

# philippine studies

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## **Is A “Reading Knowledge” Possibel? Skills and Techniques for Reading French and The German Science Reader**

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emphasizes this fact which was so familiar to the Hebrews and so foreign to modern men. History has a meaning and a goal in which two worlds, that of the spirit and that of the material, coalesce in a marvelous harmonious unity. Neither spirit nor flesh is rejected but both are brought into an hierarchical order directed to a supernatural goal, the salvation not only of the Jews but of the Gentiles as well, not only of the men of the Old Testament but of all future ages.

This theme or central idea is developed through the great men who include Saul and David, Elijah and Amos, Isaiah of Jerusalem and the second Isaiah, Job and Daniel. The selection is thoroughly wise. The theme is established by bringing to witness all the best in modern scholarship on such varied problems as the dating of the Pentateuch, the literary forms of ancient writings, the story of Canaanite Baalism, the comparative study of Ugaritic literature, etc. Through Fr. Moriarty's own familiarity with the most recent discoveries in scholarly research the reader finds himself at home with the excellent contributions of Professor Ginsberg, Dr. Albright and a host of others both Catholic and non-Catholic. One sees new meaning in the old saw that "truth is where you find it." It is in this book in a thousand ways. Catholic scholarship can be proud of this addition to the ever growing renaissance of biblical scholarship.

JAMES T. GRIFFIN

## IS A "READING KNOWLEDGE" POSSIBLE?

SKILLS AND TECHNIQUES FOR READING FRENCH. By Louise C. Seibert and Lester G. Crocker. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1958.

THE GERMAN SCIENCE READER. By George William Radimersky. New York: The Ronald Press, 1950.

A favorite subject of debate among foreign language teachers is the question whether there is really only one effective method of teaching and learning foreign languages, namely, the oral method. Given a limited amount of time and the need to acquire the skill of using certain foreign languages as tools for scholarly and scientific work, is it possible to acquire a "reading knowledge" of these languages through some other method than the oral method?

Charles C. Fries, of the English Language Institute at the University of Michigan, has gone on record as holding that "no matter if the final result desired is only to *read* the foreign language, the mastery

of the fundamentals of language—the structure and the sound system with a limited vocabulary—must be through speech. The speech is language. The written record is but a secondary representation of language. To ‘master’ a language, it is not necessary to read it, but it is extremely doubtful whether one can really *read* the language without first mastering it orally” (1956).

On the other hand, Louise C. Seibert and Lester G. Crocker argue that “reading a foreign language is or ought to be fundamentally like reading one’s mother tongue. An Englishman, a German and a Frenchman, reading a book in their native languages, all go through the same mental processes in order to get the meaning of the printed page. The printed symbols are the only things that are essentially different. It follows therefore that after one has mastered the art of reading one’s own tongue, an enormous mass of habits, patterns and mental processes can be transferred to the reading of a foreign language.”

The authors then proceed to enumerate the factors involved in the reading process and argue that these can be transferred: 1) the *perceptual factor*, which consists of the ability to see and recognize the printed sign on the page; 2) the ability to *recognize behind the printed sign* the word for which it stands with its meaning; 3) the *ability to see relationships* between words so as to recognize the idea expressed in a sentence, and relationships between sentences so as to understand the different ideas expressed and to evaluate each properly; 4) the *ability to organize one’s thought* according to the purpose for which the reading is done.

Moreover, in answer to the objection that translation is much too complicated an operation to ask of a student in the early levels of language learning, Seibert and Crocker point out the distinction between understanding the meaning of a word or a sentence in a foreign tongue and translating it exactly into one’s own language: “If one is to achieve proficiency in reading a foreign language, one must try to grasp the ideas directly from the text without making any attempt to use the mother tongue as an intermediary. The attitude of the reader is thus quite different from that of the translator.”

