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Learning to Write

How the French Boy Learns to Write; by Rollo Walter Brown. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. \$1.25.

IF the French child writes far better than the American child of the same age, it is not because of any "superior intelligence or some sort of magic in his native language." It is essentially because expression is made the dominating purpose of the French bookish education. The kernel subject of study is the mother tongue, and grammar, reading, writing, spelling are only special emphases to contribute to fuller ease and accuracy in the use of language.

The American elementary teacher seems possessed of no such synthetic purpose in her instructing. She is teaching these matters as "subjects," not as tools for effective expression. She dimly expects, of course, this happy result as a by-product, but she does not make it the chief end of her daily teaching. When the child reaches college he often enters on examinations of a slouchy inexpressiveness that would be considered in France as evidence of his feeble-mindedness. His instructors tear their hair and wonder how he can be coaxed into writing intelligible English and thinking firm and concise thoughts.

What we emphatically desire we procure. Professor Brown's investigation of French *lycées* and *écoles* shows that the French get expression because they mightily desire it and work for it. Very concretely he sets down the graded courses in which the language is taught, describes the procedure in the classroom, discusses the qualities of the teachers. The book is a model of method, written with clearness and ease, dealing with expression in an expressive and pointed way. Professor Brown's purpose was to study the French teaching for the light it might throw on the teaching of English in America. He leaves little doubt that the same systematic method here would produce the same result.

In the French school, Professor Brown finds, the study of the language continues from the earliest age of five through the entire school. In the lower grades ten hours a week are given to it; in the higher, four or five. It is scarcely an exaggeration, he states, to say that the French child writes all the time. Even the small child has his note-book in which he records his problems and quotations and assignments, and he is judged by the language he employs in these books. Grammar, which has become almost a scandal in the American school, fits into the French scheme because it comes as a generalizing of an expressive use of language already acquired. The language is deliberately explored. In the writing of themes, the teacher does not rely upon the formal work, excellent as it is, to produce composition of its own accord. Pupils are not left to flounder with their topic as in the American school and college. There is active discussion in the classroom before anything is written. The teacher feels that it is his first duty to arouse the child's interest in his subject and set his imagination in motion. In this way the minds of the group have opportunity to cross-fertilize each other. After the theme is written, coöperative criticism takes place. Just as the pupils have contributed ideas and points of view to each other before the writing was done, so they are in a mood to react to the product and discriminate between the different treatments of the theme. Both real creation and real criticism seem possible with such a method of approach.

There could be few books more fundamentally useful to the American teacher than this brilliant exposition of the teaching of a mother tongue.

R. B.