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1961
Johannesburg College of Education
https://hdl.handle.net/10539/25105
Partridge, A.C. (1961). Liaison between the universities and secondary schools. Symposium: A Journal for Education in Southern Africa, pp. 119-122.

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ENGLISH ACADEMY

Liaison between the Universities and Secondary Schools

by A. C. PARTRIDGE

FROM time to time letters are received from teacher-subscribers to **English Studies in Africa** suggesting that we allocate a section of the Journal to articles on the teaching of English in South African schools, especially high schools. This we should, naturally, be prepared to do if more teachers became subscribers, and if the teachers themselves undertook to provide some of the ideas. In the Transvaal province the relationship between the secondary schools and some of the larger universities resembles the aloofness of neighbours in suburbia, who have greeted each other across the hedge for ten years, but contented themselves with no more than this nodding acquaintance. This leads to a certain amount of unworthy recrimination, especially on the shortcomings of instructors in both camps.

The solution to this breakdown in the communication of ideas may be more frequent discussion on method with the Colleges of Education. With these institutions the universities' relationships are on a slightly better footing; but the prospective graduate teachers who attend the universities for their degree subjects in order to become secondary school teachers seldom startle us with any challenging notions on method; they seem as docile and innocent of ideas in education as any state system could wish to make them. What we teach them and what the College teaches them may, so far as we know, be poles apart, particularly on the disputed ground of English method. Conferences have sometimes debated, without finality, that **terra incognita** of our educational map "the proper function of language teaching"; we have even passed pious resolutions, but have not the means, the knowledge or the confidence to put them into operation. Clearly, those who are entrusted with the teaching of English at different levels have no common understanding or purpose; and this is not only tragic, but criminal, in our present situation. I therefore propose to say what I think the purpose of English language teaching ought to be in this country at the present time.

The task of English teachers should be to demonstrate the potentialities of the language in its most cogent and vital **expressive** forms. Less emphasis should be laid, at the secondary school level, on the acquisition of proper views about great or lesser authors, and more on the critical examination of speech and of methods of writing. The command of modern English is an exacting discipline, and few South Africans are conscious enough of its social importance to realize the character-moulding effect of acquiring it properly. Because vigorous English is a matter of purity and sincerity of expression, of functional ethics in phrasing, it remains a rare accomplishment. We have now reached the nadir of educational incompetence, when grammar and usage are so unsure, even in the mouths of teachers, that structural analysis of a sentence can scarcely be relied upon, and at certain educational levels is even deliberately avoided.

Functional grammar (which is all I am proposing should be taught) is the theory of sentence structure, and as such is the means to clear and accurate expression. A liberal education implies the mastery of the technicalities of at least one language. How else can we communicate ideas about proper structure adequately? The erroneous belief is current that, while structural grammar syntax is indispensible for an inflected language like Latin, it serves no practical purpose in imparting the niceties of an uninflected or analytical language, such as English. We should never be convinced by the argument that, because a thing is abstract or subtle, it should not be taught. Without abstract reasoning civilization could never have advanced, and ability to grasp an increasing degree of subtlety is a mark of intellectual progress.

Now the argument runs that no one ever learnt to write by this method, but by steeping himself in the work of the best writers or playing what Stevenson called "the sedulous ape." No reasonable educator would deny the value of this kind of imitation. But this is a counsel of perfection, not a day-to-day method of working with immature pupils, where the teacher is confronted with the painstaking necessity of removing blemishes. He begins to realize his inability to communicate with the child on a common footing. How does he, for instance, explain the complexities of the English tense system, or show how the elements of speech strung together in certain sequences make meaningful patterns? The contextual nature of meaning

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itself is something that eludes without constant elucidation. In teaching the language we continue vaguely to describe such and such a locution as "good" or "bad" English; but the nature of the solecism should be explained, and can only be by means of an accepted grammatical terminology.

