

*English in the Lower Grades of the
Public Schools.*

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I. Introduction:-

Opinion of educators.

II. Discussion:-

1. Difficulties confronting the primary teacher.
 - a. Overcrowded rooms.
 - b. Different dispositions.
 - c. Different nationalities.
 - d. Different environments.
2. Development of the child along social lines.
 - a. First work conversational.
 - b. Oral work followed by written.
 - c. Correlation.
 - d. Use of poses and pictures.
3. Constructive and interpretative method.
 - a. Grasping of the thought between the lines.
 - b. Most effects produced by the fewest means.
 - c. Use of hints from the very first.
 - d. Use of emotional words.
 - e. Tone coloring.
 - f. The writing of autobiographies.
 - g. The value of impersonation.

III. Conclusion:-

The prime object is to teach children to speak correctly and to write effectively.

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It is now generally conceded by our later and best grammarians that comparatively little so-called grammar should be taught below the high school; and I am sure that those of us who are struggling with the problems in English in much humbler positions quite agree. With that as a premise then, I dismiss the subject of technical grammar, and take up for the grades only what has come to be known as the language or the means for effective expression, leaving the corrective element subordinate.

The problem before us is not an easy one. In the beginning we note many difficulties confronting the primary teacher. She has usually a large room overcrowded with little ones, coming from different homes, from different surroundings and with the consequently widely varying vocabularies. Yet by our present school system she must take all these many minds, put them all through the same machine-like training and turn them out at last, all equally complete. The child comes to the primary teacher fresh from an environment where he is used to asking the why and wherefore of everything; where the anxious mother and interested father have been happy over all his conversations. Such a condition has made him wonder-

fully self-centered, but has given him a fondness for conversation, and for the narration of personal experiences that if used properly, form the very best basis for our work. He has a small horizon, but one capable of infinite expansion.

Before the child comes to school he enjoys, above everything else, picturing with words and pencil those things that interest him. Consequently after he begins his English work, if there are no vital interests appealed to, and if language is used simply for the repetition of lessons, what wonder that one of the chief difficulties of school work has come to be instruction in the mother tongue? The language we have been teaching is unnatural; it does not grow out of real desire to communicate vital impressions and convictions, and consequently freedom in its use gradually disappears, until finally the high school teacher has to invent all kinds of devices to assist in any spontaneous and free use of speech.

The children in the first room seldom if ever complain against having to write something, for they always have something to say and a way of saying it - if we give them the needed freedom. From the beginning then, let us develop the child along social lines. Let us not allow the four walls of the schoolroom, the set rows

of desks and a rigid program or course of study to kill the child's love for communication; for there, doubtless, is where we have been making our greatest mistake. During the first three years of a child's school life especially, and as much as possible throughout all the grades, we should seek above everything else to let grow and develop that spontaneity so necessary to good language work, for if this spontaneity is crushed in these earlier years, we never, no matter how strong the English work in the high school or college, get free and willing results.

It is easy enough for us to point out our defects, but not so easy to solve the method of remedying them. It is not enough for us to develop the child so that he may go through life with sufficient language to make his wants known; our aim is rather to create out of him an intelligent reader, an acceptable writer and an apt conversationalist.

The work at first must necessarily be conversational, the learning of symbols, coming in slowly and almost unconsciously. Right here is one of the most significant stages of the work. Here is the place that determines whether we are going to take language from its natural basis - the medium of social exchange - or set it apart as something to be studied, learned, and recited for a stated period each day. The latter end seems

ridiculous, and yet it is just what we have been too often doing. Despite the importance of its social basis we have been doing the absurd thing of giving language work as a thing by itself.

Correlation, then, especially in the lower grades must be emphasized. It is incongruous to think of setting aside twenty-five or thirty minutes a day to the so-called language work, when during the remainder of the day the child is talking about his lessons or other subjects and using the very medium of expression that we are placed in the schools to form. It is useless to teach a child correct forms during a short period of the day when during the remaining portion of the day we let pass unnoticed such expressions as, "Can I set with Charles?" or "I haint got no pencil." We are beginning to realize more and more that there should be in the first three grades little else than reading and language work.

After a child has had his early oral lessons and been taught to form his statements in spite of his childish excitement, into clear full sentences, then it is time to begin the written work. The crudity of the early efforts is so pronounced that here is another vital point, lest too much criticism from

the teacher produce a hampered feeling in the pupil, and he even at this early stage become thoroughly disgusted with the written work.

It seems best, though, even from the first not to let the mistakes go entirely, because bad habits once formed are difficult to correct. At this stage it is necessary for the teacher to have much enthusiasm in her work so that the pupils may become inspired with sufficient interest to carry them through the drier technical work which must necessarily follow in the grammar stage.

