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The Teaching of English at the Junior School Stage

by L. G. W. SEALEY

ALTHOUGH I haven't got anything new to say about the teaching of English, there are a number of things that I would like to bring to your notice.

First of all, as is quite obvious to all of us, the teaching of English is not something you can divorce from the every day and all day activity of the classroom. This is almost a trite saying, but it is true, and it therefore is really something of a surprise to find that English is still on the time table chopped up into its various parts. In Britain, we used to have a sub-division of the teaching of English into such things as composition, grammar, speech, drama, and so on, but in recent years in Junior Schools, we have tended to blow away these rather false subdivisions and consider the whole thing more or less as linguistic skills making our broad division in accordance with the view of language and its four modes.

Now, the four modes of language — and there are only four — are of course speaking the language, listening to the language, reading the language and writing the language. This is true of all language, whether it be Afrikaans or French, Chinese or English, and any satisfactory educational programme must, I think, take account of these four modes and decide the balance of time and effort which is to be given to each in accordance with the home environment, with the past experience and the maturation level of the students.

Speech is, I think, unique in this quartet because speech is largely very well developed before children come into school at all.

I am personally interested in speech because I'm interested in cognition and in the way the cognitive process works. It took a lot of people a long time to realise that language is absolutely fundamental to the explicit formulation of ideas. You have an idea in your mind and then you begin to think round it, and then you begin to talk round it, and there are some people in the world who would say that you do not know a thing until you can talk about it. As a student I was once listening to a lecture by a very well-known professor who came from Vienna, and he thoroughly stimulated all of us. One of my friends, in an attempt to answer a question of his, stumbled badly, and then he said, "I'm very sorry, Professor, I know what I want to say, but I can't say it." The Professor said, "If you cannot say it, you do not know it." Now this is an exaggeration. It is, in fact, not true, but I want you to consider this story a moment, because, you see, speech is the first mode of personal communication that we develop. It's difficult enough to express ideas through speech, but the written mode of language is a much more sophisticated way of expressing ideas, and indeed most of us here have still not become very good at it despite our lengthy and rather expensive education. Words that are spoken are the result of a very complex process that goes on in the brain. Sometimes you will have the experience of knowing what you want to say, of having the idea quite clear, but having no symbol, no spoken symbol, for it. This has been man's story all along the line. This is why the language, the spoken language, is constantly changing, and because man is constantly thinking of new ideas, it is necessary for him to fumble along until he finds some explicit formulation of these ideas in the spoken word and then, later on, in the written form.

Man's story is the child's story, and it is of fundamental importance that we realise that if we want children to develop their ideas and communicate them we must allow them to speak these ideas, and we must expect them to find it difficult in the first instance. Incidentally, during my years in Leicestershire, one of my first jobs as I looked around the County, was to try and liberate the written work of children. It was entirely constrained. There was a period marked "Composition" once a week on the timetable of most Junior schools, and during this time, the children were expected to express their ideas. They were expected to do this together and at the same time; to produce fairly original and, at the same time, creative work, and that was the only time when their own ideas were considered worthwhile at all. They were not allowed to write about the other things that interested them. They were not allowed to write about the thoughts that came into their minds and I spent a very long time liberating these as well as I could and getting teachers to see that really these were the most important parts of

This article and the following one contain the text of two papers given by Mr. Sealey at a conference of South African Preparatory Schools held in Durban in April 1965.

English. The whole point of having a language was in fact to use it as a form of communication in all its forms and to tell other people about the ideas that were in your head. So, as I have said, for the explicit formulation of ideas you must have language and I'm sure that you will realise that all sorts of things are not yet known about this. There is "internalised speech" for example. Sometimes when you want to get an idea clear, you have to talk it to yourself. You will talk an idea over to yourself in a sort of personal dialogue before you go to sleep. In the explicit formulation of ideas, speech is of prime importance.

But another reason why speech is important is one that is often not entirely understood, and it is this: that a person grows as an individual through speech. This is a well established notion, but one not taken very much account of. I find that I do not make a judgment about a person until I hear him or her speak. I wonder if you do that? The personality of a person may never be completely clear to you, but you cannot have anything but a very oblique and often erroneous view of it, until you see him move. Each person moves in an idiosyncratic and a personal way; each person speaks in an idiosyncratic and personal way. So if you bottle up speech — if you don't allow this to come out, to flow out — then you are also, I suggest, inhibiting personal development.

