THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

In the Secondary School

BY

CHARLES SWAIN THOMAS, A.M.
Lecturer on the Teaching of English
Harvard University

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

THE present is beyond doubt a period of significant change in the field of secondary education. Under perfect conditions, gradual and continuous readjustment to the changing demands of a dynamic society should be characteristic of education at all times. In the past, however, perfect conditions have never obtained and in all probability the future will fail to provide them. The history of education shows clearly that the school does not promptly react to changes in social demands, that educational readjustment is seldom gradual, and that desirable changes in education, neglected for the time, gradually increase in number and importance until by the pressure of accumulated force they compel extensive and radical reorganization at irregular intervals. There is every evidence that the present is one of those periods when the accumulation of long-needed changes is compelling radical readjustment in the secondary school as well as in other departments of the system of education.

Numerous factors have combined to require extensive changes in the character of secondary education at the present time. During the past quarter-century the secondary school as a social institution

has undergone a marked transformation necessitating important changes in its aims and functions, and, therefore, noteworthy changes in its organization and administration. The fact that in the two decades between 1890 and 1910 the number of pupils in attendance at the public secondary schools of this country more than quadrupled is significant of much more than that a larger number of pupils must be accommodated, or even that a larger proportion of the total population is receiving a high-school education. Such a development is also significant of the fact that large numbers of pupils have entered the secondary school whose different capacities, interests, and probable future activities demand differentiated forms of education never before provided, with far-reaching effects on the aims and functions of secondary education, the values and purposes of studies, and methods of teaching.

These changes in the character of the high-school population and in the social functions of secondary education have been accompanied by developments in the fields of educational psychology and educational sociology which have vitally affected the work of the school. Thus, in the field of educational psychology, among other influences may be mentioned the recognition of the importance of individual differences, the development of methods of quantitative measurement, and a reëxamination of the laws of learning with special reference to theories of mental discipline. In the

field of educational sociology, among other influences may be mentioned the reformulation of aims and functions and their restatement in terms of modern social theory, the social analysis of subject values, the recognition of the importance of vocational training and educational guidance, attempts to reduce retardation and elimination, and the endeavor to extend educational opportunity.

Such changes as these demand, and at present bid fair to effect, extensive changes in the entire economy of the secondary school. Developments in the field of educational sociology necessitate an analysis and revision of the aims and functions of secondary education. Developments in the fields of educational sociology and educational psychology demand a reexamination and reinterpretation of the values and purposes of subjects of study and a redirection of methods of teaching them.

When such important changes are imminent, there is imperative need of orientation and direction. The series of books on secondary education, of which this book is an important representative, finds its justification in the recognition of current demands for the reorganization and redirection of the work of our secondary schools. The character of the series and of this book is thereby determined.

The study of the English language and its literature occupies a unique position among the studies of the

secondary school — a position supported by universal recognition of its importance for all pupils. No other subject can compare with it in the amount of attention afforded throughout the secondary-school course or in the extent to which it meets (or should meet) the needs of all pupils. Its economy, therefore, is of greater importance than that of any other subject of study in the program.

While all recognize the importance of the study of the mother tongue and its literature, and while few question the justification of its prominent position in the program of studies, opinions are by no means unanimous concerning the specific values and aims which should obtain in the teaching of English in the secondary school. There personal bias and personal opinion take the place of careful analysis and interpretation, with resulting lack of definite objective and with emphasis placed on this or that phase of the work according to the caprice or special interest of the teacher. English, no less than other subjects of study in the program of the secondary school, requires a careful analysis and interpretation of its special values and purposes.

Such an analysis, however, with its consequent definition of specific values and purposes, can accomplish little unless the implications of those values and purposes actually operate in the work of the school so as to affect vitally the organization of subject-matter and methods of teaching the subject. One of

the constant dangers of educational practice, even where correct values and purposes are recognized in theory, is that the organization of subject-material and the character of the teaching method may not be so directed as to achieve the desired ends. Criticism at present directed against secondary education affects particularly assumed values and teaching methods. The teaching of English has not escaped such criticism and in many cases doubtless has deserved it. Only when the values and purposes of the study of English in the secondary school are properly conceived in terms of the aims and functions of secondary education as a whole, only when the organization of subject-matter and the character of the teaching are adapted to develop those values and achieve those purposes, can the study and teaching of the mother tongue and its literature become really effective.

