

The Foreign Languages Problem

Mesamarat al-Gayb, 18 January 1948

The Ministry of Education has recently moved to reduce foreign-language curricula in schools. What is your own view of this policy, in terms of its effect on the general culture of the new generation?

This is the question our own correspondent put to Dr. Taha Hussein Bey and Dr. Durriya Shafiq, who answered as follows:

Dr. Taha Hussein

My own view is that this inclination to weaken foreign-language instruction in schools is genuinely dangerous — not merely to our cultural life alone, but to our entire public life. Arabic is developing and advancing, but has not yet become a world language for science, literature, politics, and economics. Our own connection to the Western world is the correct foundation for our renaissance and our advancement, and the Ministry of Education will never succeed unless it reconsiders foreign-language instruction altogether — not confining it merely to English and French, since doing so amounts to belittling the Egyptian mind, and confining it entirely to French and English cultural influence. All the major European languages ought, instead, to be taught in our schools, with each student or family choosing two of these languages: German, Italian, Spanish, and Russian are all languages of tremendous significance in culture, politics, and economics, and there ought to be some among our own young people who master them well. It is a genuine disgrace to Egypt, in the twentieth century, that German, Italian, Russian, and Spanish literature should reach us not directly, from the languages in which they were written, but by way of English and French translations. This monopoly does not suit the independence we aspire to, and this ignorance does not suit the dignity we deserve. All that is needed is a measure of courage, enabling the Ministry of Education to take this step — one I have called for, and continue to call for. The Arab East alone accepted this Anglo-French cultural colonialism; if we genuinely want independence, the way toward it is never to permit any nation whatsoever to monopolize the most distinctly human thing there is — the mind, the heart, and taste itself.

Dr. Durriya Shafiq

My own view is that this move to reduce the number of modern-language lessons in government schools is a move that does real harm to Egypt, and to her own distinguished aspiration to benefit from the civilizations of other nations. We do real harm to ourselves when we confuse patriotic zeal with benefiting from Western civilization: modern Egypt was never able to secure her own elevated place among the nations of West and East alike, except once she had completed certain Western studies. Muhammad Ali the Great and Khedive Ismail both understood this situation perfectly well, which is precisely why their own educational missions abroad were so numerous, and so varied in scope. Were it not for the mission school, our own backwardness would have been unmistakable; were it not for the School of Languages, its own director Rifa'a al-Tahtawi, and his own distinguished students, our Arabic literature and scholarship would never have flourished with this magnificent heritage of knowledge. Were it not for our own men of letters studying French, English, German, and other languages in real depth, we would never have taken pride in these writers, who rival the writers of the West in thought, in intellect, and in style. If we now make war on these languages for reasons that make no real sense, we make war only on ourselves — and a day will come, should the opponents of modern-language instruction succeed, when we search for a translator in government service or in private business, and find none at all. Not to mention what follows from a nation's own ignorance of these languages: everything new will remain hidden from our own language and literature, and we shall benefit from no new intellectual current whatsoever, since we shall have become a people turned entirely in upon ourselves, forgetting that whoever learns a people's own language is safe from its cunning, as the Messenger of God, peace be upon him, once said.