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WHY CAN'T OUR CHILDREN SPEAK A FOREIGN LANGUAGE?

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At a recent student conference in Paris the United States was represented by some twenty young people from America's leading universities. After the proceedings the delegates were invited to a party and given a chance to mix informally. An American news correspondent who had been present went to his hotel room that evening and penned a letter to the president of his alma mater, in which he remarked with bitterness, "I was ashamed that in this group of America's finest youth, not a single student could speak the language of the other delegates. The European and Asian boys and girls, by painful contrast, went about chatting glibly in English, French, German, Italian and a score of other tongues. What's wrong?"

More and more Americans in this post-Sputnik world are asking the same question: Why can't Johnny, and Susie, speak a foreign language? Why are young Americans conspicuous the world over by their inability to express themselves in anything but English? Testifying before a Senate Foreign Relations Committee last January, Marion B. Folsom, former Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, declared that "the United States is probably weaker in foreign language abilities than any major country in the world."

While Johnny and Susie have been amused by courses in "driver training," "telephone techniques" and "courtship and marriage," Russia's Ivan and Katyushka have been exposed to heavy doses of science, mathematics and foreign languages. Soviet secondary school students must study six years of German, English or French, and if they are lucky enough to get to college, at least two more years of language study await them there. Scholarships are awarded gifted youngsters, who are sent to special institutes for five years of training in important world idioms.

In no civilized land except the United States is a person considered educated who cannot read, write and speak at least one foreign tongue. In Germany, if young Hans wishes to go to college, he must study not one but two foreign languages. What is more, he is expected to master them thoroughly. An American exchange teacher recently described an oral examination in English which she had witnessed at a high school in the German city of Hamm. A young lad was handed a copy of former Prime Minister Clement Attlee's speech on the death of Gandhi and allowed fifteen minutes to read it over. In flawless English

he discussed its contents, after which he was asked several questions on India. Without hesitating, he answered these in English which had but the slightest trace of an accent. This student, the teacher noted, was neither the best nor the worst in his class, yet few American college students could have matched his performance in, let us say, German.

As a result of our shortsighted neglect of languages, America often finds itself hamstrung on the international front. Secretary of State Dulles not long ago declared, "It is important that Americans should get more familiar with modern foreign languages. The United States carries new responsibilities in many quarters of the globe, and we are at a serious disadvantage because of the difficulty of finding persons who can deal with the foreign language problem. Interpreters are no substitute."

A recent survey of language abilities in the Foreign Service disclosed that many of our career officers do not possess a working knowledge even of such simple foreign languages as French, Spanish or Italian. Moreover, Secretary Dulles admitted at a hearing during the 85th Congress that three-quarters of the otherwise qualified recruits to the Foreign Service are unable to speak fluently anything but English. No other country in the world would be content to accept such a low linguistic standard on the part of their diplomatic corps.

THE failure of our schools to provide the type of language training suited to twentieth-century needs is one of the tragedies of American education. Whatever the reasons for this neglect, the fact is that Johnny and Susie have the cards stacked against them when it comes to acquiring a second tongue. Let's see just what sort of language instruction our two young people might receive in a typical American community.

Central Ridge High, situated somewhere in the Midwest, is a modern, attractive school, well rated by national standards. Johnny and Susie sign up for French, which is taught by Mr. Robert Jones, considered an excellent teacher of mathematics. Mr. Jones did not wish to teach French and did so only under pressure from the principal, who had discovered ten hours of French on his college record. Poor Mr. Jones' knowledge of French background and culture is almost nil, and his only contact with French language consists of visits to the Chez Paris restaurant in downtown Central Ridge.