

## THE TRUE PLACE OF ENGLISH IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOL WORK.

It will doubtless be generally agreed that, while English is not all or even the greater part of what should be taught in the school, it is an indispensable condition of progress and is perhaps the greatest factor of the public-school work. To illustrate by comparison: if it is said that transportation is an indispensable condition of commerce, it does not mean that transportation is all of commerce. There are other things without which we could not have commerce, such as farming, manufacturing, lumbering, cattle-raising, etc.; but it still remains true that without transportation there could be no commerce.

English is the medium through which our children both gain and impart ideas, and these ideas may be perfect or imperfect only as the medium of thought is more or less perfect. An imperfect medium cannot give a perfect idea. Many pupils fail in their lessons because the words and sentences have either no meaning or an imperfect one.

The English is of value to them chiefly for what it does. It gives a better understanding in geography, in arithmetic, in history, and in all other subjects. The pupil who has a good command of English can think better and see more clearly into any subject.

One great difficulty in teaching pupils in the elementary studies is that they see the subject "as through a glass darkly," on account of an imperfect comprehension of the language of the subject. Each study has a language of its own, in a certain sense, and there can be no efficient work in it till the language is mastered. For example, take that arithmetical bugbear, bank discount. Most of the pupils who fail in this fail from a lack of comprehension of the language of the banker. The terms are new and mean nothing to them. A language drill is necessary as a preface to each lesson. Another instance is that of pupils who at home hear only a few words used, and perhaps these few

used in a local sense. The teacher will have to enlarge the vocabulary of those pupils and, what is more difficult, teach the proper use and application of the one already acquired.

It is true, as has so often been said, that nothing so quickly tells against one's educational training as poor English, either in speaking or in writing, and for this there are two reasons: First, every educated person is a competent judge of English. He may be ignorant of any number of technical matters; he may not be able to interpret an architect's drawing or a lawyer's brief; he may not be able to distinguish "fossil Silurian" from "Devonian," or know the difference between "placer" and "deep" mining; but he does know whether a singular verb is used with a plural subject; whether an objective pronoun is made the subject of the sentence; whether capitals and small letters are properly distributed; whether the spelling is phonetic or correct; and whether the arrangement of material is logical and clear. Second, though good English, like good manners and a becoming dress, is not absolutely essential to character, or useful knowledge and skill along many lines, it is generally held to be the best possible index to the amount of education and culture one really has had. Hence failure here is quickly held to indicate incompetence along all lines.

It seems necessary to protest against the "study of English for English's sake." One might as well talk for talk's sake, as indeed many people do. English, to be the core of the common-school course, must be studied, *not as an end, but as a means*.

The tendency has been too much toward making the form the object of our work in English, when the true object should be the content. The form must be mastered, but only for the sake of the content.

English is the key that unlocks all knowledge; and we must remember that education has a combination lock and that its adjustment is complicated. English for English's sake makes it only a plaything, a pastime, a fad; but English as a means leads up to higher knowledge and larger desires.

English, which is essentially the nucleus of the public-school course, can be made so only by being studied scientifically. The

idea seems to prevail in some quarters that, while other branches require scientific study, English will somehow develop itself in the understanding without giving attention to its science. It is thought that knowledge of technical grammar is unnecessary, all that is needed being the ability to speak or write sentences; and it is even implied that the study of grammar is the reverse of beneficial. There is no convincing reason for entertaining such a theory. The principles of grammar are as essential to the speaking and writing of correct English as are the principles of mathematics to the successful solving of its problems. It is true that our pupils would learn to speak and to compose sentences without the study of technical grammar, and so the most illiterate learns to express his ideas and communicate his wants without even learning to read; but the fact that the actual necessities of life are met in both cases is no reason for arresting education at these points. Is it not time for educators to realize that a shortcut to any branch of learning is an impossibility? Eternal principles should guide us in English as certainly as in all other studies.

It sometimes seems that the teaching of grammar has fallen upon evil times, for the recent forms of language lessons have so weakened the whole subject as to leave out the heart of English grammar.

It is true that formal technical grammar should not be commenced until the pupil can understand its laws, and with this feature of the modern plan the writer is heartily in sympathy; but it would seem that in our strenuous efforts to avoid the mistake of forcing analysis and parsing upon the unprepared mind we have gone to the opposite extreme. We are trying to make a fragmentary, mechanical method of imposing aimless sentence-making upon our classes answer the purpose of beginning the study of English, whereas the subject should from the first be taught inductively. All work given should have definite meaning. Both induction and deduction should be employed, examples developing definitions, and definitions being applied to examples. For the present heterogeneous mass of unsystematic talk and writing in the lower grades, with its lack of responsibility

for definite progress on the part of teacher and pupil, we should substitute the steady, persistent, and connected study, with the committing of the rules and principles of English grammar, followed by concrete application, and with as strict accountability to the teacher for every failure as we require in the study of arithmetic. Complaints from the secondary schools of poorly prepared candidates for admission to their courses in rhetoric and composition are too numerous to be neglected by those in charge of elementary work. A higher standard should be required before leaving the grammar school, and a more systematic, unified course of instruction carried on from the primary school up. A knowledge of his mother-tongue to be thorough must grow with the child's growth.