In English work throughout the course of study the use of poses and pictures is a valuable aid. Poses afford the best material to work upon, first by giving the child actual and live objects which are always interesting; second by introducing in a simple and direct manner the points for descriptive work; and finally by causing the child to see more clearly from the poses, how a picture is life put upon canvas. Arrange a series of poses, using the children together with objects from the schoolroom, beginning with the most simple composition and working up to the rather complex, having the children

describe each time the three points: (1) Who and what it is; (2) Where it is, and (3) If a living thing, what it is doing. Here is an opportunity of encouraging the pupil to use a variety of expressions. Each time ask if the thought might not be expressed in a different way, and thus keep the pupil from running into ruts early in the work. Paragraphing may be easily introduced here also, for the child will quickly grasp the idea that the introduction, the description proper, and the conclusion are three distinct parts.

From the poses it is easy to pass to the pictures, doing as before; first selecting those of simpler construction and gradually going to the more complex, always taking those that are not too complicated, that have a point and that are interesting to children. The best results are obtained from those that depict intense emotion. The Perry and Brown pictures are so inexpensive that it seems to me every teacher should provide herself with sets of them so that the individual pupil may have one to refer to whenever he wishes. Before the children are experienced in this work, it might be well to build up the

first descriptions from the class or at least to discuss the pictures thoroughly with the pupils before the written work is done. Teach the child to tell all he knows about one part before going to another, to be systematic in description, and thus incidentally teach the fundamental principle of "point of view." Discriminate in all the work the difference between the description and the story of a picture, for the latter is even more important than the former.

In this and in all other work correctness as to form, neatness, capitalization, and grammatical points may be thrown in but always kept subordinate to the other work.

In the teaching of English for all work outside of the grammar text book, and for all grades, from the first to the close of the twelfth, I am an advocate of the constructive and interpretative method or the movement developed by Prof. Sherman of the University of Nebraska and by Prof. Ansley of the University of Iowa. By the interpretative work is meant the work of grasping the thought that the author leaves between the lines, of emphasizing the effects

or hints that he leaves to arouse our imagination. The constructive side is the process of writing these effects or hints so that we may arouse similar imagination and emotion in others. We are just beginning to realize forcibly that all of our great writers have used unconsciously perhaps, exactly these methods, and that no one has attained merit unless these elements have entered into his work.

Have you ever realized that the master literary minds have never told you anything that you could imagine for yourself? The very fact that your own individual imagination has to work when reading a certain selection causes you to enjoy it. Because you enter into a mental partnership with the author, there is aroused a heart to heart communion with him. The best authors know just how much to leave in the inkstand. They have the ability to produce the most effects by the fewest means - to make the little include potentially the much. "An effect is set forth in such wise as to challenge the fancy to account for it."

It is by this means that Shakespeare has become master of the dramatic world. Take for

example in the third scene of the play of Macbeth where Banquo and Macbeth are coming home across the heath from the scene of battle. They meet the witches, question them and in response Macbeth is hailed, "King that shall be." The author makes him "start and seem to fear," and we at once apprehend that he might have scruples abetting or even consenting to his own promotion. Later, however, we learn that by those few words the author shows that Macbeth has entirely different views, and wishes to catch the crown by the nearest way.

Another example of the same kind of work may be taken from Browning. The question in the poem entitled "Luria" is, will Luria prove a traitor and siege Florence? Luria is being watched all the time by those around him, who assume on general principles that he must be as unscrupulous and self-seeking as themselves. The secretary has had peculiar opportunities for espionage and in response to general questions answers:

"Here I sit, your scribe,
And in and out goes Luria, days and nights;
This Puccio comes; the Moor his other friend,
Hucian; they talk - that's all feigned easily;

He speaks (I would not listen if I could),

Reads, orders, counsels:— but he rests sometimes,—
I see him stand and eat, sleep stretched an hour
On the lynx-skins yonder; hold his bared black arms
Into the sun from the tent opening; laugh
When his horse drops the forage from his teeth
And neighs to hear him hum his "Moonish songs"

In our own minds is Luria a traitor to
Florence? Could a man who reads, orders,
counsels, sleeps, enjoys the sunshine, sings, laughs
at his horse's memory of its early life, age,
rests sometimes; could such a man be a traitor?
But how has the author given us that con-
viction of Luria's innocence which is stronger
than a jury's verdict? Simply by hints or
effects that have challenged our fancy and
imagination.

Thus we may go on and on and find we
have the key to every literary masterpiece, not
only that, but to every famous painting. In
the "Angelus" how do we know the peasants
are at prayer? By the hints of attitude. The
wheel barrow and potatoes show us the kind
of work they have been doing; the half open

sack and the scattered potatoes portray the sudden stopping in the work and thus give a measure of the devotion. In the same way the touches on the sky tell us the time of day. Thus it is that a real artist places objects on canvas not for the sake of the objects merely, but that they may be the means of arousing thoughts and emotions in the individuals. So the lines of an author are dead if the content stops with the words alone.

