do not always give their full value to these lovely sounds. I have heard it hinted (I must confess by an exasperated Irishwoman) that the English language as spoken consists of one obscure vowel and no consonants to speak of. This, I will allow, is an exaggeration [sic]: perhaps a French friend of mine was nearer the mark when she said 'Les anglais sont difficiles à comprendre parce-qu'ils avalent leurs mots.' Now words are not intended to be swallowed, nor yet to be mangled and dropped from the lips like dead things. They should be shaped and given life and then sent out upon the air, winged words, beautiful in themselves and carrying their meaning with an intonation that makes it absolutely clear and a joy to the listener.

When, in the *Purgatorio*, Virgil sees that Dante is anxious to ask a question, he says to him,

'Thy bow
Is bent, now loose the arrow of thy speech.'

And Dante, being an Italian and accustomed to producing his voice, would naturally send out his speech like an arrow, clear and unhesitating, going straight to the mark.

Now there are different ways of learning a foreign language. One is by travel. Children hearing an unaccustomed tongue spoken all around them will pick it up with astounding speed—and probably forget it almost as readily when they come home again unless they are encouraged to keep it up. Still, having once been fluent in a language will always make it easier to learn again should opportunity or necessity arise for so doing. It is also possible to send a child to school in France or Germany, being careful to provide against all the other pupils being either English or foreigners of different brands, so that conver-

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sation outside school hours becomes linguistically unprofitable. Or he may attend the summer schools held in university towns on the continent. These are generally well arranged and are both useful and delightful to the foreign boy or girl who has the good fortune to be sent to one. But these summer schools are not for very young children, and I am pleading for the learning of a second language in the nursery.

My own family was brought up in West Limerick, far from a school of any kind, and with the width of two islands and two seas between us and the continent; but all my five children learned to chatter freely in French, and since they grew up they have assured me, jointly and severally, that they found this facility very useful. I think, too, that it helped them to a clear enunciation of their own language. Most of them in later years have had to give lectures or hold classes, and I never heard any complaint of their being inarticulate or unable to hold the attention of their hearers. Our plan was to engage a 'bonne supérieure' through some good agency. Of course one has to be very careful as to who is invited to be the stranger in one's house; but my own experience was that, though there were occasional mistakes and misfits, for the most part we were very fortunate in the Frenchwomen who from time to time made their home with us and usually became rather friends than instructresses.

It may seem a small thing, but I was always very particular that the children should use the polite form of address from the very first. Of course this seems supremely ridiculous to the French or German teacher, but the young English men and women who have learnt a foreign tongue in the nursery, and drop too soon into the familiar way of speech, find themselves in a much more ridiculous position.

And now I have 'bited a schoolmaster,' and the only reason I can offer is that I did it 'on porpus.' I wonder if he will bite back. . . .

[Discussion is invited.—ED.]

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MY TONGUE'S USE.

By MRS. DERMOD O'BRIEN (Page 171).

DISCUSSION.

I.

I have just been reading Mrs. Dermod O'Brien's spirited article, 'My Tongue's Use.' There may be some who will criticize what she has to say but I wish to support her very strongly.

Having been brought up abroad, it has always been a matter of great surprise to me that English people appear so unwilling to learn, or to have their children taught foreign languages. So deeply do we feel this that in March the members of the Wanstead Branch are having a lecture on the subject entitled, 'Commonsense about foreign languages.'

Surely it is time that Latin and Greek were discontinued in our schools, except for scholars entering certain professions, and the much more important French, German, Italian and Spanish properly taught. I once asked a schoolmaster why Latin and Greek were taught in preference to these others, and the answer was that a knowledge of Latin and Greek 'was a great help in learning other languages'—but why not employ the schoolchild's valuable time in learning modern languages to begin with?

To-day, as never before in the world's history, foreign languages hold a daily increasing importance in education. We

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must be able to hold our own wherever we may be, to be able to discuss matters with whomever we may meet, and to take an intelligent interest in foreign affairs because we understand them.

The days of the aloof Britain are over. No longer can we *expect* the foreigner to speak to us in our own language, and to resent his not doing so. Such was the case of the gentleman from London who was having difficulty in the Customs at one of the French ports as he could not understand what was being said to him. In acute exasperation he turned to his family and said, 'What on earth were these blighters doing when they went to school!'

