

# THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

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# THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

ISSUED BY THE  
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SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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## FOREWORD

*The Teaching of English*, issued by The Incorporated Association of Assistant Masters in Secondary Schools, is the fourth book in the Association's post-war series on the teaching of the main subjects in the secondary school curriculum. *The Teaching of Science*, *The Teaching of Modern Languages*, and *The Teaching of History* have already been warmly welcomed, and the companion volumes on Classics, Geography, and Mathematics will appear in due course. In the preparation of these publications the Association has the good fortune to be able to draw upon the devotion, knowledge, and experience of many members and friends, to all of whom it would express its most grateful thanks.

The far-reaching reforms in the administration of secondary education foreshadowed in the Education Act of 1944, the development of a wide variety of types of secondary education suited to the abilities and aptitudes of all children in the secondary stage of their education, and the need for further advancement of the 'grammar school type' of secondary education combine to make it essential that there should now be a thorough examination of the whole content of what is taught in the schools.

It is the earnest hope of the Executive Committee that this present publication will bring to that study a contribution of no mean value and that its wide circulation will exert an important influence on the theory and practice of the teaching of English in secondary schools of all types.

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*November 1951*

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## PREFACE

The Association's *Memorandum on the Teaching of English* first appeared in 1923. It was a modest little book, the first of a series planned by the Association, and was soon followed by other books dealing at greater length with most of the material that makes up the school curriculum. That it satisfied a need was evident from the demand, and a New and Revised Edition was published four years later. That edition was reprinted and is now out of print. A conference of English masters, invited by the Education Sub-Committee to consider the question of a further revision of the *Memorandum*, recommended unanimously that, in place of a revised edition, a new book should be prepared.

In 1923 the position of English in the schools was far from satisfactory. This was brought home in the Board of Education's Departmental Report on *The Teaching of English in England*, published at the end of 1921. The following quotation from the Report reveals how urgent the problem then was:

'From the evidence laid before us it became speedily clear that in many schools of all kinds and grades that part of the teaching which dealt directly with English was often regarded as being inferior in importance, hardly worthy of any substantial place in the curriculum and a suitable matter to be entrusted to any member of the staff who had some free time at his disposal.'

Since 1923 the position of English in the school curriculum has been strengthened. It no longer has to struggle so hard for periods, and most schools have at least one English specialist on the staff. The need for a good school library has gained general recognition, and perhaps no subject in the curriculum has benefited more than English has from this development. But much still remains to be done, and those in charge of the English teaching in our schools have a great responsibility—as well as a great opportunity. The English continue to mishandle their language by slovenly pronunciation, by drab delivery, and by dull or tired writing; they tolerate too easily official jargon and advertisers' rhetoric; and they have little time or love for their own magnificent poetry. There is, therefore, at this time of reconstruction and educational reorganization, a great opportunity for us to consider our practice, define our aims, and make a fresh advance.

The Association entrusted the preparation of this book to a small

## PREFACE

committee, which met under the chairmanship of Mr A. M. Walmsley and had the assistance of a panel of corresponding members.

It is not to be expected that any committee of English teachers will agree in detail about syllabus or method. We are in full agreement about the general principles and aims that should govern the teaching of English, but the work of translating them into practice must ultimately be the responsibility of the individual teacher. Success in the teaching of English depends, probably more than in any other subject, on freedom to work out the syllabus in one's own way. Hence we make no attempt here to draw up anything like a detailed syllabus, but we hope that the young teacher will find a good deal of assistance in planning the details of his own syllabus.

## PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

Small corrections have been made throughout the text. The sections on 'Visual Aids' and 'Gramophone, Tape-Recorder and B.B.C.' have been revised. Chapter xv on English in secondary modern schools is new.

*November 1956*

## PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION

Chapters viii and x-xiv are completely new, and minor corrections have been made to the existing text. The bibliography has been completely revised.

*1966*

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## PART ONE

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### I SOME PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

#### THE SPECIAL NATURE AND PLACE OF ENGLISH IN THE CURRICULUM

The teacher of English is faced at the outset by problems that are peculiar to the subject that he teaches. Except for some districts in Wales, to none of the children is English a new subject when they first go to school. Whatever their age, whatever the type of school, they all know some English, though in a limited way. The boys who enter a grammar school at the age of eleven never start from scratch in the English class: as a rule, they all have different handicaps. They can speak, they can write, they can read, they can make themselves understood, they can themselves understand and, whether or not we teach them, they will of necessity continue to do these things and, to some extent, to improve themselves. Moreover, other people teach them these things constantly, and they spend more time over it than does the English teacher. The children practise and learn them with the help of mother, father, other children, other masters in the school, and the many other people they meet outside school. Finally, amongst all these things which we attempt to teach, there is an almost complete lack of any body of objective fact which has to be transmitted or passed on. It is true that there is the one section, dealing with the grammar and the syntax of the language, to which this remark does not seem to apply, but even here there is a difficulty, for a boy of eleven entering the school already uses in his speech more complex grammatical constructions than we ever intend to teach him during the grammar lessons of his school career.