In this book the author presents a theory of the purposes of the study of English and an analysis of methods of teaching the subject, designed to achieve them. The purpose of Mr. Thomas in writing this book and the purpose of the editor in endorsing it as a part of this series, is to orientate and thereby improve the teaching of English in the secondary school. The author has first clearly and definitely outlined the values to be aimed at in the teaching of English and the purposes which should obtain. On this basis he has built up a theory of the organization of sub-

ject-matter and a theory of teaching the subject, designed to develop those potential values so that they may actually achieve their intended purposes. To this task he brings an unusual knowledge of the educational theory involved and the results of long and successful experience in training young people through the study of English. In recommending the results of the author's labors to teachers of English and students of education the editor has in mind the importance of a conception which has guided Mr. Thomas in his work — that there is a vast difference between teaching English to pupils and training young people through the study of English.

ALEXANDER INGLIS

PREFACE

KEENER and keener grows the inquiry into the *whys* and *wherefores* of current educational practice. The classics have already come under such severe scrutiny that the opponents have practically banished Greek from the public high school. As we watch the modern trend we are actively wondering if Latin may not soon encounter a similar fate. In several communities the teachers of algebra and geometry have been suddenly placed on the defensive and coolly asked to justify their work. A general consensus of opinion still graciously allots a large amount of time to the study of high-school English, but the skeptical attitude of the scientific inquirer and the insistent questioning of the incredulous parent, as each examines current practices in English teaching, has already suggested very direct investigation concerning the details of our work. Why not include more modern literature? Why teach *Silas Marner* to high-school freshmen? Why spend any time on formal grammar? Why devote so many lessons in the English classroom, drilling on certain principles that are habitually ignored in practice in the history classroom? Why allot six weeks to the study of *Treasure Island* — a book that any normal boy would adequately digest in a day's diversion?

Some of these questions are incidentally answered in the pages of this book, but there has been no at-

tempt to anticipate sporadic inquiry or forestall criticism. There has been, on the other hand, a constant effort to seek fundamental principles that would aid us to justify or renounce any of our work that chances to be under momentary scrutiny — not so much the scrutiny of the unfriendly critic as that which we ourselves invite and direct. With the varying phases of the work brought into successive focus, what will the separate judgments be? And what old methods, as the results of these judgments, shall we discard, what new methods shall we introduce, and what shall be the various shifts of emphasis?

We hope that the net result of this thinking has been constructive, and that there has been established a clearly defined theory of English teaching and departmental management applicable to the secondary school.

The direct motive for putting this material into form was the invitation to offer to the students of the Harvard Summer School a course in the teaching of English. To the teachers who have taken this work during the past two years that it has been offered, the author is indebted for many ideas developed in conference and in class discussion. The major portion of the material is the accumulation of the author's study and experience through twenty years of school and college teaching. For direct help more recently furnished particular thanks are due Dr. Alexander Inglis, the editor of the division of secondary education in this series.

C. S. T.

CONTENTS

THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH IN THE SECONDARY SCHOOL

CHAPTER I

BASIC AIMS AND VALUES IN THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

THE mediocre English teacher is often mediocre because he views his work from the merely obvious and immediate point of view. He is tempted to accept unquestioned the work which authority has imposed, and thus he fails to recognize the larger and finer aim which a broad psychology and an actual understanding of social values would supply. Because other English teachers in his vicinity have been doing their work in a special way, he wrongly concludes that their conventionalized methods are the only correct methods. Or because men of recognized experience have made certain recommendations, he may falsely conclude that within their condensed set of recommendations are embraced all the arcana of the craftsmanship of English teaching. But genuine craftsmanship seeks a larger base and a more extended vision. It skeptically questions the validity of present performance and constantly urges a continual and intelligent advance.

Because the art of English teaching deals primarily

with language, the English teacher must clarify his conception of language formation and language growth, and thus employ his complete knowledge in adding to his teaching efficiency. In acquiring this knowledge he may profitably ask the aid of both the psychologist [1] and the linguist, and through these learn the importance of having a scientific and analytical attitude toward the subject of English instruction.

We shall learn from both that one of the fundamental reasons for emphasis upon English rests on the necessity of mastering the conventional. This assertion, it must be understood, is in no sense opposed to the idea that modern education should seek to develop originality. It should develop originality, but there are many conventional things for the student to learn before he can have a base sufficiently firm and sufficiently broad to allow his originality intelligent display. Even should we assume that in the grammar grades the student has learned to spell and to capitalize and to punctuate, we should, even without giving any time to reviewing these elementary matters, have a multitude of new principles to impart and new connections to make. We are helped in the appreciation of the magnitude of our task by an inquiry into the origin and growth of language.