It is important for everyone in this modern world that they should speak foreign languages well, but how imperative it is that politicians should be adept at it, for the man who is dependent on the interpreter must be at a great disadvantage in a discussion of importance.

It is true that children can learn two or more languages at once with great ease. My brother and I were brought up in Northern Portugal and we spoke Portuguese and English as small children equally fluently, and though I have lived in England for forty-four years I have not forgotten it, neither have I forgotten the French and German which we picked up by mixing with those colonies.

There seems to be some stir in the educational world at the moment, and it would be a great thing for the future of Britain if foreign languages could be *properly* taught in all the schools in the land, and by *properly* I mean taught by teachers who have learnt the language in the land where it is spoken.

(Mrs.) C.H. BAKER.

II.

I feel impelled to write and say how enormously I appreciate Mrs. O'Brien's article on the art of learning languages in this month's *Parents' Review*.

That the method advocated by her is the ideal one is borne out by my own experience. From the time our eldest child was

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tiny we sang to her French nursery rhymes as often as English ones, and living in Scotland, she also became familiar with the sound of good lowland Scots. Dagobert was her favourite hero, and La Palisse and the Laird o' Cockpen, Jock o' Hazeldean and Marlbro' familiar friends, moreover it was natural and right to express oneself about each of these characters in a different accent and intonation.

When she was five we went to live in Italy, where we spent the next ten years (with an annual holiday in England). From the start we arranged for an Italian lady to take her out for a walk on two mornings a week; there was no lesson in the usual sense of the word, merely friendly intercourse. In this way not only did we avoid her picking up kitchen Italian with the ugly local accent, but a welcome relief was afforded to Nannie, who now had a new baby to cope with. In a few months she was quite fluent.

After a year she started music lessons, this time from a French lady, and we suggested that the lesson should be preceded by half an hour's walk and talk. In a very short time all intercourse with this teacher was being carried on in French. When the time came for our annual visit to England I bought a French story-book meaning to read it aloud in order that she might keep up the language. On the journey she asked if she might have the book 'just to look

at the pictures.' It was handed over, and long before we reached home she had read it from cover to cover. 'Do you *mind*?' she asked rather anxiously, and when asked if she had been able to understand it all, she said: 'Well, I didn't know all the words, but I understood the *sense*.'

The two younger children, born in Italy, were bi-lingual from birth, and at eighteen months our small son, given a message in English, would trot off to the kitchen and deliver it in Italian. Only when he was tired, or as he put it himself, 'awful stanco,' did he confuse the two languages; on one occasion when Nannie was out his father offered to bath him, he replied: 'No thank you, Father, I will make it da se.' Later, when he went home to school, his father gave him an Italian Bible and he used that always for his private reading and so contrived not to forget [p 136]

what he had learnt. Moreover, since Italian is not much taught in English schools, our children did not have to suffer, in the way so feelingly referred to by Mrs. O'Brien in the case of French speakers, by being ridiculed for their fluency and good accent, indeed their knowledge of a completely strange language earned them some kudos among their school-fellows, and my daughter was able to take the Italian paper in the School Certificate examination without any special preparation at all.

I fully realize that my husband's position as an Archdeacon in the far-flung diocese of Gibraltar has given us an exceptional opportunity of approaching the learning of languages in the right way. But even those who have not these chances might, I think, take more trouble than they do over this vital subject. What is the use of talking and writing about brotherhood among the nations and not *doing* the one thing which all of us can do to bring that ideal state of affairs one step nearer? The most important thing I am sure is to bring the children into close personal contact, at the earliest possible age, with those of other races and languages, and now that we are faced with the 'refugee problem' this should not be too difficult, indeed, might it not afford an opportunity in many households of killing two birds with one stone?

And in all schools I would advocate a reversion to the excellent practice of having only foreign teachers to teach their own languages.

ELSIE SHARP.

III.

I read Mrs. O'Brien's 'My Tongue's Use' with pleasure amounting to glee.