The patterns of words in sentences can be considered from three points of view: grammatical form, aesthetic form and logical form; that is to say, the good, the beautiful and the true. The man-in-the-street naturally asks of an expression "Is it **good** English?" because, as I said, grammar is really the functional ethics of words. Each of these individual formulations satisfies an intellectual need of a trained mind, but obeys the laws peculiar to its norm. Each contributes something to the meaning which the sayer transmits to the sayee. Indeed, the great writer, of whatever kind, is the one who co-ordinates all three laws, without violating the traditions of any one.

Even people normally considered educated say the most naïve things about grammatical functions, and have scarce an inkling of the relationship between sentence structure and style; so that in most judgments of quality subjective criteria have to suffice. To analyse the veriest commonplaces of idiomatic speech, is to realize that living English is an analytical language; and to understand its system of analysis is not useless, but a necessary groundwork for the subtleties of synthesis, which at the personal level we call style. The idiom of a language is its essence: that which gives it its distinctive character. When one examines closely the idiomatic uses of words, symbolic relationships begin to reveal themselves; and language is seen to be a unique form of symbolism.

Matter and Spirit

Though, **prima facie,** it may appear that language is involved with the **matter,** and literature with the **spirit,** of words, the separation is purely metaphysical. The common ground between the two studies is psychological, and is concerned with meanings. Mentally, symbols, whether uttered or committed to paper, are like strokes of a brush on a blank canvas: their collocation may have significance or not. We have a sentence only when we have a formal relation that means something; just as we have a picture only when brush strokes represent objects of vision. But, as in a picture there is distortion brought about by the laws of perspective and by human fallibility, so in the sentence there is incomplete realization of the germ of the idea, because of the deficiencies of grammar and the limitations of the conceiving mind. Most people realize that it is impossible to speak or write about anything without modifying one's original notions about it.

Santayana wrote: "Language the philosophers must needs borrow from the poets, since the poets are the fathers of speech." Poets and their kind create new possibilities for existing words, and do not increase their vocabularies by technical additions. Instinctively they have felt the truth of what Lady Gregory wrote to Yeats: "Think like a wise man, but express yourself like the common people." The single test of the fitness and power of words to endure is their expressive quality.

The question of equivalent standards in the various matriculation examinations is one fraught with insoluble complications, especially in dealing with the language papers. One has the feeling that examiners themselves are floundering, because no one has made up his mind, inside or outside the schools, what is essential to ensure proficiency in the use of the language. While I naturally favour individualism in teaching, greater conformity is desirable in the existing chaos of language studies, because confusion is caused in the minds of all concerned by the varying concepts of value at present attached to different methods of tuition.

Declining Standards

Declining standards of literacy are invariably countered by more searching test-papers, or the introduction of sub-minima; but this largely negative process cannot continue without widening the gap between pupil attainment and examination requirements. Admittedly, the principal cause of declining standards in English is the inadequate supply of properly qualified English-medium teachers; but it is no solution to adjust the marks obtained in a public examination to a statistical curve, if the results accurately reflect the situation of literacy. I make a plea for less adjustment, and more attention to the root causes of the decline. And here it seems that the solutions are largely of an academic character; they may lie along the path of frequent discussions between secondary school teachers and university English staff, with the English lecturers of Colleges of Education acting as a kind of pedagogical jury. The function of the universities is to provide the research, and to suggest remedies for education shortcomings. For the university has to deal with the end-product of the system, and if the end is unsatisfactory, the beginning and the middle must need reform. What universities expect of the secondary school is the moulding of minds in preparation for higher education. But the minimum standard is not yet in sight. It will not be, until a high standard of expression is demanded by secondary school and university teachers, not only in the language and literature classes, but in whatever subject is being taught and examined.