Because of this lack of objective fact there is no clearly defined English syllabus; and where English teachers work on a similar syllabus they will approach it in different ways. It is difficult to fix progressive aiming points; it is difficult to test efficiency or to assess progress fairly. Because those difficulties are inherent in the subject, many teachers have attempted to find or to invent a body of fact which can

## SOME PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

be taught and then tested. They have tried to base their teaching on the teachable facts of grammar, to concentrate on the history of the language or to study literature as a body of historical fact.

We must recognize, then, that under this heading 'English' there is included a variety of skills to be taught and a vast amorphous mass of material to work with, but very few obvious facts to teach. In answer to the question what it is that we 'teach' under the subject 'English', we can only answer in a general way that we teach the English language in all its forms. We teach the language itself and discuss how it is constructed. We teach how the language can be spoken in various ways; how one person can, by speech, convey his thoughts, his feelings, his personality, to another person; how he can, by speech, conceal his thoughts and feelings; how he can understand and reproduce (by acting a part) some other person's thoughts and feelings and personality. We teach how the language can be written down, and how various ways of writing can have various effects on the minds of those who read. We teach our pupils how to read so that they can understand all that the writer intended when he wrote; and we train them to listen so that they can take in all that a speaker wishes to convey. We want them to think logically so that they will express their thoughts clearly; to feel deeply so that they will appreciate their own feelings and the feelings of others, and become articulate about them; and to be sensitive to the beauties of spoken and written language.

Language is not only a means whereby we make statements and express our thoughts and ideas about things. More than this, we actually think by means of language. Our ability to think, as well as our ability to express our thoughts, is limited by our ability to use language; our power of understanding the thoughts of other people is limited by our own ability to use language ourselves. In addition, language is one of the means whereby we express our feelings.

It is well to remember that an average boy at school is using, practising, and developing his control over language for as much as a hundred hours each week. Only during four of those hours will he be receiving English lessons in school. Our primary concern is with those four hours of what we can, by contrast, call 'intensive' practice in English. But we dare not disregard that enormous amount of what we shall call 'extensive' practice, that constant use of language which is carried on whilst the boy is not actually under the control of the English teacher in school.

## THE AIM

### THE AIM OF ENGLISH TEACHING

The aim of the teacher of English in the time available for intensive work will be twofold: to increase the power of his pupils over language which deals with ideas, and to increase their power over language which expresses feelings. As a teacher of English he should be an expert in both these uses of language. From his extensive use of language every pupil will bring to the English lesson a set of language habits formed and practised elsewhere, and this is the material on which the English teacher must work. His aim, therefore, will be to develop new habits so that his pupils understand more fully and express themselves more clearly; to refine what is good so that they become ever more subtle and ever more sensitive; and to correct those habits which are not economical or which impede progress or which are not socially acceptable. But in addition to these general aims the teacher will have views upon the kind of citizen he hopes to produce in the end, and upon the uses to which English will be put by those pupils in their daily life. These other views must react upon and influence his teaching aims, for ultimately the value of whatever work he does during those periods of intensive practice must be justified by the effects which are to be seen on the habits of his pupils during their extensive use of English, both whilst they are at school and in after life. The boy who has practised conveying and understanding ideas in speech and writing will have developed his powers of listening intelligently, and his powers of thinking, speaking and writing clearly. He should, by virtue of this, be better able to explain his actions, to give directions, to write a letter, to make himself understood over a telephone, to apply for a job. He will also have developed his command over language which expresses feelings, and he should be more able to appreciate the feelings of others. By virtue of this he should be more at ease in the company of others, more able to judge and to discuss questions where both fact and the feelings of people are mingled. He should be more aware of insidious propaganda, more capable of putting forward his own views tactfully when they are in conflict with the views of other people. Because he has developed his command over language as a whole, he should be more able to find satisfaction in his leisure time, for he should be more capable of appreciating books, plays, films, and radio programmes which demand a more sensitive approach to language and which give as their reward a deeper satisfaction.

## SOME PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

The normal uses to which a pupil puts language during this everyday life should provide the main source of the material for the work he will do under the guidance of the English teacher. But this will not be the only source, for we must have, in addition, the written record of the experiences of other human beings. Literature, the storehouse of recorded experiences, provides models for study for all the variety of uses to which we put language, and offers also an enormous range of experiences to undergo. This latter point is most important, for English is one of the few school subjects in which the pupil is encouraged to undergo vicarious emotional experiences and thereby to enlarge his own emotional life.