Therefore, with just these two aims in mind, we must ask ourselves how we can facilitate these developments within our schools. What have we done in speech to date? When I first started teaching, the only speech that went on in the classroom was my own; the only continuous, sensible speech was mine. The children were expected to be quiet and to know their place. Occasionally I would look them square in the eye and ask them a question, and they were supposed to formulate an answer, but for the rest of the time I spent a considerable amount of effort and not a little emotion in keeping them quiet. It was also necessary for them to preface any remark that they made with a "Please, sir". I have never really understood what that has got to do with answering a question. Yet I perpetuated the situation remarkably until I even got children to the state when they would come up to me, stand one foot away, raise their hands, and say, "Please, sir", when I had asked them something. Notice the very odd nature of this situation! Classroom speech was of a very trivial nature when I was teaching, and there was no chance to speak with children. It seemed that the pedagogue was too bright and intelligent and important to ever discuss anything with somebody small. But discussion between an informed adult and a growing child is vital both for the adult and for that child, and thus the need to discuss with children — you being a little more experienced, a little wiser, knowing just a little more — is a very important thing. And yet the only speech that was on the timetable was called "Speech Training". I submit that such speech training had nothing to do with helping children to speak. It was a sort of middle-class society's attempt to make everybody middle-class.

But speech training exercises were really quite trivial and often very amusing — all about brown bread and pickled pumpkins. But having trained the children in speaking we didn't allow them to engage in any discussion and therefore the thing must have seemed to them, as it indeed did to me, to be very artificial.

One of the very important ways in which personal growth can occur and people can explicitly formulate ideas is through drama. Here again, I was forced to take, in my early teaching days, what was called a "Drama Lesson". This indeed was highly dramatic, or should I say "traumatic"? We had a set of books called "Drama Books". Some dried-up ex-teacher had written these exciting plays for 9, or 10, or 13 year olds, in which the Queen said this, and the King said that, and somebody said the other, and drama consisted of reading this trivial matter out aloud in the nice voices that we had learned in the speech training lesson. This is not drama, and I don't propose to say much more about it. It is much more exciting to take your group of 9 year olds into the hall, sit them down in a corner and do some child drama. Drama, by definition, means acting out of experience. Greek drama was acting out an experience in a secure situation, and talking about it, moving about it and feeling about it. There is still great confusion in the minds of educationalists between drama and theatre. Theatre is performance and has nothing whatever to do with drama. Occasionally, for some people, theatre can become drama and occasionally good drama can become theatre, but 'occasionally' is the important word in all this, and the idea of everybody doing a play is entirely foreign to the particular point of view that I'm taking this morning. I have not said that nobody should ever do a play; but doing a play or reading dramas — plays, so called — from books, with somebody taking the parts or reading round the class, or whichever way it is done, is not really related to what I am saying.

Quite recently, we have begun to realise that for some children speech does not come easily. The ideas pop into their heads so fast that they can't find the words for them and they stutter or stammer, and get confused. And to make such children talk with you or with others in public can become a traumatic experience. You have all experienced very able children who stutter and on whom you can never call to answer a question because they get so confused. True, in the relaxed situations now in schools, these children have a better time of it, but I, some years ago, realised that children who

needed to speak — as they all do — were not always prepared to do it in public, and so I began to use such things as puppets and tape recorders to help these children say what they had to say. A puppet is a very nice way of projecting your personality into an inoffensive, inanimate object.

I remember quite recently, taking a group of children, sitting them in the hall (I'm going back to drama now, and not talking of puppetry) and saying to them, "Now first of all, we'll do some work in pairs, and then we'll imagine a situation and we'll sort of work our way into it, think about it and feel about it. Then we'll move and we'll talk about it." So we did some simple work in which pairs of children, choosing, of course, their own partners, had arguments. They would imagine a situation — for example, the theft of a bicycle — and then argue aloud, in pairs, and then other children threw up other ideas, and by careful steering we had a whole range of emotional experience, from the argument to the sort of rather sympathetic situation where two children discovered — all of this imagined of course — a dog that had been knocked down by a car. And there it was, twitching in the road, and they had to decide what to do about it.

