

ENGLISH TOPICS

V. J. Cook



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V. J. Cook

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of *English Topics* is to equip the foreign learner of English with the ability to take an active part in conversations in English. The course is intended to be used with students at intermediate to advanced levels; in particular it is suitable as a preparation for the First Certificate of Cambridge University (formerly the Lower Certificate). The course is planned to get the student actively speaking and listening in the classroom. It consists of a variety of materials, all with the purpose of making the student eager to express himself in English and to understand what other people are saying. It is organized around ten topics, ranging from 'Sport' to 'The Supernatural', from 'Teaching' to 'Pop Music and Fashion'. These ten are known to be frequently discussed by English people and are selected so that a variety of beliefs and opinions can be expressed about them. The teaching material in each topic is organized in the following way:

Background material

Usually this contains a descriptive passage or extract about the topic; in the case of 'Food' for instance it is recipes given by foreign students; in the case of 'Holidays' it is extracts from holiday brochures. This provides the student with some of the structural items and vocabulary used when talking about the topic. Then there comes some brief factual information, mostly based on England, and some points arising from the passage and the factual information for the student to consider. One way in which the teacher can use this material is to ask the students to read it the night before the class and to decide what they themselves think about the points to consider. Then the teacher can start the class by asking the students for their reactions.

Dialogues

Each topic has two short scripted conversations, each with a different purpose. *Dialogue 1* is for general work in the class-

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room. The teacher either reads it aloud to the students or plays them the tape. Then he makes them repeat it in small sections, either individually or in chorus, and he and the class discuss any points that arise; at the end of the conversation there are some suggestions for 'talking points' that the teacher can use as a basis for this. *Dialogue 2* is for reading aloud. The students first read it silently, then choose parts and read it aloud. After this they discuss anything that interests them in the conversation; again a list of 'talking points' is supplied. Finally, if they have the tape, they can listen to the recording of the conversation.

Activities

Each topic contains a number of 'activities' to provoke the student into using English. Usually a topic has five of these. *Activity 1* is a questionnaire which asks the students to answer several questions about the topic; the students can fill it in at home or do it in the classroom. As well as practice in comprehension, the questionnaire provides a starting-point for classroom discussion and argument. The teacher can, for example, count up on the blackboard how many students have answered in one way or another, and get the minority, or indeed the majority, to justify their views. Alternatively the teacher can challenge the students' views or he can contrast them with those of English people; many other approaches will also lead to useful classroom discussion and exploitation. *Activity 2* is often a 'case-study': the students are given information about an imaginary situation and then have to solve some of its problems and act out some of its happenings. In 'Teaching', for instance, the students are given a brief portrait of a school including biographies of teachers and pupils; they have to try to solve some problems in the school and to act out some situations in which the characters find themselves. *Activity 3* varies from topic to topic. *Activity 4* usually consists of photographs linked to the topic; in 'Sport', for example, there are photographs of a famous tennis player, a champion skier, and a motor-racing crash. The student is asked to talk about the photographs: to give him some help, brief hints are given under each photo. *Activity 5* provides a list of short talks; the students prepare and give talks lasting two to three minutes on one aspect or another of the topic.

Listening Passages

Each topic has two listening passages. *Passage 1* is scripted and has multiple-choice questions. The students first listen to the passage, either from the tape or from the teacher's reading aloud. Then they look at the questions and listen to the passage again as many times as the teacher or the students think necessary to attempt all the questions. They discuss the content of the passage, a list of discussion points being given. Finally they look at the written text. Alternatively the passage can be treated as reading comprehension, when the students read it silently before answering the questions. *Passage 2* is an extract from a live recording of English speakers speaking spontaneously; the exercise that goes with it is one in which the student must agree or disagree with several statements about the passage. Again the students listen to the passage from the tape or hear their teacher reading it before seeing the exercise; they listen again as often as necessary and discuss the passage, possibly using the discussion points suggested. Finally they see the written transcript. There are usually two versions of this, either or both of which may be used. One is simply the unedited transcript of what was actually said; the other is a slightly edited version. Some teachers may prefer to use the edited version because they feel it is easier for their class; others may prefer the unedited transcript because it provides practice in comprehending real spontaneous English. If the teacher does not have the tapes but has to read the transcript aloud, it is probably better for him to use the edited version. Finally, after the passages there are some suggestions for written work - essays, letters, conversations, and so on.