South African education seems unable to rid itself of the traditional conviction that a broad field, involving many courses, has greater value

than intensive or concentrated study. The worst offenders are the designers of teacher training, whether at the University or College of Education level. It is customary for a pupil teacher to have to cope with eighteen to twenty-two courses in a single year. Is our vision always to be strained to vast horizons, or the height of our brows to be measured by the number of subjects with which the mind has to conjure? The recognised courses suffer here from overloading, with consequent superficiality. We shall never improve until we follow the educational advice of Newman to study "a little, and well."

Condense the Curriculum

My information is that the school curriculum, as a whole, could be condensed, if the good pupils were not compelled to mark time for the weak and mediocre ones. A year is wasted, partly in the lower standards of the Primary School, partly in the two-year Matriculation course, which is usually completed in eighteen months. In my view, the school-leaving examination should, therefore, be written by all candidates at the end of Standard IX, and the final (or Standard X) year devoted to preparation for an Advanced Level Examination, in which only four subjects would be required, chosen from the four groups needed for the university entrance endorsement of the Joint Matriculation Board. This intensive study of fewer subjects, involving different basic disciplines, would prove an advantage, not only to prospective university entrants, but to pupils entering a business or profession. In this limited field of subjects, an adequate standard in each could be maintained; while university entrants would be provided with the more specialized training we all desire in the direction either of Arts or of Science. Such a plan, if the Departments would see the wisdom of it, would go a long way to remedying our absence of a sixth form, which we have tried in vain to supply. We in South Africa are out of step, in this respect, with most parts of the world, where the immense strides in technology and research have made brain-power the indispensable adjunct to man-power.

But in the midst of all this technological advancement, we have to remember that we are human beings, and that language is a human instrument. It is worth while to learn to write and speak well, because the discipline develops peculiar insights. Modern languages are, alas, pressed increasingly into scientific, technical and official usage. In every country today there is a vast body of semi-literates unconsciously and uncritically absorbing one or other of the accepted jargons. In modern conversation, it is dangerous or impolite to speak one's mind, studied vagueness of expression is an art not peculiar to politicians.

If recent trends in South Africa are continued, there is grave danger of subverting the character of education as a civilizing and humanizing force. The emphasis, at present, is largely on factual knowledge, useful techniques and social indoctrination. The community that barters the minds and lives of its future citizens for immediate technological or material advantages is on the road to cultural and spiritual extinction.

Scholarship foundations in South Africa should, therefore, give greater support to the encouragement of scholarly work in the humanities, particularly in the field of language. The rewards for scientific, sociological and commercial merit are altogether disproportionate. Languages enshrine the cultural vitality of a nation; and if the power to use words vitally and accurately is lost, what medium of communication is left to the gifted technologist, researcher or administrator?

H. W. B. Joseph puts the problem in communication very sensible: "Can a man know what he means, when he is unable to say it? The question is in principle the same with certain others: as whether a man can know what he wants without being able to describe it; what he has forgotten without being able to remember it."

Educational Palliatives

What practical steps can be recommended as educational palliatives in the present situation? A university English committee of which I was secretary a dozen years ago recommended the appointment by the Provincial Education Departments of "Special Language Organizers" in each official language to conduct research in the selection and use of basic language disciplines. Nothing has yet come of this recommendation. The idea was that these Organizers should be supplemented by the appointment of Special Language Inspectors of Schools. It was emphasised that constructive organizing work in the use and techniques of language could only be undertaken by specialists whose life had been given to their subject.

Whether Language Inspectors are appointed or not, the immediate need is to resuscitate grammatical teaching on new lines in the secondary schools. This would mean refresher courses, preferably at Summer Schools conducted by the leading universities. I offer this as an immediate objective of the Academy; and the scope of these schools might later be extended to cover other fields, besides English language teaching; for example

(a) Reading and comprehension
(b) The place of English background history
(c) The teaching and examining of literature
(d) Forms, techniques and structure of writing in poetry, drama, the novel, etc.