In order to grow emotionally, children must have emotional experience. There is not very much evidence that schools are prepared to accept this fact. They tend to be sterile, unemotional places, dried up in certain dimensions and that is why it is important that we, as teachers, must be emotionally mature people able to cope with ourselves in order to show children that the whole range of emotional experiences they have are quite valid.

The validation function is terribly important to children growing up. They must see that you are like them. And you can do this with children in drama, and they can speak about it and you can by judicious skill work into the situation quite a lot of emotional education of the very best kind.

This group of children, mixed boys and girls, then sat down and I said, "Where would you like to go where you've never been before?" One child said, "I'd like to go to India." "Good," I said. "Well then, let's imagine we're all in India. What's the most exciting time of the day," and the children said, "Late at night." So I said, "Good. Well, we're in India, and it's late at night. Do you think it's hot there?" And they said, "Yes, it's very hot." So I said, "If it's very hot, why don't you take your coats off?" So they took their coats off and their collars and ties, and they began to feel hot. And then I said, "What do you think that is over there?" One child said, "It's a sort of house." So I said, "Well, let's go over and have a look at it." We all walked across the empty room, and, do you know, there was a house, and inside this house, was a large, brightly lit room. We went into this brightly lit room and then a very strange thing happened; all the lights went out — Shocking feeling! Quite a chill came over us. Then one little child discovered a tiny door in the corner and they had to creep through this door, and once they were inside, they were seized by unknown forces. Couldn't move, and half of them were indoctrinated. Their brains were removed by invisible hands making a sign on their foreheads and these became devil children and they felt that they must sacrifice one of their number to the gods in order to get back.

These children were perfectly respectable, middle-class boys and girls, who looked and dressed in the conventional way, did the conventional things, but these ideas were in their minds. Whether they had come from television or books or anywhere else, I really don't know, and what is more, I really don't care. They obviously needed this emotional experience. So they simply took hold of one big boy who was very good at sports and games and whom they hated because he was so good, and they strapped him down, cut him into small pieces, and they fed these to the invisible things, and then they all reappeared and the lights went on and they found jewels and all sorts of things, and that was the end of it.

The speaking during this half an hour was very, very fascinating. Little children, who didn't say very much suddenly became wildly excited. I remember the look on the face of the child who found the biggest diamond that there ever was. She held this diamond in wide-stretched arms, her face glowing, showing it to everybody else.

But if you take a puppet, then you can lose your identity in the puppet and do all sorts of things, and this is very important and a very good way to get children to speak. While we are on the subject of speech, I wonder if you really understand the new neurological evidence relating to speech and to perception and to language in general.

Wilder Penfield, who is the director of the Neurological Institute in McGill University in Montreal, has made it clear to us that part of the cortex of the brain is committed to speech and perception. At birth, this part of the cortex is a blank slate. The experiences that a child has — and this explains why language develops so quickly from birth — the experiences that the child has, gradually establish learning paths, if you like, electro-magnetic, if you like, chemical — it doesn't matter what they are — but set up patterns in this area. By the age of 10 or 11, or perhaps 12, this part of the brain has been used in a commitment either to language or to perception — the ability to perceive things. The fascinating theory is that unless language patterns are established in this part of the cortex by the age of 12, then a large potential is under-developed, but its capacity has been used up. Can I illustrate that? Here is a part of the cortex of the brain committed to language

learning and perception — it's empty. At 12, if the language learning has been rather thin, then you have a sort of pattern which is not particularly dense, because the whole of the space has been used. If, on the other hand, and this is the hypothesis, you do a lot of language learning before the age of 12, then the thing is dense and you have got better value for money. Now language learning — all future language learning — is dependent upon these original patterns. Learning, as I say, is a process of building up, so learning a third language or a fourth language depends upon a good pattern to start off with. This raises a very nice question. What's the point in learning a third language or a second language after the age of 12? Should it not be done earlier?

In the International Schools in Geneva, some children can speak three languages quite fluently — French, possibly German, and English. Others certainly speak two — French and English, or French and American, or French and Italian — right away. I would suspect that in South Africa, a young child that is left with a nanny can speak two languages almost immediately. I would think that if your home is Afrikaans speaking and you work where you have to use English, then you will learn two languages immediately and I would say that such people will be able to learn other languages more easily later on. It has in fact been shown by research, that this is true.