It is not intended that the topics should necessarily be gone through in the order in which they appear; instead the teacher should choose those which are best suited to the needs and interests of his class, and teach them in the order he feels suits them best. Similarly with the material in each topic the teacher is free to select those parts which he feels are most suitable and to teach them in the order he likes, to suit the mood, pace, and reactions of the class. While it may be likely that the 'Background material' is best introduced first and the 'Suggestions for written work' last, the conversations, activities, and listening passages in each topic should be combined in any way that suits the teaching situation. *English Topics* is intended

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to be used flexibly; nothing could defeat its object of involving the students in the spontaneous use of English more easily than going through each topic in a mechanical unvarying manner.

English Topics is then based on two assumptions about language teaching. One is that many people study a foreign language because they want to talk to other people about things that interest them; they do not want an academic knowledge of the language nor do they want simply to be able to use English in purely practical exchanges in shops and restaurants: they want rather to express their own ideas to people in English and to be able to understand those of others. They hope to acquire the ability to inform, to contradict, to argue, to discuss, to hear and say things they have not said or heard before, to get a particular reaction from the listener, and to be aware of what reaction a speaker is hoping to provoke: in short they need a flexible ability to communicate in English in the give-and-take situation of real conversation. The second assumption behind *English Topics* concerns language learning and is that the ability to communicate is best acquired by actually communicating: you learn to understand spontaneous speech by listening to spontaneous speech; you learn to speak spontaneously by speaking spontaneously. So activities which make the student a passive observer and parrot of other people's sentences and opinions are not so effective as those which involve him actively. All the different parts of *English Topics* provide opportunities for the student to understand and use speech himself. He is expected throughout to use the book as the spring-board for expressing his own opinions and his own thoughts; to react to what he encounters rather than to accept it passively.

TOPIC ONE

TEACHING

Background *Education in England*

Text In England children go to school between the ages of five and sixteen. Most children attend 'State' schools, which are free. Much of the responsibility for education is taken by local governments rather than by the national government, so each area usually differs slightly from the general pattern. The state system is divided into three levels: primary schools for children from five to eleven; secondary schools for children from eleven to at least sixteen; and further or higher education for those who have left school.

Primary schools have changed greatly in recent years under the influence of new theories about child development and new ideas about what they should learn. A typical classroom, such as the one shown on page 15, no longer has rows of desks facing the teacher; instead the room is divided into 'areas' for particular activities, where the children can work alone or in groups under the guidance of the teacher.

State secondary schools fall into three main types: secondary modern, grammar, and comprehensive. Until recently children were selected at about eleven to go to secondary modern or grammar schools, the secondary modern school being intended for the more practical child, the grammar school for the more academic. In the nineteen-sixties the national government tried to make all secondary schools 'comprehensive', that is to say, accept all the children that live in their district rather than select only a few. Many areas of England have now adopted this system and no longer have 'selection'.

Higher education has several branches: colleges of education that mostly prepare students to be teachers, polytechnics that usually prepare students for some kind of career, and universities. Virtually all higher education is selective, usually depending on how well a student does in G.C.E. 'A' level (the General Certificate of Education, 'Advanced' level), taken at about eighteen.

Topic One

Facts about English Education in 1972

- i) Secondary modern schools in England and Wales had 1,085,000 pupils, grammar schools 540,000, and comprehensives 1,337,000.
- ii) The proportion of pupils to teachers was 26 to 1 in primary schools, 10 to 1 in secondary moderns, and 17 to 1 in grammar schools.
- iii) The average size of a class in a primary school was 31 pupils, in a secondary modern 25, and in a grammar school 26.

Points to Consider

- a) What are the chief differences and similarities between the English state system of education and that in your country?
- b) Is there selection in your country's educational system? At school? At university? What kinds of selection do you approve of?
- c) What proportion of pupils to teachers do you feel is best?