When reading on the railway train or walking along the street, why is it that consciously or unconsciously we are always forming an opinion of those we see? It is because of the hints in dress, in manners, in tone of voice, in vocabulary used, that are crowding upon us all the time. If we are wideawake teachers we are constantly analyzing the character of our pupils and the atmosphere (figuratively) of our school room by the hints of character, mood and incident that are continually forcing themselves upon us.

But you ask, what has all this to do with

the teaching of English? Just this; since all the best writers use effects, and since good reading is not simply naming words, but gathering all the thoughts and inferences of the author, our pupils must have such work as I have suggested in order to become feeling, sensitive readers and writers. The hints should be introduced from the very first and the strongest most effective work done in the fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh grades, because it is then that a child's emotional and imaginative powers are most alive - then that those powers are developed or deadened. That, is why I say sacrifice ^{if need be} the technical side of English in the lower grades to the betterment of the creative or constructive side. When the pupil reaches the high school he is largely past the state of fancy and is then better fitted for grammatical technique and can tolerate grammar without stupefying the emotions that have been aroused in earlier years.

In the lower grades the most simple hints can be taken first and in a conversa-

tional way, gradually taking up the writing as the symbols are introduced.

From these of simpler form we can pass on ~~up~~ to the more complicated as we advance in the grades, giving the various kinds and degrees of mood, character and incident. We should be careful to exact each time the most precise and careful interpretation of the hint, for the interpretation is of much more importance than the naming of the effect. After the children have discovered the hidden meaning in the hints you have given ask them to write all they can think of to show that it is a rainy day, or circus day and such subjects, in order to exhibit the mood of fear or joy.

The teacher will often be surprised if she has handled her work well to find how wonderfully bright and active the little minds are in this work and how fond of it they are.

I find the pupils especially fond of picturing the moods and characters of animals as much so as Landseer was when painting his "Dignity and Impudence." My

now advanced boys and girls would rather write a mood sketch of nature than prepare any of their lessons in mathematics. It is not unusual to hear the children say that they want to write all the time.

Along with the hint work, train the children in the use of emotional words. We have been taught and are teaching that the meaning of words is to be found in the dictionary. Only a part of the meaning is to be found there, and not always the most important part. The dictionary gives the idea content; but there is an emotion content which the dictionary cannot give. That is found in yourself, and is dependent upon yourself. Can a definition written by some one else give you the full meaning of play house, moonlight, home, battle, siege, mother, death? These words appeal to each in a different way, convey to each a different meaning because the experiences and associations of each have differed from those of his neighbor. Take these lines from Goldsmith:

18-
116A

"Sweet was the sound, when oft at evening's close,
Up yonder hill the village murmur rose;
There as I passed with careless steps and slow,
The mingling notes came softened from below
The watch dog's voice that bayed the whispering wind,
And the loud laugh that spoke the vacant mind;
These all in sweet confusion sought the shade,
And filled each pause the nightingale had made."
and see whether Webster or the Century can
give the full meaning of the lines.

It has been said that "the person who is most sensitive to the emotion content of words, will obtain the most pleasure from the reading, and as a rule, the most profit, other things being equal. It is then an obligation, that we train the child to think in images for which words stand; that he may have this sensitiveness for the emotion content of words." The study of these images is intensely interesting to the child and when he comes to write, such study gives his diction a quality of individuality that we so often find lacking in children's compositions. It makes him

refreshingly natural. We as an Anglo Saxon people try to subdue, even crush out feeling. We think we must not laugh or cry too much, must not be sad or glad by turns, but be composed, almost stolid, under all circumstances. We put a fence around ourselves and keep from showing our emotions to the outside world. Such a course is wrong, intensely wrong, and the education that encourages it is cold and unfeeling. Give our children more fancy, imagination, emotion and less of the cold hard facts, and we shall have a warmerhearted, more sympathetic world. At least such training will take away the element of drudgery from our language work.

Another device employed by our best authors, that we can use with much effect in our English, is that of tone coloring. Note the use of it in Shakespeare's witch scene:

"For a charm of powerful trouble
Like a hellbroth boil and bubble,
Double, double, toil and trouble,
Fire burn and cauldron bubble"

In Spenser in the Faerie Queen;

"And now to lull him in his slumber soft,
 A trickling stream from high rock tumbling down,
 And ever drizzling rain upon the loft
 Mist with a murmuring wind, much like the sound
 Of swarming bees, did cast him in a swoon."
 or again in Poe's

"Jingling of the merry bells,
 Tolling of the iron bells,
 Tinkling of the silver bells."