To these principles we must add another, and one which will act constantly as the main limiting factor in determining what we shall teach at any one time, and one which will guide us through the tangle of material available. Our teaching must always be adjusted to the levels of emotional and intellectual development of the children we are teaching. Now the English language offers enormous quantities of material of all stages and all levels of thought and feeling, so enormous that every individual teacher is able to select material which will suit not only the children he is teaching, but also himself. He is thus able to enjoy what he teaches and infect others with his enjoyment. One of the particular skills of the English teacher will therefore be found in his ability to select the material which is suitable to a group of children at a particular time and at their particular level of development. Another will be revealed in his ability to teach in such a way that he encourages those developments and refinements we have indicated, for his opportunities are not many and opposition can be great.

We have said before that in English there is almost a complete lack of objective fact to be transmitted from teacher to pupil. The material of English exists in the mind of the boy who is being taught. The English teacher aims to stimulate the boy to think and to clarify his own thoughts. He intends to stimulate the boy to feel and to become conscious of his own feelings. The teacher cannot supply the thought: the teacher cannot supply the feelings. If he attempts to do so, then the boy expresses thoughts not his own, feelings which are conventional or sham. What the teacher can do, and aims to do, is to put the boy into situations, real or imaginary, in which the boy will be compelled to think or to feel for himself in a particular way, and by guidance to

help him to clarify his own thoughts and his own feelings. In English we are not called to read a book only for the facts it contains: it can be read as an emotional experience in which the boy is encouraged to share. The teaching of an English teacher is consequently based on a direct contact with the feelings and the thoughts of his pupils. He acts as stimulator, as a guide, and as a refining agent for the boy's own thoughts and ideas, feelings and imagination. Because of this, the teacher himself must be a man who is able, by virtue of his personality and wisdom, to appreciate the thoughts and feelings of the boys he teaches; he must be able to inspire trust, so that pupils will readily express their own thoughts and feelings without reservation, for boys, just as adults, are shy of revealing themselves and will refuse to do so to anyone who is at all distant or antipathetic. He must be able to teach boys as a class, and yet appreciate each one as an individual with separate emotions and thoughts. To a great extent these are the qualities of all good teachers, but there are necessary differences of attitude between the approach of the English teacher and that of others.

In teaching English, the opinions of the boy are important, for they are his own opinions; he must be encouraged to give them, and they are entitled to due respect as such. Furthermore, in English we are concerned with developing the emotional life of the boy, and so in the same way his feelings matter and must be respected. In other subjects the opinions of the boy must often be ignored, discounted, or declared wrong, for they may clash with that body of fact which is being transmitted.

We can now sum up our views on the qualifications of one who is required to teach this subject which is the centre of the school curriculum and of the artistic subjects in particular. We have said that his ability will depend upon his knowledge of the resources both of the language which deals with ideas and of that which deals with feelings and imagination. We have shown that his ability will further depend upon a knowledge of the intellectual and emotional development of the children and of their capacities at various levels. Added to this we have shown that he needs to be interested in, and sympathetic to, people. All this amounts to a demand for a cultured man with a sympathetic personality who has a clear grasp of the principles of his subject and who has an interest in children. It would be foolish to assume that any University Honours School or any Institute of Education

## SOME PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

could manufacture automatically men of a high level of general culture and of sympathetic personalities, and it would be equally foolish to say that only those who possess special qualifications in English have those qualities, and are therefore the only ones who can teach this subject successfully. Men who have studied other subjects and who have culture, personality, and teaching ability have also taught English well. But although we do not expect any academic body to guarantee these qualities in its graduates, those who have passed through an English Honours School should have developed habits which will make them better teachers of English than those who have not. For if the English School at a university is concerned not so much with the transmission of a body of objective fact, but rather with the development of the student's own capacity to think and to feel, then the graduate should have an insight into the resources of language, and should have developed habits of study which will make it easy for him to handle and discuss intangible ideas and feelings with other people. He should, therefore, be able more easily to adopt that attitude to his subject and to his pupils which we have indicated.

## THE VARIOUS SKILLS TO BE CULTIVATED IN ENGLISH LESSONS

We learn to express thoughts in speech and in writing. We understand the thoughts of others by listening and by reading. The spoken word expresses feelings as well as ideas: it includes conversation and debate, reading aloud, reciting, and dramatic work. The written word has a great variety of form and uses. It is clear that there are many skills which will need to be practised in the English lesson. Thus, although English is a discipline by which a general faculty of the mind is trained, yet for practical purposes the subject must be divided into sections. We cannot teach everything all at once and in practice we must localize the attack. For instance, when we teach 'Poetry' we are not only helping the boy to experience the feelings described in the poem, but we are at the same time exercising his powers of reading and understanding and also his powers of expression. But if our aim at that moment is the appreciation of the poem, then all those other activities are subordinate.

Our ultimate aims are clear: good speaking, good listening, good writing and good reading. These continue all through the school, and