Dialogue 1 *Priorities in Education*

Listen to this conversation between three friends; then repeat it in small sections and discuss the points that arise.

ANN: I think it's quite ridiculous spending money on a select few and ignoring everyone else.

JAMES: What are you talking about?

ANN: The fact that universities get plenty of money and primary schools get none.

JAMES: That isn't really true.

SARA: In any case universities need more money for equipment, for libraries, and so on.

ANN: And primary schools need it for books, teachers and so on.

SARA: Yes, but universities don't just teach; they also do research.

ANN: That's the trouble: they care more for their research than for their students.

JAMES: Well they've done a lot of useful research in the past.

ANN: That still doesn't mean they should get the lion's share of the money.

JAMES: I didn't say that. In fact I agree that the proportion's wrong.

SARA: Well I don't. If we're to compete in the modern world, we have to keep up the standards of our universities, and that means spending money.

Talking Points

- a) What *should* determine how much money is spent on the different kinds of education?
- b) What is the function of higher education? Acquiring knowledge? Learning skills? Being trained for a job?
- c) How important is money to education? What difference do beautiful new buildings and well-paid teachers make?

Dialogue 2 *Exams*

First read this conversation between two students silently. Then choose parts and read the conversation aloud. Finally discuss any points that arise.

BRENDA: I know I'm going to fail the exam.

PATRICK: Oh?

BRENDA: It's not that I haven't worked. This term I've done nothing but sit in the library.

PATRICK: In fact you've been most unfriendly.

BRENDA: Well I'm scared of failing. You see I'm one of those people who panic in exams: all my thoughts seem to go out of my head.

PATRICK: That's what's wrong with the system, isn't it? You study for three years and you take an exam that lasts three hours. What happens in the exam is what counts, not the rest of the three years.

BRENDA: Yes. Some people can do exams, some can't; I'm one of the ones who can't.

PATRICK: Well what does that prove? Passing an exam just shows you're the kind of person who can pass exams; it doesn't show that you're clever, that you work hard, or anything else at all.

Talking Points

- a) How much studying should a student do? Which is more important – working in the library or meeting fellow students?
- b) What are the justifications for a three-hour written exam? What does this kind of exam actually measure?
- c) How could exams be improved? By having them more often? By using multiple-choice questions (like those on page 18)? In other ways?

Topic One

Activity 1 *Teaching Questionnaire*

Tick the answers that you agree with most.

1. What age should children start school?
 - a) 3 to 4
 - b) 5 to 6
 - c) 7 to 8
2. If you had to make a choice would you send your children to
 - a) selective schools?
 - b) comprehensive schools?
 - c) no school at all?
3. How much should parents have to pay for their children's education?
 - a) nothing
 - b) a little
 - c) what they can afford
 - d) the full cost
4. Should decisions about children's education be made by
 - a) the government?
 - b) the school-teachers?
 - c) the parents?
 - d) the children themselves?
 - e) a combination of any of these?
5. If a child is unsuccessful at school is this chiefly the fault of
 - a) the parents?
 - b) the teachers?
 - c) the child?
 - d) none of these?
6. Which of these subjects should be compulsory for all pupils? (Sport and religion are compulsory in England.)
 - a) sport
 - b) religion
 - c) politics
 - d) mathematics
 - e) a foreign language
 - f) another subject not mentioned here
7. When the child first goes to school which of these areas are most important?
 - a) reading, writing and arithmetic (the three Rs)
 - b) social adaptation to other children and to society
 - c) mental growth of the individual child
 - d) sport
8. When someone is a 'good' teacher is it because
 - a) he knows his subject?

- b) he knows his pupils?
 - c) the pupils like him?
 - d) none of these?
9. If a child had done something you regard as very wrong and you were his teacher, would you
- a) hit him?
 - b) talk to him severely?
 - c) make him do extra work?
 - d) keep him at school after the other pupils have left?
 - e) make him stand up in front of the class and describe what he had done?
 - f) do none of these?
10. For which of the following reasons would you want to have higher education?
- a) training for a job
 - b) interesting social life
 - c) opportunity to acquire knowledge
 - d) chance to serve society
 - e) better job prospects
 - f) other reasons

Activity 2 *Silford Comprehensive School*

The school is located in a poor district where many people are unemployed. Many of the children's parents have grave problems with money, housing, and employment and so cannot take much interest in their children's education. The school buildings are old but solid, rather like the one shown in photo 3 on page 16.