Needless to add, we should be happy at any time to publish papers on these topics in a special Teachers' Section of **English Studies in Africa.**

No one is going to care much about the future of English in South Africa, unless we do something about it ourselves. Our besetting sins have been complacency and materialism. But we can no longer afford to be a nation of shopkeepers or half-hearted citizens of the world. If we do not square up to the fact that we have been opportunists, even escapists, who are now in a tight corner, there is not much hope of salvation for English-speaking South Africans.

We know that the control of language amongst people theoretically educated has declined almost everywhere, and that this is due partly to rapid mechanical changes in the modern way of life. Our situation in South Africa is peculiar only because we are ideologically isolated. If we accept the material comforts of this lotus-land, forgetting the vigour of our pioneering past, we must inevitably surrender the culture that is embodied in our language.

For the English language is the expressive medium of our thoughts, our link with similar civilizations in other parts of the world—the world of the Western European tradition, about which there is so much idle and perverse talk. In a few generations our way of life may become unintelligible to English speakers elsewhere. The critics, I know, will controvert me by pointing to the recent Renaissance of South African English literature, which we hope will be lasting. But does the intellectual achievement of a handful of writers discount the general apathy of the man in the street? Their works are read, both here and abroad, mainly for their matter, not their manner. The recognition and appreciation of good writing is rare indeed in the present generation of South African readers.

Fallacious Argument

The argument that English is a world language, inviolate in its traditions and its literature, may be true, but for us fallacious. Any traditions can be broken down by calculated official neglect or restrictive legislation. Commerce will not be sufficient to keep a debased form of English here abreast of overseas standards. Defenders of our South African brand of speech may mock at the Babu of the local student returning to his native shores with a R.A.D.A. intonation. But the known alternative is nothing to be proud of in our classrooms, where a good student's sensitive reading of a poem "in English" is a cause for merriment, often not innocent, but hostile.

The proper cultivation of the home language at the impressionable age is an educational discipline for which there is no adequate substitute. It forms the mind, sharpens sensibilities, disseminates ideas, makes for active participation in cultural groups—in short, places in the hands of any minority the only fruitful source of progress. Young nations that prosper have grasped the truth early, that language and culture are two sides of the same coin; they cannot be separated. We can not be expected to hold fast to the one, and to dispense with the other. Culture is no dilettante pursuit of the plastic arts; it is a mode of realizing and achieving, within the framework of a tradition, a way of life that offers the fullest intellectual scope to a people's aspirations. The related cultures that grow alongside of each other in South Africa, need not fear contamination; whatever earns respect will survive, provided there is goodwill and tolerance.

Our task, as English-speaking South Africans, is to become responsible citizens; to maintain unruffled our dignity; to consider ways of survival, in a spirit of collaboration, not of personal rivalry and recrimination. Democratic institutions (we have some left) have never failed, in the end, to find a compromise for dealing justly with the underdog. It would be better not to smart too vocally our grievances, but to contribute unselfishly to the change of heart that will come, not alone by Providential aid, but by our own efforts.

This is what William J. Cory of Eton wrote about education in the 19th century:

". . . you go to school not so much for knowledge as for arts and habits; for the habit of attention, for the art of expression, for the art of assuming at a moment's notice a new intellectual position, for the art of entering quickly into another person's thoughts, for the habit of submitting to censure and refutation, for the art of indicating assent or dissent in graduated terms, for the habit of regarding minute points of accuracy, for the art of working out what is possible in a given time, for taste, for discrimination, for mental courage and mental soberness."

May I, in conclusion, offer the following suggestions to the English Academy of Southern Africa. The Executive Committee and Council could perform a valuable service if it would prepare the following:—

1. A preliminary survey of the state of English in South Africa.
2. An exhortation to English-speaking parents, pupils and teachers in South Africa to do all in their power to preserve English as an effective home language.
3. A regular newsletter entitled "News of the English Academy."
4. A list of organizations with which to co-operate.
5. A census of secondary school teachers who hold University or Training College qualifications in English, and of posts requiring to be filled.