Children delight in this color work and love to apply the tone words figuratively and thus let their fancies play. They will have a tendency to overdo a good thing and run into the so called "fine writing" but it is much easier to check that than to arouse the imagination of a pupil whose emotion has been deadened by years of hum-drum technical grammar work.

Another device for stimulating feeling, and therefore developing vocabulary in a child is the the writing of autobiographies. Pupils enjoy playing they are trees, animals, flowers, clocks, chairs, money, books. One day a teacher let each one of her class be whatever he pleased. One chose the pencil, another the penny, but

the one showing the most originality was written by a little-ten-year-old boy. The subject was:

"The Autobiography of a Piece of Bread.

I was born in a big field. I do not remember much about myself till I was a little brown thing with lots of others. A little boy called us wheat. We were soon taken out of our bin and ground up.

Then I was sold to a man. He took me home and put me into a barrel. The same little boy called us flour then.

One night a woman poured me into a big pan. She stirred me around and around until I was dizzy. The next day she pounded me awful. It hurt me. Then she took me out of the pan and pulled me in pieces. I thought I would die then. She put me into an oven where it was very hot. I was afraid I would burn up. Soon I was done. The next morning the woman put butter on me and put me into a tin pail. That little boy took me to school with him. At noon he ate me. I helped

to make that little boy's body, and now I sit in school with him and hear him read his lessons."

A crude piece of work you say. But there is individuality, a spirit of invention in it which is of infinitely more value than something much better worded which came from an encyclopedia, a magazine or the dictation of a mother.

Then there is the scheme of impersonation which all of us have used - that of having our children turn insects, birds, trees or animals into persons to tell what kind of people they would make. The pupils are thus indirectly but very keenly impressed with the force in character of the whiteness of the lily, the modesty of the violet, the coarse showiness of the sunflower, the stinging of the bee, the tormenting persistency of the fly, the loveliness of the wren, the sturdiness of the oak or the constancy of the evergreen. Then have the pupils turn themselves into these same things and have them tell what they would be and how they would act.

These exercises not only arouse a kindly regard for the beasts, birds and insects, but cause to be preserved in the pupils that same relation with nature that the child has earlier in life when he whips a stubborn chair or refuses to stick pins in the doll. We are too prone to train the children to stand aloof from nature whereas we might better lead them to feel that they have a very intimate kinship with every living and growing thing. Indeed such practice causes them to feel nearer to all their school mates, and thus through the language work we can lead them to appreciate the idea that the doctrine of an "eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth" has long been thrust aside and should be entirely forgotten.

While the pupils are doing this construction throughout the grades in proportion to age and capacity for work, they should be at the same time finding the same things done by others in books or selections that they read. The interpretative

work then is correlative with the constructive. By the time the pupils reach the seventh and eighth grades they should be able to take a literary masterpiece, select from it the emotional words, the words of tone coloring, the effects of character mood and incident, and to show the borrowed element in the figures of speech. They should be readers that are readers - those who take up a selection for its real merit, not simply to gather the story contained. Then it will be that every selection will bear to each boy and girl a different message in proportion as it touches the individual keys of emotion and experiences. The children will not dread the poetic pieces as we used to in the old Independent Readers, but will read them with a relish because they have learned to appreciate the emotional potentiality contained. I know of no better way of developing the love for good literature than by this constructive and interpretative work. The real gems from the Carey sisters, Holmes and Longfellow, the myth stories and prose selections

will all bring widely different and much more pleasing messages to the children who are taught to read between the lines.

Neatness, exactness, and carefulness in all work may be stimulated by posting the best efforts in the school room, reading the best selections before the classes, by sending work home to the parents, publishing the compositions in the local papers, or by making booklets with original illustrations.

But I might go on and on indefinitely for the subject is an inexhaustible one. I have not touched grammar, letter writing, punctuation and many other things which must come into the English work, in their relative places. But send to us in the high school pupils who are fond of writing, who are alive in emotion, who have increased their vocabulary at the age when it should be increased and we shall see that sufficient grammar and correct forms are given.

Just one more point. In all the branches of our school work there is no other when the

criticism of the teacher has to be given so carefully as in the language work. The beginner is not able to distinguish clearly the good points in his composition. Red ink marks are discouraging. You have received red ink themes yourself. You know too, what a thrill of pleasure has run over you when a surprise in the form of a compliment - has come to you through a theme reader. You have found a new capability and you set to work to increase it. What is true of you is true of your pupils.

Invariably give all the commendation to a piece of written work that you can conscientiously give, keeping the criticism in the background, for remember always that the prime object of our work is not merely to write correctly but to write effectively. "The encouraging comment is the fuel for getting up more fire and the way of salvation to the teacher burdened with papers."