The Staff

John Bentley, the headmaster. He is in his late fifties; he is interested in sport and doesn't believe in modern 'nonsense'.

He takes a real interest in his pupils, many of whom keep in touch with him for years after they leave.

Betty Newham, the English teacher. She is in her mid-thirties and believes strongly in the importance of creative writing to develop the individual. Mostly the pupils like her.

Michael Blake, the maths teacher. He is in his twenties and has only recently come down from university. He is serious and quiet and gives the impression that mathematics is the only important school subject. Some of the pupils find him cold.

The Pupils

Peter Allen is fifteen and intelligent but is bored with school. He likes motorbikes, plays the guitar, and belongs to a youth club. He doesn't know what he wants to do when he leaves school.

Helen Windsor is sixteen, quiet and pretty, and about average in her schoolwork. She seldom goes out and doesn't have many friends outside her family.

George Summers is sixteen and very good at maths. He lives alone with his father and is often absent from school. His chief interest is football. He appears rather tense and nervous.

Their Problems

Discuss how the following problems might be solved.

1. George Summers looks rather pale and thin; his clothes are torn; he never has any money for school excursions. What should the staff do?
2. Michael Blake has been offered a job in industry at twice his present salary. What do you advise?
3. The staff suspect that Peter Allen, and possibly other pupils, are taking dangerous drugs. What should they do?
4. The school have been given some money to spend. Should they spend it on sports equipment, on a tape-recorder, or on painting some of the classrooms?
5. Helen Windsor's parents want her to go to university; the staff think that this would mean too much work for her; Helen doesn't really mind what she does. What do you suggest?

Situations

Take the parts of the different characters and act out the following situations.

1. Michael Blake has taken Peter Allen to see the headmaster because he claims that Peter hit him. Peter says it was an accident.
2. Peter Allen wants to take Helen to the pictures; George objects as he wanted to go to a football match with Peter the same evening.
3. The headmaster has asked to see George Summer's father to find out what is wrong and how George can be helped.
4. George Summers has twisted his ankle playing football. Helen and Peter help him walk to the staffroom where the staff have to deal with the situation.

Activity 3 *The End of Term Report*

Fill out this report on a term's work either for one of the pupils of Silford School or for yourself as a child.

Name of School:	
Pupil's name:	Class:
English	
Geography	
Sport	
Music	
Mathematics	
History	
Behaviour in school:	
General comments:	

Activity 4 *Photographs*

Photo 1 *A Primary-School Classroom*

Describe what is going on in this classroom. What do you think of this kind of teaching? Is it more work or less work for the teachers?



Topic One

Photo 2 *A Classroom*

Describe what is happening here. In what ways is this classroom different from that in photo 1? Which would you prefer?

Photo 3 *A Playground*

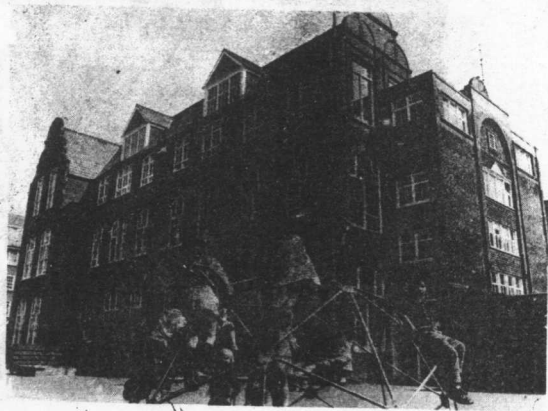
Describe what the children are doing and their school. What is the value of this kind of play? What kinds of problems might there be in this school?

Photo 4 *The University of Sussex*

Describe the students and what they are doing. Would you like to study in this kind of environment?



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