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THE PRACTICAL IMPORTANCE OF ENGLISH STUDIES For English-Speaking Children

By M. C. O'DOWD

WHEN I was at University, twelve years ago, there was a widespread belief among the students that the study of English, or whatever the first language of the student might be, was a subject for which the would-be practical man, the intending scientist, engineer or businessman, had no use. It was compulsory for B.Com. students to take one course in English but this requirement was deeply resented by the students, who gave the course as little of their time and effort as they possibly could. Science and engineering students, as far as I know, did no English. Even at school, during the last two or three years, many of the boys could be seen to be sorting out their subjects into those which they regarded as practical for their own purposes, and those which they did not, and except for those boys who intended to be lawyers or journalists, they invariably relegated English to the impractical class. I have little doubt that those of my contemporaries who adopted this attitude have already learnt their mistake in ten years of practical life, but I am afraid that it is very likely that the present generation of students and school children is making it afresh.

The origin of the mistake lies, perhaps, in the too exclusive identifications at school of English with literature and creative self-expression, combined with the belief that literature and creative self-expression serve no practical purpose. I do not wish here to discuss the very doubtful validity of the latter belief, but merely to point out that even if it is true, it does not touch a vast and vital area of the use of language.

It is generally realised that language is a means of communication, but what is less often remembered is that for practical purposes it is almost the only means of communication. There are other means, such as pictures, diagrams, mathematical and other scientific symbols, and practical demonstrations, but although all of these serve important purposes in particular spheres, they are seldom used without the support of words. How often does one come across pictures without captions, films without dialogue or commentary, mathematical or scientific writing expressed exclusively in symbols? And leaving the special cases aside, in the ordinary course of their day-to-day work, at meetings and conferences and informal discussions, in preparing proposals, making reports, discussing plans, reaching decisions and giving orders, businessmen, scientists and engineers, and indeed everybody else use languages as their instrument.

No one would deny this, but I fear that many people would doubt that it has anything to do with the teaching of English. Surely, they would say, it is not necessary to teach English or any first language, at that level? Anyone can say what he means about a practical matter.

Mr. M. O'Dowd, as Education Officer to the Anglo-American Group took part in a workshop concerned with the teaching of written English which was organised in April 1962 by the Symposium Group. Mrs. H. Birkett, also a member of the workshop, has ably summed up this interesting five-day conference elsewhere in this issue, and has referred to some of Mr. O'Dowd's comments. We thought it would be interesting to hear what an able man in the world of commerce had to say about English standards, and we invited Mr. O'Dowd to present his point-of-view in the article above.

In fact, of course, saying what one means is not easy at all. It is easy to say more or less what one means, and if exactitude does not matter, or if the hearer has plenty of time to ask for explanations of what he does not understand, that may be sufficient, but in practical spheres like science, engineering, and business, exactitude is all-important, and time is money. The man who cannot express himself at a discussion without wasting the time of his busy colleagues or write a report without forcing its readers to come back to him with queries is unlikely to be promoted to high positions where the cost of these disabilities will be high. If he is promoted on account of other qualities, he will not achieve the results which he might have achieved with an adequate command of language.

There is no field of activity in which people have to co-operate where the need for articulate and precise expression does not arise. The field geologist or the explorer has to write his reports, and very likely has also to convince his superiors or sponsors, that his ideas are worth following up. The soldier, if he rises to any sort of level of responsibility, will have to give complicated orders in circumstances where everything depends on his being understood exactly and promptly, and where there is not time for queries and further explanations. The notorious Charge of the Light Brigade at the Battle of Balaclava was caused by a loosely worded and ambiguous written order (See Woodward: *The Age of Reform,* Oxford 1946, Page 271, Note 3) and one wonders how many other blunders, less well-known, but not necessarily less costly, may have originated in a similar way.

All this is nothing new, and it is no accident that a first-class command of language was always one of the central objectives of the education that was traditionally given to those who were destined for positions of authority, although, as the story of the Charge of the Light Brigade shows, the objective was not always attained. Nevertheless the changes which are taking place in the world today are increasing the importance of such a command of language in many ways.

In the first place the proportion of workers who need this command is increasing rapidly. At one end of the scale the unskilled worker, who used only the simplest tools and needed to be able to understand only the simplest orders, is rapidly disappearing and being replaced by machines, and the people who operate the machines. These people have to be able to receive and understand far more complicated instructions, and if they are to have any hope of promotion to be able to give such instructions as well. At the other end of the scale not only the number but also the proportion of people employed in professional and administrative positions is increasing rapidly. In 1921, about 12½ per cent. of all Europeans in South Africa in employment were in administrative and professional jobs. By 1951 the percentage had risen to about 15½ and if the present trend continues, by 1980, when children now at primary schools will only be on the threshold of their careers, the percentage will be nearly 25. (These percentages were calculated from figures from the Union censuses, given in *Union statistics for Fifty Years* compiled by the Bureau of Census and Statistics, Pretoria.)