We read that Michael Angelo was the first artist of modern times whose work was true to anatomical structure. We *know* that the work of Michael Angelo is the most glorious and satisfying legacy of art that has descended to us. And so, by analogy, those works of literature will be the greatest and most permanent whose authors knew thoroughly the science as well as the art of their language. Even the inferior Latin authors are an illustration of the value of literary work done by those who thoroughly understood the structure of their mother-tongue.

The value of composition work from the beginning cannot be overestimated. There should be time in every grade for practice in constructing sentences, paragraphs, and essays, always carefully examined by the teacher and then corrected by the pupil.

The teaching of composition work, like the teaching of English in general, should be such as to show the pupil that composition is a means and not an end in itself. The function of language is to express thought, and no amount of drill upon words can teach the use of language if thought is not awakened and employed throughout. The child is not given composition work primarily for the sake of composing, but for acquiring ability to express his thought. There must therefore be something within to express, and to this purpose language should be taught in connection with literature, history, science, and other studies, instead of as a branch by itself. If our pupils could

reproduce in writing the substance of the majority of their lessons, the work would serve as a continual review of other branches as well as a language lesson. They would thus treat subjects of which they know and are learning something. Nothing is more futile than the attempt to have pupils express in writing ideas upon subjects of which naturally they can have but little knowledge. A fourteen-year-old pupil should not be asked to handle such subjects as "Immortality," "The Dignity of Labor," or "Hitch Your Wagon to a Star." Abstract subjects in general should be avoided, for the visible, material world is the scene of the child's experiences, and no one can bring forth from his mind what has never existed there. The subject treated must be clear in the child's mind before he can make it clear to others.

The teacher should encourage the development of an individual style in each pupil's composition, and refrain from such criticism as would have the effect of injuring the natural characteristics of the different writers, while he should give the necessary general training. The superior attractiveness of short sentences, of good Anglo-Saxon words, and the strength of the simplest form of expression should be impressed upon all.

With the aid of the modern text-books, it should not be difficult for the teacher to make the study of English pleasant as well as profitable. In these days of many reading-books carefully compiled by scholars, there is no excuse for the use of the wishy-washy, trashy school readers once prevailing. "The fat cat sat on the mat" style of primer is quite as much out of date as the "Do we go up? Yes we do go up" style.

The reading of good literature is second only to the constant example to correct speech for the work of cultivating the pupil's English. The store upon which the English-speaking child has to draw is practically inexhaustible, and though we should not now give Dr. Johnson's advice to spend days and nights on the reading of Addison, we should agree with him that to acquire the power to express thought in pure, noble, vigorous English, no better way can be advised than that of the extensive reading of our standard authors.

We are all at fault in the present generation in allowing ourselves to form the habit of too much newspaper and magazine reading. We deliberately sacrifice the time which should be profitably as well as pleasantly spent in the reading of our best books and higher-class periodicals to the skimming over of great masses of matter presented in the daily newspapers and cheap journals. The deleterious effect upon the memory as well as upon our appreciation of pure English should be a sufficient warning to us to preserve our children from this habit. The children especially should have none but good models of English provided for their reading. The introduction of dialect stories into the children's magazines is most deplorable. It is strange that writers who have the ability to use the best English should offer productions filled with unnatural and ungrammatical constructions and incorrect spelling, but if there must be dialect stories, let them be read by older people and not by children whose habits of expression are now being formed. The literature read by the child should be expressed in pure and beautiful language, since its purpose is to train his mental faculties as well as to aid his moral development, and should be a most potent means of culture in its form as well as in its content.

If it is not possible to make the sentiment against promiscuous reading by children sufficiently strong to extend to their home reading, the schools should at least do all in their power to counteract the deadly influence of "newspaper English" by presenting the best of our weekly and monthly periodicals for their use at school, instead of encouraging the reading of the slipshod, slovenly articles usually hurried into the daily editions. The excellent plan in vogue of giving brief daily lessons on current events could be made still more valuable by advising only the highest class of newspapers and periodicals as aids and requiring the pupils to name their authorities. Not only this study but every recitation may give opportunity for training in the use of good English. The old-fashioned practice of cramming the memory with the exact words of the text-book has fortunately given way to that of reproducing the facts and

information in the pupil's own language, and thus the opportunity for daily improvement and culture is invaluable.

Although the science of grammar can be learned from textbooks, the art of expressing ideas clearly and forcibly can be learned only in one way—by using language in the expression of original thought. Of scientific, methodical instruction in language there is especial need in America, since our schools almost invariably represent a variety of races, and therefore the children of our schools have not to aid them the hereditary facility in the use of English which they would have had in the native language of their parents.

If our ideal of language instruction could be realized, there would be no reason for such an arraignment of the work of our schools as is found in a recent number of *Harper's Magazine*:

Inaccuracy in applying the foundation principles of good reading, good writing and good reckoning.

Indifference to the importance of accuracy in the same.

Ignorance of the fact that literature, if it is to be of any vital use, must mean far more out of school than it ever can within.

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