Are we justified in our schools in this very early time, when there is still a potential for development, when the whole of the space is not committed, in keeping children away from the other languages that they may, or may not need?

When I was a young student, unless you could speak German, you could have no real knowledge of the world of science. All the science that mattered, the new science, was going on in Germany just before the last war. Now that all the German scientists have gone to America, you have to learn either American, which is a relatively easy language to learn, or Russian, which is a relatively difficult language to learn. We in Britain are really concerned about this. We know that we should be teaching Russian at 8 or 7, or 6 or 5, but we haven't got the teachers. In Leicestershire, we have started to help children learn a second language in our State Schools at 8, and this has got to be French because we have a large resource of teachers who can speak this language. We tried an experiment, incidentally, with 5 year olds in this regard, by putting into an infant classroom, a native French-speaking woman, who, while the children were working in an informal way, would speak to them only in French. She was not allowed to use one word of English, and, after a while, the children understood what she said, and could answer her, and they hadn't had one minute of formal French teaching at all. Penfield would of course, agree with this and say the natural way to learn any language is to listen to it, and then of course, to speak it. I'm just throwing out an interesting notion to you that when you're thinking of speech in relation to English, you ought to be thinking of the neurological evidence of speech in relation to the other languages you want your children to learn.

Let's have a look at another mode of language — reading. There are three aspects of reading, which I think, need to be stated quite clearly. The first aspect is that of simply learning to read — the consolidation of the code-breaking process. This code-breaking can be quite a difficult affair and there are very many ways now of reducing the complexity of the code and making it much more logical and reasonable and these are working very well. Learning to read is the lesser part of the matter and the other two aspects of reading are, I think, more important.

First, becoming a reader. What do you do about seeing to it that your children become readers? I have been rather disappointed as I've looked at schools all over the world in the ignorance of the notion that the only point in learning to read is to become a reader or, and this is the third thing, to get information out of the printed word. Once you can read, you have access to everything that has been written in the language, or languages that you can understand. A whole new dimension is open to you. In both these respects, schools are, I feel, lagging behind.

Let me first consider and elaborate what I mean. To encourage readers, the best way is to lock up the school library and to open it from time to time and allow children to trickle in and turn the magic "becoming a reader" message, and let them get on with it. The best way to encourage readers surely, is to surround them with tatty, dated, ineffectual books. The best way to encourage readers is to provide the Classics, which were classic and appropriate, say, 10 decades ago, but which have no meaning, no point of contact for the children who are living in the jet age.

The best way to encourage readers is never to read to them. Now, of course, I'm talking nonsense, aren't I? You're all agreeing that what I'm saying is rubbish. This is the way to prevent children from becoming readers. And so, of course, you don't have locked libraries and you do have appropriate books — many thousands of them, because there are many thousands now. Of course, you can't have access to all of them all the time, so may be you'd have to borrow them and keep on changing them and keep up to date, and select the best possible books — not the cheapest books, but the best that there are. You have to show the children of course, that books matter, so your school will be full of interesting and enticing displays of books. Here are some books about elephants, or large creatures, and so the librarian or

the person in your school who is interested in this will obviously have a display, so that as soon as the child enters the school — bang! Here's the book thrust at him. He's not told to read it, but it's just there. The climate is there. I cannot over-emphasise the importance of establishing a total climate in your school. If you establish a climate that does not signal that books are important, children well not think that books are important. You cannot presuppose that the expensive homes and the well-to-do families from which many of our children come, signal that message to children any longer. This is no longer something that we can assume. We certainly cannot do this in Britain. So it is up to us to see that the children become readers, and this may become an increasingly important part of our task. Books must be seen to matter to you, and I have been in schools where there has been no signal to me that books mattered at all.

The books that I saw were lying around — poor books, many of them — unattractive — nobody paying much attention to them, and indeed, very, very few in number.

Reading for information is important and, by the way, most of our young people are not very good at it, because they can't read fast enough. I calculated quite recently, that I have to read 750,000 words giving information to me every week from the journals, from the abstracts, from books. The exponential growth of books, containing information for me at my level is fantastic, and because of this, I have become interested in speed reading. Reading fast, not reading every word, but reading fast, and this year, for the first time in one of my schools, I have introduced an American machine, which I found in every school in California and this is improving the reading of children. It sets the speed of reading and groups of words according to a specific eye span, etc. are carefully worked out and are projected on a screen. In five or six minutes a day, they can put up their speed of reading, once they can read and double it perhaps in six weeks.