I recently met and talked with an exiled German teaching here, who has considerable experience of language teaching, and his method is to associate the elder with a much younger child of a different nationality. He claims that one learns languages best from a young child.

F.E. BUTLER.

[Further discussion is invited.—Ed.]

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MY TONGUE'S USE.

By Mrs. DERMOD O'BRIEN (Page 171).

DISCUSSION.

IV.

I should like to add to the discussion on 'My Tongue's Use,' not to criticise Mrs. Dermod O'Brien's findings, which are, alas, painfully true, but to stress one aspect of the question which has not, so far, been mentioned.

What makes so much of our language teaching futile—and it *is* futile—is the fact that we in the schools are working under the shadow of the public examinations, and, for the purpose of passing most public examinations it is not necessary to be able to speak a foreign language at all—only to write and translate it. Where there is an oral examination, it is usually subsidiary and optional.

I began my career as a language teacher by teaching French in a private post where the children, belonging as they did to the leisured classes, were not haunted by the spectre of public examinations. From the age of twelve upwards, we conducted our lessons entirely in French, and we read and narrated a great many French books, not always classics, either.

Later, I went into a school where I had to take the French up to examination standard, and I planned to continue along the same lines. I would teach entirely on the direct method. [p 257]

I would encourage the reading and narration of French books, and I would give up one lesson a week entirely to French conversation. But I found that this was not at all what was required for examination work. Instead, we had to spend weary hours learning irregular verbs and highly complicated grammar rules and trying to translate untranslatable French words into English, and vice versa. When my pupils did not know the French words, they would cheerfully put in the English ones, so that their exercises read like this: 'Je suis allé dans the steamer où j'ai vu le steward.' One of your correspondents suggests that only foreign teachers should teach their own language. This is ideal in theory, but in practice I would say that, for examination coaching, not only is a foreigner unnecessary, but she might even be unsuccessful. Her French would be too good! All that is needed is an efficient English teacher (no matter how bad her accent) with a gift for clear explanation, and a good dictionary.

It seems to me that, until all the examining bodies refuse to pass a candidate who has not taken an oral and a written examination, the former to be conducted by a foreigner speaking the language offered, there is little hope of improvement in the language teaching in our schools.

C.M.C. TEACHER.

V.

As I have been trying to bring my children in contact with the native speech of a foreign language since their babyhood, I am very interested in the discussion in the *Parents' Review*, following Mrs. Dermod O'Brien's article, 'My Tongue's Use.'

There can be little argument against Mrs. O'Brien's opinion that a child can learn two languages simultaneously in the nursery years—the Welsh give us proof of that—but mothers wishing to put the theory into practice with continental languages are confronted by very real difficulties at the present time. The '*bonne supérieure*,' like our English 'Nanny,' has practically disappeared and I imagine very few Agencies in England would have an experienced foreign nurse on their books owing to present international conditions. Before engaging a nurse from [p 258]

abroad it is necessary to satisfy the Ministry of Labour that no British subject could be found to

take the post, and much expense and delay are incurred before passports and permits can be obtained [sic]. If individual circumstances can overcome this obstacle, there can surely be no good reason against a child being brought into contact with French or German or any other language in babyhood. My second child commenced to hear German before she was two, through my having a companion of that nationality. Now, at eight years old, she can converse comfortably and is beginning to read and write. At one stage she frequently mixed the two languages, and I was glad that all present knew German when she remarked, 'It was quite hell in Tante's Zimmer,' but now she seldom introduces an English word unconsciously.

I found it necessary to insist that my companion always spoke her own language when the children were present, as they were young enough unconsciously to imitate her English. During the last fourteen years I have had foreign students on 'au pair' terms to help the children in conversation, and I have noticed how much better the foreigners pronounce new words they have never seen written than those they have already learnt at school. And how difficult it is to cure them of literal translations that are already fixed in their minds! Of course we find it very amusing when 'Henri' comes and solemnly thanks me for effecting the salvation of his trousers (I had removed a small stain), and 'Otto' writes that his parents are in good butter—but one also realizes that in translating literally it is very easy to say the wrong thing!

My own experiences make me agree with 'F.E. Butler' that one learns best from a child, and the greatest advantage a child can be given as a foundation is a few months' visit in the country where the language is spoken, in a family where there are several children.
(Mrs.) C. VINE-STEVENSON.