Thus, Seibert and Crocker try to develop in the student techniques and skills of reading whole sentences, even paragraphs, to get at the thought back of the words and to rely on the context to help the reader understand the meaning of words. The methods used to develop these skills are interesting. The first chapter, entitled “A Study of Cognates,” acquaints the student with the fact that there are many words in French which are similar to those of English. Moreover, once the meaning of these words has been grasped, they also play an important role in the recognition of a whole series of “word families.” For

example, the word *courir*, which means "run", has the derived words: *coureur*, "runner", *course*, "race, trip"; *coursier*, "steed"; *courier*, "messenger"; *accourir*, "hasten"; *parcourir*, "pervade, run through"; *concourir*, "co-operate"; *concours*, "meeting"; *cours*, "stream, course", and so on.

Next, the authors treat the problem of recognizing verb forms, and here it is mainly a question of showing the relationships between the stems and endings of the various moods, tenses, numbers, persons and voice.

Then follows what is perhaps the most exciting chapter of the book: "Guessing Word Meanings by Inferences." The authors first point out that in reading his own language, the student frequently comes across vocabulary items which are unknown, yet which are understood in the light of the context of the entire passage. This process of making logical inferences the authors analyze and systematize. They have, indeed, succeeded in making it a practical tool. It involves the use of phrases which define and describe the unknown words, the use of antonyms and synonyms, the logical inference of words in enumeration, the association of words, the use of one's experience about the subject being treated and so on. These initial "guesses" are later refined into "precise understanding" by a set of exercises in a later chapter in the book.

The authors next take up the study of important key words in the phrase and sentence structure of the language. Here, the student is thoroughly exercised in the recognition of conjunctions, prepositions, adverbs and particles which play key roles in the comprehension of passages. The structure of clauses is described and the interplay between the elements of a paragraph is analyzed and studied. Finally, the student is trained to find the *central idea* of a selection and to work out from this as a focal point towards an understanding of the entire selection.

Radimersky's book is another attempt to show that it is possible to learn to read a foreign language without using the oral method. The book bears the sub-title: "An analytical approach to translation problems." At the outset, the author tries to define the problem by saying that to develop an effective approach to reading a foreign language—his work is more narrowly aimed at technical and scientific reading—the student must have at his command the following: 1) a sufficient vocabulary; 2) a mastery of the various types of clauses and clause constructions, and 3) the ability to attain a reasonable speed. The first requirement, the author contends, can be achieved only if adequate

tools were provided the student; and by "adequate tools" he means: 1) a suitable working textbook chosen by the instructor and which contains a vocabulary at the end of each lesson; 2) a dictionary; 3) a separate notebook for the orderly and classified entry of such points as may be brought up during class discussions. The mastery of the various types of clauses, which is as important as the acquisition of vocabulary, can be attained by a thorough knowledge of the fundamentals of German grammar.

All this can best be acquired, says Radimersky, when the student comes to appreciate the fact that, after all, English and German are very much alike. The basic differences are, of course, matters of syntax and inflection. Finally, to attain a reasonable speed, the attainment of the first two objectives are presupposed. Then the student is trained to familiarize himself with the entire sentence unit before he begins the actual translation. The last and perfect stage is *reading*, of course, and no longer translating.

A case can certainly be built on a distinction between the *active use* of language, which is demanded in one who aspires to speak the language, and a *passive ability to recognize* the various forms and syntactic structures of the language, which is all that is necessary for one who wants to read a language. The skills demanded by the former are much more complex. Habits have to be formed by long, tedious and persevering drills in the clichés and basic structures of the language until the student is able to express himself almost without thinking of the necessary idioms and vocabulary. On the other hand, the skills required for one who merely wants to read the scientific publications of a foreign language are not unlike those of a man who is engaged in decoding the message from an enemy broadcasting station. Whether such a knowledge is adequate for a "mastery" of the language is another question. Likewise, it remains to be seen whether in time mastery can equally be achieved by readings in the foreign language. It seems, however, that documents of routine value are not beyond the ability of a man who has learned to "read" the language. Passages with closely reasoned clauses should be checked with someone who speaks the language, for in reality it is the man who speaks the language who can be trusted absolutely to catch all its nuances.

However, reasons arise which prevent students from spending the necessary time to speak the language. For those who want to learn French and German as tools of research and who are looking for suitable texts, these two works are highly recommended.