What are we doing about that? We start off learning to read in some schools by taking a page of print and a piece of cardboard, and we put the cardboard under the line and we expect the child to read that little bit. Nobody reads like that at all. You don't actually look at the words that you are reading and in order to read properly, you must have at least some idea of the whole sentence before you actually begin. And yet schools will still do this kind of thing. I would like to bring to your attention the fact that the children who are in your schools at 11 now, who will have jobs like us, may need to read a million words a week, and they have got to read fast. They have got to be able to run down a page of print, which is possible. If I pick up the newspaper, all I need to do is to put my finger on it and read down it and I've read it. Not every word of it, but then that's not the idea. If the thing is written properly, you shouldn't have to read every word. I'm not reading poetry; I'm reading mundane stuff for information.

If children are going to have to refer to books, then they must be there — they've got to be to hand. In Junior Schools, a central library is really a resource only for the books that are not always needed and therefore, you must bring into your classrooms many of the books, or if you have a central library, you must have immediate access, and constant access, and it must be possible to get the book out without going through some confounded, difficult routine, like working through a complicated classification, and signing a chit and all that nonsense. It must be possible to go to the book and get it, because if you make it very difficult for a child to go to books, you are telling him that teacher says it is difficult to go to books, so don't bother. And far too many of us will turn to one source of information instead of the 20 that we need in order to get the fair view.

Our children must learn and therefore, they must have many, many reference books and I think that no school, irrespective of size, even if it only has five children in it, can really get away with having anything much less than 2,000 reference books. This has been a great problem in our State Schools, because we have some very small ones and they still need 2,000 books. The books that are going to be needed are going to be related to the interests of children and five children have as many interests as 500. We are overcoming this problem by making library grants to schools, so that a fair number of our schools have now got 2,000 books and more. We also have a library service — a mobile library service — which puts 500 books each term into every school, changes them and this kind of thing. Of course, these books get out of date quite quickly and some of them will need changing fairly often.

Now let's have a look at writing. This is the thing dearest to our hearts. As scholars we believe that writing about our feelings is the penultimate of ambition and it is very important, because once you have written something down, you have concretised your thought. Until we had tape recorders — these monstrous things that listen in to every thought in your head and write them all down to be used in evidence against you — writing was a psychologically significant thing. When you wrote something down, it was there. You could see it and everybody else could see it. Although, in fact, it is rather strange that most of the writing was buried as soon as it was written. It was buried in things called writing books or composition books. These never went anywhere, except eventually into the waste paper basket. It is, I suppose, quite clear to all of us here, that language is a communication skill. The whole point of language is to communicate with somebody else and therefore, the child

who has been used to communicating with somebody else, if he is asked to write something down, expects that it will be communicated to somebody else and therefore expects you to see it. I think we've done some terrible things to children when they've communicated in writing. If somebody is speaking to you and hesitates, or makes an error, you don't give him a great clout on the head, or stamp on his feet, or cut out his tongue. Yet, in the first piece of writing instruction that I was asked to do, I had to tell the class a story and they had to reproduce it — and then I had to mark it. Slash it about. Mutilate it and then I sent it back and they had to do it again. I had to correct it, and then I began to realise, you see, that this is what the game was. In order to stop children from really communicating, you had to make them do things over and over again. You had to make them do corrections and even occasionally write things out again, because you see, unless you did this, they were going to come up with some original ideas and that might be very dangerous. There are three kinds of writing, as there are three modes of reading. There is writing that is just free — free expression, if you like, of what children think — which can't ever have anything to do with you and which you can't stamp on and mustn't stamp on, for if you do, they will just dry up.

Free writing is very important. In fact, free writing is probably the only writing that really matters in the end, but there will be two other kinds of writing. There will be writing about the experiences in school — all kinds of experience — and there will be writing that is really very closely directed by yourselves.

Now there are a few things that I must bring to your attention. First of all, modern research has shown that the actual mechanics of writing are rather complex and sophisticated and the idea of constraining children in their movements to little tiny lines is just as dead as the dodo. Nobody, any more, ever introduces young children to the idea of writing on lines. This is quite an impossible task. They must never be constrained to lines. The actual mechanics of writing are really rather odd, aren't they? You learn one script. Then you forget all about that and you learn another one — a sort of cursive hand. That again has gone and now writing has some progression and logic built into it, so that initial print script can become italic script, or Marion Richardson script, or Fairbairn script or what have you, so that no unlearning or relearning takes place. And the time we spend on the actual mechanics of writing is very reduced.