The origin of language is so shrouded in mystery that we are tempted to agree with Greenough and Kittredge in their assertion that "we do not know, and

[1] Cf. C. H. Judd, *Psychology of High-School Subjects.*

never can know, how language began."[1] Perhaps we may be aided in our desire to secure a clearer conception of our task of English teaching by a definite understanding of one of the most widely accepted theories of the origin of speech. This theory assumes simply that in some far-off moment of primeval times, one of our very distant ancestors made a certain definite and arbitrary sound. It chanced that this sound conveyed a certain concrete idea to some fellow being. Finding that this device secured the communication of ideas, this ancestor of ours repeated it and later invented other sounds. And the present complicated state of language growth may be nothing more or less than the enlargement of that primeval idea. Arbitrary sounds, later translated into written symbols, have thus, through a long and involved course, become the medium of thought exchange. And it is these sounds and symbols, in all their uses and potentialities, that compose the materials of English teaching.

In all our educational work it is particularly advisable that the true relationship of language to thought should be definitely conceived. The English teacher must come into vivid consciousness of the faith that this relationship is so intimate that sincere endeavor to express a particular idea will help to clarify the conception of that idea and will, at the same time, tend to give it permanency. This relationship is expressed

[1] Greenough and Kittredge, *Words and Their Ways in English Speech*, p. 4.

symbolically by Sir William Hamilton. He compares thinking to the process of excavation, and language to the masonry which secures form and makes the excavation practically enduring. To acknowledge the truth of this interdependence is to place upon all true teachers the responsibility of emphasizing language-training for the purpose of developing the thinking powers of pupils.

As teachers we shall remember that the early attempts of childhood are imitative. The child is merely trying to come into a clear comprehension of his linguistic environment and thus learn and thus understand the conventions inveterately convolved with his inherited language. In youth and manhood he acquires by education a more or less imperfect mastery of both oral and written speech. He acquires, coincidentally with this, a proportionate mastery of his thinking powers. The highest function of the English course is to bring the two elements of this synchronous growth — power in expression and power in thinking — to a quicker and higher potency.

It is because of this intimate and subtle relationship between thought and expression that the study of a certain writer's style will, within certain limitations, reveal that writer's thinking powers; for maturity of thought almost automatically secures maturity of expression. And conversely, the cultivation of a more mature style will generate a more exact and a more involved process of thinking. In teaching pupils to

read and write effectively we can make use of this principle in a practical way. We can, for example, in the earlier years of the high-school period, dwell upon the process of cultivating a more mature form of sentence structure. It is particularly helpful to explain all devices by which proper subordination of ideas are secured within the sentence. Gradually, by making the more involved forms the basis of drill, we may encourage a maturer type of thinking.

The English course develops this maturity of thought and expression by the work in composition and the work in literature. The intent of the first is to give the student command of the art of both oral and written expression and in the process to clarify the student's own thinking and feeling. The intent of the second is to stimulate thought, to arouse sympathetic emotions, and to purify conduct through the selected writings of those who have something worthy to say and have learned the art of saying it worthily. And to discover how this dual growth in language power may be developed, we may examine, in closer detail, the possibilities offered both (1) *through the expressional side of language*, and (2) *through the interpretation of reading matter*.

1. The expressional side of language

The most marked growth in language power comes, doubtless, through the opportunities offered constantly by informal speech. It is our recurrent priv-

ilege, in conversation and in letters, to give pleasure to our family and to our friends by recounting interesting incidents and describing scenes which the experience of each day offers. We soon discover that any lack of success in these attempts is due in part to inaccurate observations. We realize that we have carelessly allowed our impressions to be casual and general. We should instead rigorously demand that they be specific and thorough. As Flaubert explained to Maupassant, each horse is different from every other horse, and a careful observer will detect the difference. Then having detected this difference, the writer's problem is to select such specific words as will graphically reveal the striking and differentiating qualities. To allow himself to perceive and express only vague and general impressions is to allow his vision and his style to become sadly enfeebled and powerless alike to secure any real intellectual grasp or set forth any real impression.

This contrast between vagueness and clearness of thinking is generally revealed in group discussions of any question other than the purely obvious and elementary type. The relationships of the various items that the question comprehends are either not perceived at all or else perceived but dimly. Many of those participating in the discussion reveal both lack of power in logic and lack of power in expression. Business men seated around the directors' table discussing the probable influence of the Federal Reserve Law, educational theorists considering the practical