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MY TONGUE'S USE.

By MRS. DERMOD O'BRIEN.

DISCUSSION.

VI.

My attempt at stirring up strife in your January number has made some very interesting responses appear both in February and April. The only thing that grieves me is that all who write to the *Parents' Review* seem to be on the same side. The enemy gives no sign of life, makes no answer whatever, and yet that he exists is a certainty. That he is able to paralyse the hands of those who want to do real work, the feet of those who want to make real progress, is only too well known to harassed parents and teachers who find their protests marked 'read' and their mouths stopped as soon as they try to call attention to abuses that are crying out for reform.

Of course the attitude towards the learning of foreign languages is only one of these; there are plenty of others.

'C.M.C. Teacher' can wield a sharp spear but finds it ineffectual against what she truly calls 'the spectre of public examinations.' The ordinary weapons with which we fight each other seem to be useless when directed against this bogy. He has a giant's strength and he uses it as a giant, he is powerful, he is pervasive, but when it is a question of attacking him he is not to be found.

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One by one, as parent or teacher, we climb the steps of his castle and try to wind the horn that will call attention to our approach. It gives forth a feeble and deprecating squeal and, after waiting a reasonable time and meeting with no response, we tighten our lips across our teeth and try again. This time the sound may be louder, but there is no movement in the hall and no porter comes to the door. We draw a long breath, shape our mouths with care and blow again, producing quite a sounding blast, but the result is just the same and despondently we hand the horn to the next comer, who wipes the mouth-piece on his sleeve and repeats the process, meeting with no more success.

But that the bogy, or giant, is in the castle is unquestionable, for from another door, which we may not approach, processions of examiners sally forth carrying bales of examination papers. It is no use to attack them, for they only smile politely and say, 'We are not responsible, we are only carrying out orders'; and they go their way to universities and colleges and schools, linking them all together with a chain, apparently as slight, and actually as strong, as the one with which the Aesir bound the wolf Fenreir [sic].

If only the bogy behind the examiners and the examination papers could be made to take shape and to answer a few straight questions it would clear the ground and be a great relief to all our minds.

Of course we (parents, grand-parents, and teachers) are quite ready to allow that there must be examinations. Our weapons and our machinery must be tested, thoroughly and in detail, before they are taken into use. But the testing should be carried through with some idea in the examiner's mind as to what is going to be done with those weapons and machines when they have passed through his hands.

I remember once, in Limerick, having a chat with the manager of a Lace-school. She told me that she had just come back from an exhibition in Dublin and that the authorities there had approached her, asking if she had any remarks to make about the way in which affairs had been conducted. She replied that the first thing she would like to suggest was that the judges

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should know something about the subject on which they were called to adjudicate.

It does not seem much to ask, but it is really rather important.

Shall we go so far as to suppose an examiner saying to himself 'Here I have to test the knowledge of a young diplomat, or a young traveller for a firm, or a young member of a union, who wants to study labour conditions as they obtain in other countries. These carefully prepared candidates for examination have not been encouraged to learn their languages from native speakers, whose home-grown manner of speech is 'too good' for examination purposes. When they actually visit these other countries, as they are bound to do in the ordinary course of events, what use will they make of 'the mass of irregular verbs and the complicated grammar rules' which they have painfully acquired at school? Will they be able to understand what is said to them or to make themselves understood?

Is this old hide-bound tradition of ours, this accumulation of out-of-date literature and grammatical junk, of any practical use?

I am more than half afraid that the examiner's loyalty to the bogy would be unshakable, and that he would not dream of putting such unorthodox questions to himself. And he will not allow anyone else to put them to him. What are we to do about it?

For my part I have tried to wind the horn at the castle-door and have succeeded in

making a very little noise to which the bogy has made no response whatever. Now I retire meekly down the steps hoping that someone with more skill and better breath than I possess may come after me and blow a blast that will penetrate to the bogy's lair and bring him out into the open, to be dealt with by the parents and teachers who for many years have been tyrannised over by him and his emissaries.

¹ (Mowbray: Richard II, Act I.)