This allows more time for writing freely and being expressive. The progression of free writing is really rather interesting. What we have done is to provide children with large books, unlined, about a foot long and ten inches wide from the very first day they come into school at five, and from the very first day they come into school, they actually write although they can't form or write a single letter. Neither can they read. They don't understand what they're doing, but in fact, whenever a child has done anything interesting, the teacher says, "How about writing that down? That's worth remembering." The child says, "That's a good idea, but I can't write." The teacher says, "Well, you tell me and I'll write it for you." So the teacher writes a little sentence and then says to the child, "Well, this is the way of telling us about it by writing. How could you tell everybody else about it? Could you do it by drawing?" The child says, "Oh yes, I can draw it," and the child will draw something. So the writing is matched by the drawing.

The child then takes a big thick crayon and goes over the letters — over the teacher's writing — so it is now writing and the children of course, can immediately read what they've written. They've written it — they can read it, and they sit there reading it. Their reading and writing go hand in hand. Eventually, the writing will be behind the reading, but at this moment of time, at this fragile, rather beautiful first moment, they're absolutely starting from par.

The children will then begin to write on their own and perhaps draw what they are writing. Eventually they will need to have some special words, so we must surround them with access to words in sort of groups, so simple dictionaries will appear. Children will talk with teachers about what sort of words they might want and group them round, say, things in the street, and so children will see pictures of things in their street and the big words which describe them. They will have picture dictionaries of all kinds, and each child will have a personal word list, a little book, with each of the pages given an initial letter, and if children want words and they can't find them for themselves, they take this book to the teacher and say, "Could you show me how to write this word?" and it goes in the book. So there is always a personal pool of words available to every child.

By the time these children are eleven, if this has been a continuous progression, there comes the magic day when the child is ready to communicate with other children, so the teacher says, "Why don't you start making books now? Make a book of your own."

In one of our schools, a child of 11, a very able one, has just completed in one term, a 250 page novel. But let us not worry too much about the quantity. Free writing must have quality. It must be personal as opposed to the more factual kind of writing which will go on at the same time. Just listen to this.

Some five year old children made a canoe and decided they would float it, and so they did, and one child wrote an account of this.

One day we decided to make a ship. We decided to make it a canoe. We made it out of cardboard, wood and plastic to keep the water out. Now the day has come when the boat is ready to sail. I christen this canoe, 'The Canoe of the Sea.' May God bless her and all who sail in it. I chucked a bottle on some string at the boat. Tommy made a speech, then Miss W. paddled in and got it back.

I have said enough, but I would just like to read you one or two examples of children's writing in this free way. I haven't really talked, as you well see, about remedial sequences for linguistic skills. I would just like you to begin to consider the whole field of linguistics, which is a very interesting one. When I was quite a young teacher, I used to talk about adjectives being describing words and say that "swim" was an adjective, or was it a noun? Yes, of course "swim" is a noun isn't it. Or is it a verb? And so on, and so on. The new approach to language is concerned with the use of language rather than the arid attempt to describe it.

Here is a piece of free writing that interested me very much. I just picked this up the day before I came away. A little boy — again, of five — saying:

It will soon be Easter. We will have Easter eggs and I will take one Easter egg and smash it on my sister's head.

The Adventures of King Bingo, by Margaret Moffat. Now Miss Moffat begins:

Long, long ago in Southern Ireland, there lived in a fairy glen, a beautiful fairy queen. Her name was 'Buttercup' and her husband's name was 'Bingo.' They lived together in a beautiful palace in the King's garden. Now King Bingo loved ice creams. Whenever they went into town, he wanted to have an ice cream, and when he got them, he ate 12. *Queen Buttercup got so angry with him because she thought that one day he would simply go pop.*

And there follows, this fascinating, well-written, well-illustrated story in a sensible Italic hand of the adventures of King Bingo, by Margaret Moffat. Now it is very interesting to watch this girl writing the conventional, almost Enid Blyton style and to see how occasionally bits of her own personality and reality have got through.