The increase in the number of people doing professional work is not the only factor calling for more people to have a good command of language. The nature of the work is changing. Everywhere the tendency is towards larger units of organisation, and narrower specialisation, with the consequence that more and more specialists have to co-operate not only with others like themselves, but with specialists in other fields, and more and more people, including specialists, are engaged in co-ordinating and directing the work of others. The top-flight engineer or scientist today is usually engaged not in dealing with particular problems of science and engineering but in directing, encouraging the work of other scientists and engineers, who are, in their turn, working in teams. All this guiding, directing and encouraging, as well as the discussion which is the basis of team co-operation, is done by means of language.

Another very important consequence of this tendency to larger units of organisation is that to an ever-increasing extent the affairs of practical people are conducted not merely in words, but in writing. This results primarily from the necessity of keeping many people informed of what is being done and the ease with which writing can be duplicated. Thus in a small business even a very important decision can be taken as the result of an oral report by one official to the head of the firm, a brief discussion, and an oral instruction. In a large organisation, ten or twelve people will have to be drawn into the discussion because each has specialised knowledge which is relevant, and a great number of people will have to be informed of the decision. By far the best way of handling this, and the usual way when there is time, is for a written report to be circulated to the officials concerned in the decision, for a meeting to be held at which this report is discussed, and for the final decision to be recorded in writing, and sent to all those who need to know of it.

The importance of this for our purpose is, of course, that accurate communication by means of speech is far easier than it is in writing. For one thing, in speech, the meaning of words can be supplemented by tone of voice, expression of face and gestures whereas the written word must be able to

stand absolutely by itself. Furthermore, the spoken word is comparatively cheap in time and effort by comparison with the written word, particularly where the latter may have to be typed and duplicated as well as written, so that the need for brevity in writing is much more pressing than in speech. Most people learn to speak reasonably well at home and in their everyday lives, but insofar as the art of writing is different from the art of speech, they have little opportunity of learning it anywhere but at school. Thus the increasing practical importance of writing throws an increasing burden on the schools.

Another development which throws an increasing burden on the schools is the disappearance of class distinctions. There was a time when positions of responsibility in society were few, and were in practice reserved by various forms of class barriers, for the sons of people who themselves held similar positions. In consequence the children who had to be educated for such positions invariably came from highly literate homes, where the more complex uses of language were practised and valued. Traditional upper-class forms of education did pay attention to those things but they could also, up to a point, take them for granted, or at least take for granted a belief in their value. Today there are no class barriers among the Europeans in South Africa, and in the advanced countries of the world there are few barriers against anyone in the whole population. In consequence the schools have the problem of teaching a high standard of command of language to those whose home and social backgrounds give them little assistance.

If the benefits of the removal of class barriers are to be fully realised, both for the benefit of individuals and for the benefit of society as a whole, which requires the service of the best talents of all sections of the population, it is most important that this problem shall be solved. At the lower levels if employers cannot get the standard of command of language which the work requires, they will take what they can get, and the work will suffer. At the high levels, however, they will insist, not less but more than formerly, on a high standard of command of language; and I hope that I have written enough to show that their doing so will arise not from a sinister plot to perpetuate class distinctions, but from a realistic assessment of the qualifications required for high positions. This being so, a child at school who refuses to take the trouble to acquire skill in the use of his own language is himself perpetuating class distinctions, to his own detriment. Perhaps if this fact were more generally appreciated by the pupils, the teaching of English might become a little easier.

POST-SCRIPT

The Charge of the Light Brigade; or, the perils of "you know what I mean."

The incident of the Charge of the Light Brigade is so good an illustration of the point made in the article that it is perhaps worth quoting the account in full. The following is from Woodward: *The Age of Reform*, Page 271:—

"The Russians appeared to be about to retreat with the English guns which they had captured from the Turks. Raglan ordered Lucan to send his cavalry forward to save these guns. Lucan took the order to mean that he was to attack another section of Russian guns a mile and a quarter distant at the end of the valley. Russian cavalry covered the guns, and other batteries on the sides of the valley protected them. The order was brought to Lucan by Captain Nolan.

"*Note* 3: The written order was in these terms: 'Lord Raglan wishes the cavalry to advance rapidly to the front, and try to prevent the enemy carrying away the guns. Troop of horse-artillery may accompany. French cavalry is on your left. Immediate.' But what guns? And what front? It is clear that, if Lucan had interpreted the order in the light of previous orders received, he would have understood that Raglan meant the English guns left unprotected by the Turks. On the other hand, he could not see the guns, whereas he knew of the Russian batteries at the head of the valley, though these guns were also out of sight. Lucan protested to Nolan; Nolan pointed, according to Lucan, to the valley and answered, with some sharpness, 'There, my lord, is your enemy. There are your guns.' Nolan probably did not mean to give an exact direction. He was not pointing to anything which either man could see. He knew the intention of the order, and in any case Lucan may have misinterpreted the sweep of an arm; the angle between the right and wrong direction was hardly more than twenty degrees. The responsibility for the mistake may therefore be divided amongst (a) Raglan whose order was not precisely worded; (b) Lucan, who did not show common sense, or take care to get precise interpretation of the order given to him by Nolan; and (c) Nolan, who was sharp to the verge of insubordination, and did not make sure that Lucan understood Raglan's message."