

## ON TEACHING FRENCH TO YOUNG CHILDREN.

BY MARJORIE EVANS.

I FEEL that in this little paper, it will be as well to deal only with French as taught to young children. After the age of twelve, there is not so much discussion as to how a child shall be taught a foreign-tongue. If, by that time, the pupil has a fairly good vocabulary and a pure accent she is able to begin the study of French literature and study some good grammar, such as that by Larousse. There has been much discussion lately about the place of *Translation* when teaching a foreign-tongue to children. The majority of the Reform teachers seem to think it can be dispensed with altogether, and I think a discussion on its value would be found rather interesting. I think most teachers agree that no direct translation from the mother-tongue should be attempted until the pupil has acquired a certain facility in reading the language and shows a fair capacity for expressing her thoughts in that language.

Translation has rather a warping effect upon children, and it is surely not much use to seek to arouse an interest in the literature of a country by means of *Translation* before you have fairly well made your pupil master the language in which this literature is written; and is *Translation* as useful to this end as other methods are? Translation certainly forces the pupil to face difficulties and think for herself, and this is, I suppose, its greatest use. However, as Translation is a means of learning a foreign-tongue for more advanced pupils, I am straying from my subject.

(1) In teaching French, I think the first point to be considered is a *correct pronunciation*. Some people have an idea that a good accent can be acquired later on, but this is a very grave mistake. A *Good Pronunciation* of a foreign-tongue is the all-important factor at the BEGINNING. A good knowledge of French and a bad accent is almost as bad (*I think it is quite as bad*) as no knowledge at all. If this good Pronunciation is mastered from the beginning, the teacher will of course save herself much trouble later on.

To insure this correct Pronunciation, a study of Phonetics will be found most useful.  
[p 529]

Children are excellent mimics, and there is no reason why they should not be able to pronounce every French word correctly from the beginning—if the teacher herself has pronounced them rightly.

Personally, I think that French taught by a person who has herself an impure accent is almost worse than no French at all, but no doubt many will disagree with me. Many children have their first knowledge of French from French nurses; this in one way is very excellent, but often the untrained nurse is too lazy to correct faulty pronunciation, and bad habits are formed. For those teachers who are not acquainted with the French Phonetic system, I should advise a little book called *Elements of French Pronunciation*, by Benjamin Dumville, and published by Dent.

To speak French correctly, the pupil must master the following list of sounds which is complete (written on a separate sheet of paper to be pinned on the board); as will be seen, each sound has its corresponding symbol. French has a slightly different *organic* basis from English, this involves the development of certain muscles, enabling them to move easily in certain ways and these trained muscles are aided by the sense of hearing, which has been

trained with them from the beginning. Mr. Dumville sums up the fundamental organic differences of the two languages of French and English in the following formula:—

ENGLISH.

1. Tongue more back.
2. Tongue and other organs moved during the production of many of the long vowels.
3. Lips little used.

FRENCH.

1. Tongue more forward.
2. Tongue and other organs always in one position for one vowel.
3. Lips very much used.

There are certain sounds which we English find more difficult to produce than others, they are:—the front vowels “i” and “e” as in “ni” and “été,” and the back vowels “ou” and “au” as in “tour” and “peau,” the front rounded vowels “u” and “eu” as in “pu” and “peu” and the nasal sounds “en,” “on,” “in,” and “un” as in “taute,” “trompe,” “vin” and “humble.” A wall chart of these phonetic signs can be bought from Messrs. Truslove & Hanson.

[p 530]

I am certain that for those teachers who have not had the opportunity of studying a language in the country itself, a study of its phonetics will be most valuable and interesting.

How can reading, acting, or recitation in French ever become a delight or pleasure to others if the pronunciation is slipshod and incorrect? We lay great importance upon the child’s enunciation when teaching English, surely we must take the same trouble when teaching French.

(2) The teacher must rouse an interest in the language she is going to teach, and to do this we must of course appeal to our pupil’s imagination. We tell him delightful stories of France and the French people, we describe their habits and occupations and dress, and try to make the French child’s life a reality to him. He must feel it is a living language and not the language of lesson books. Teach him charming little French rounds and songs and let it be as natural for him to sing these as it is for him to sing his English songs. There is a very charming book of French songs by Dalcroze, published by Augeners.

To increase the child’s vocabulary, I find Dent’s Wall Pictures of the Seasons quite invaluable for class teaching. These pictures afford a wide scope for conversation, numbers of useful words can be learnt from one picture and sentences can of course be built up from these words. With children who have some knowledge of reading and writing, the words may be written on the blackboard and copied by the children in their Vocabulary Note Books. I have found from experience that a small child will learn far more from “pictures” than in any other way. *Bué’s Illustrated French Primer* makes a most charming little reader for Class I., the print is nice and large, and after the children have learnt all the words orally, they enjoy seeing the story in print, this is also a means of giving the children their first lessons on French spelling. I think it is most important that the children should learn French poetry and prose by heart. Miss Violet Partington’s little dramatized French Fables are most charming and the children love them. They are so arranged that even the little beginner of six can have a little part to act. It is

marvellous what a lot of French the children learn in this way, and the sentences they learn are not stilted, but the idiomatic phrases of colloquial French.

Reading French Fairy Tales is a great help in teaching French. Some of Andersen's Tales have been translated into French

[p 531]

under the title of *Contes d'Andersen*. I read the same story over and over again to the class, until they are so familiar with it, that they listen in eager expectation for the familiar sentences and expressions.

When teaching from *Little French Folk*, I think it is most important to read the little stories to the pupils several times before you allow them to read them out loud. However, before the story is read at all, a lesson or several lessons should be given on the chief nouns and verbs the story contains and the grammatical rules touched upon. The little anecdote or story should not be left until the pupils can read it through quite fluently and make up fresh sentences on the same subject. It is most important that the little story should become a basis for conversation and only when it is thoroughly known and understood should it be transcribed. I do not think these stories will be much use as a means of teaching the child French, if they are only translated into the mother-tongue.

Of course, many of you here will know of several other interesting ways of using this Class II. book, and as it is so widely used in the P.U.S., it will form a very interesting subject for discussion. It is important to teach the children a certain amount of French grammar before they go into Class III., a good knowledge of verbs can of course be acquired from the Gouin lessons. Class II. children should be able to repeat and understand the use of the Present, Past and Future of *Etre* and *Avoir*, and the four regular conjugations. If the children have some knowledge of these tense inflexions, the language becomes so much more reasonable to them, and as we all know children will always appreciate what is compatible with reason.

The following points will, I think, form interesting topics for *discussion*:—

- (1) The place of Translation.
- (2) The use of Phonetics as a means of insuring a correct pronunciation.
- (3) Methods of using *Little French Folk*.
- (4) How far grammar must be taught to children in Classes I. and II.
- (5) The use of "*pictures*" when teaching small children as compared with the Gouin Method of "action," i.e., the "seeing method" or the "doing method."