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Source: *The Modern Language Journal*, Vol. 26, No. 3, (Mar., 1942), pp. 174-176

Published by: Blackwell Publishing on behalf of the National Federation of Modern Language Teachers Associations

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/317495>

Accessed: 08/05/2008 13:10

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Realia in Foreign Language Courses

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(*Author's summary.*—Foreign language teachers should freely employ informational and illustrative items connected with the peoples whose languages are studied. By so doing, they can stimulate interest in their courses, widen the pupils' mental horizons, and correlate their work with other branches of the curriculum, besides aiding defense.)

NO ADVOCATE of foreign language teaching can afford to base his arguments for the inclusion of such courses in the curriculum solely on any one advantage claimed for that line of instruction. If one grants the benefits both cultural and vocational to be derived from mastering the languages *per se*, and grants even the still debatable by-product of mental discipline—which, by the way, has never been completely or permanently discredited—there is still a wide range of closely related and undisputed sources of pleasure and profit in the too often neglected study of the countries and peoples associated with the languages.

Research in these fields will contribute much of positive value both in the acquisition of a more intelligent and appreciative knowledge of the language, and in the integration of the language course with the rest of the curriculum in the forming of a well-rounded education, that will aid in producing not only scholars, but good citizens and true patriots, imbued with reverence for their own country as well as a tolerant, sympathetic understanding of other races. Such an appreciative attitude toward Latin America, in particular, is of vital importance at the present time, as any one in our State department will gladly testify.

If it were not for limitations of time and space, it could be shown in more detail just how the inclusion of the *realia* in the foreign language course contributes to the facility of learning and the depth of comprehension of the language itself. Likewise, it could be more clearly demonstrated how the study of the peoples and their customs has a direct bearing on general education by linking the French, German, or Spanish course with the classes in history, geography, art, music, English, and even science. It is probable, however, that most intelligent teachers in these departments accept our premises. Let us, then, touch lightly on these phases of our subject, and lay particular stress on how to present the *realia* not only without impairing our efficiency in the rest of our work, but even so as definitely to improve it.

In the first place, every foreign language class, not excluding those in the ancient tongues, may well have a student committee whose duty and pleasure it will be to lead the other pupils in contributing items of timely interest. Of such items there is a vast, indeed, an almost unlimited potential supply. Nearly every issue of our magazines and newspapers contains reports of current events, particularly in these days of European war and

Western Hemisphere defense. Pupils can very easily be induced to bring in clippings and pictures for the classroom bulletin boards; and many members of the class will enjoy reading or summarizing these, or even discussing them. The bulletin boards may be further enriched by the pupils' own drawings; such as maps, flags, costumes, and illustrations of stories read.

Then, too, pupils may be persuaded to volunteer reports based on library research, or on books furnished by the school or public library, by the home, or by the teacher. It is often well to leave the particular subject to the student's own interest, while encouraging him to read extracts from more than one author, and to supplement his talk by reference to the wall map. The speaker must be brought to realize that he has a message to convey, rather than a list of words to read or recite. The teacher may so guide these reports that in the four semesters sometimes required for those who elect a language, the entire realm wherein the language is spoken, may be adequately covered. For example, in two years of Spanish, students might in the first semester emphasize Spain and present-day Spanish possessions; in the second semester, the emphasis might be shifted to Mexico; in the third, to Central America, the Philippines, and the West Indies; and in the fourth, to South America. This does not of course mean that anything of importance in any part of the Spanish speaking world should ever be ruled out at any time.

Another rich mine of *realia* is found in music. In every language class, there will be students whose particular interests lie in that direction. These can be relied upon to stimulate others to an appreciation of the music of the people whose speech is being studied, and a comparison of their folk-songs and melodies with those of others. Students of Irish extraction will be interested in the resemblance of Spanish music to that of their ancestors.

Above all, the relationship of the foreign language to our own tongue is of great and enduring importance. The unity of literature in general and the resemblances found between English letters and the works of foreign masters offer limitless possibilities for study and appreciation. The students of the world's greatest dramatist, Shakespeare, will be interested in most cases to learn of the great Spanish dramatists like Calderón and Lope de Vega, or of the world's greatest prose stylist, the immortal Cervantes; and those whose present field is the English novel will appreciate some information about the life and works of Valera, Galdós, Pereda, Alas, Blasco Ibáñez and Pío Baroja.

The writer has dwelt more on the teaching of *realia* in Spanish classes than on the equally important presentation of such information in classes in the other languages only because his own experience has been somewhat greater in that field, and because in the present crisis, Spanish is undoubtedly assuming greater and greater importance, particularly as regards its bearing on the development of friendlier relations between the Americas.

There may be, however, some teachers who although persuaded of the

benefits of the *realia*, are yet doubtful about their inclusion to any extent in the course, because of the time element involved. To these it may be said that the actual time spent on *realia* need not be very great. It is not a question of quantity, but of quality, nor does it necessarily follow that because one item of interest is beneficial, ten items are ten times as helpful. That is the line of reasoning employed by the Irishman who was urged to try sleeping on a feather pillow. Being cautious, however, he tried one feather first, placing it carefully on a stone. When he awoke with a headache, he said, "Begorry, if one feather gives a man a headache, what would a whole pillowful do?" Education, in spite of our attempts to make it an exact science, is still less subject to formulas and axioms than physics, chemistry, or mathematics.

What is wanted, then, is not a quantity production of what we call *realia*, but a permeating atmosphere of the real spirit that has evolved and still underlies the language we are teaching. Some of the best contributions along this line, such as pictures, drawings, and above all, souvenirs brought in by teacher or students, take relatively no class time at all.

In conclusion, let us reiterate that the *realia* may and should be used to vitalize our teaching, coordinate our educational courses, and develop a true culture, which is broad, tolerant and appreciative of other peoples. Mark Twain aptly defined irreverence as "disrespect for other people's gods." It is the duty of the educator to develop reverence for what is best in our own civilization and for what others have contributed to us and to the world. All this, as we have endeavored to show, may be done with a minimum of effort and time, that is well repaid by the enrichment obtained. It is a simple matter of teacher guidance of natural pupil instincts, chief of which are curiosity and a desire for self-expression. Self-expression, by the way, is of more value when there is a self worth expressing. Although one educator advocates permitting children to stand up on their desks and shout for joy at more or less frequent intervals, it would seem to the present writer that at least equally valuable results may be obtained by having the student come forward near the map and tell his fellows something of vital interest in connection with the people whose language they are all studying.

Most of the students, however their linguistic abilities may vary, will show appreciation of this phase of the work. In fact, many who are incapable of making satisfactory progress in grammar or literature will be very successful in their treatment of *realia*. One of our St. Louis teachers recently suggested, therefore, that it would be well if our beginners' course could be so organized that pupils who mastered nothing else than the *realia* might be given credit for one term of work, but not sent on to the upper classes, an idea that seems to be worth recommending to administrators. In the meantime, it would seem that all foreign language instruction should be saturated with those elements that contribute to the correct setting and background for a truer appreciation of the language and those who speak it.