Here's "The Life of a Fire Engine." I show you this, because people say, "What about the children who are not very good?" Well, there's nothing the matter with this story of the fire engine. It's a perfectly logical — not terribly well written, but valued story. The child thinks enough of her story to make it into a book, and in this school, of course, these books will be read by other children. Here is a very charming story of Candy, who is a donkey, and again, you can see the very considerable detail and attention that goes into this very beautiful story. This one starts:

Inky, pinky, I'm a donkey. I try to walk, but I just collapse.

Now you see, it doesn't begin, "One day I was walking along the North Beach . . ." does it? This is the kind of originality that we want.

Here's another one, "A Day in the Life of the Steins," by Pippa Stein, who in fact is bold enough to give us a photograph of the authoress on the front. I'll just read you the first sentence. Notice the unusual tense in which this is written:

It is half past six in the moring. Pamela, my sister, is lying in bed, with two blankets, one sheet, two pillows and one doll.

Now here we have a boy. Boys are very insensitive aren't they? You can't get anything out of boys — they're a hopeless lot, as you will see from this:

The sky reddens. The sea, a mass of different hues — red, blue, orange, silver and black. The wispy clouds, lined with orange are suspended between the light and darkness. The fallen dew glistens like a myriad of diamonds, placed by some unseen hand upon the grass. The sun pokes a playful head over the horizon. A ship hoots its mournfull tune to the accompaniment of the birds.

And another boy, 6,000 miles away, writes:

Like a hissing mass of cobras, the witches swarm into the eerie air, off to the moon's bright smiling face they sweep and are back again. As an eagle swoops on its prey, the piercing squeal is a horde of rats screaming. The rustle of brooms are waves breaking on the shore. Over the roofs they tear at the tiles like a cat tears a mouse. Their teeth are more dangerous than an eagle's talons. Then like a blazing bonfire, the sun greets the morn with an alarum call, like the call of a seagull. The witches vanish. All is still.

Sometimes, if your work is very free, you will get even in your rather directed composition book, something of the quality and feel for language that comes from the freer work. Just listen to these:

The net swooped down and missed by a hair's breadth. I cursed my luck and straightened my self, watching the butterfly flutter drunkenly away.

It is very good writing by these 'insensitive' boys that one finds all over the place. And then a piece of verse — two pieces of verse, that are really in rhyme — one by a boy and the other by a girl.

The insect world is a busy world
With habits and rules of its own;
With queen and hunter and soldier bold,
Worker and slave and drone.

Spinner and weaver, mason and those
Who tunnel in wood and earth
There are those who trap and those who store
Provisions for time of dearth.

There are those who rob, and those who kill
To dine on their victim's flesh
There are those who spin a winding sheet
To bind the prey they enmesh.

The insects build their snug nests well,
Each type of a skilful plan,
Silk-lined and proof against wind and rain
As they've built since the world began!

A very able boy, and last of all, a very poor child, who really was of very limited ability, but who wrote this poem, which I think is really deeply moving:

The wind to the west was steady
The growing of flowers was ready
The hearts of the old trees were aching
For the woodcutter with his deadly axe came raking
The death of the trees was very brave
As one day I hid in a cave
I heard the bitter weeping of the silver birch
And in the morning, for her leaves did search.

If these children whose work I have been quoting to you can multiply and grow, then I think you can be fairly well satisfied that the beginning of some of your work — in English, anyway — is bearing fruit.

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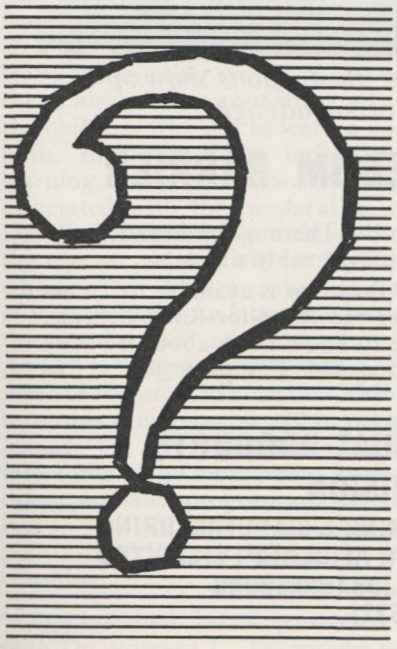

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