

THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

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Source: *American Annals of the Deaf*, NOVEMBER, 1901, Vol. 46, No. 5 (NOVEMBER, 1901), pp. 488-492

Published by: Gallaudet University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44464223>

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THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH.

It can hardly be denied that the teaching of English is, on the whole, the least successful part of the work of our schools for the hearing as well as of those for the deaf. In spite of the liberal share of time allowed to this study, and of the rigid examination tests applied, our high-schools and colleges, in too large a proportion of cases, fail to awaken in their graduates an intelligent appreciation of and delight in the masterpieces of English literature and to give them a competent mastery of their mother tongue.

While excuses for these shortcomings may be found in the pressure of other studies, in the neglect of careful expression in the conversation even in homes of refinement and cultivation, and in the circumstance that the daily newspaper, which forms the largest and the most immediately interesting part of the reading of most of us, is for the most part hastily written in awkward phrases by uncultivated persons, yet there must be a residuum of justice in the complaints against our methods of English study.

If, wishing to know what our high-schools are doing in this line, we find among the college entrance requirements "Henry Esmond," we feel encouraged. Surely, if a boy of eighteen can be made to understand and to enjoy the wonderful skill with which Thackeray has reproduced the conversation, the acts, the prejudices, the habits of thought of a past century, if he can appreciate the play of motives in the "honor," the "loyalty," and the "religion" of the characters of the third and of the fourth Viscounts Castlewood and their respective spouses and of Harry Esmond—this is something very well worth while. But if, in looking over the examination papers, we find that his study has been directed toward fixing in

his mind the line of succession of the Castlewood title, the movements of Father Holt, the details of the expedition to Vigo, we must feel that the unhappy student has been fed on the husks to the neglect of the kernel.

And the mischief is, not only that he has missed the nutriment which this book might have yielded, but that he has been made to believe that the husk comprises the whole edible contents of a book. He ought to have been led to wish to read "The Virginians" and whatever else will give him Thackeray's best; he should have been prepared better to understand and to enjoy Pepys and Evelyn and Swift; he should have been more capable of judging the faithfulness of Macaulay and of Lecky. As it is, he merely sets down Thackeray as one more "grind," and has no more notion of finding pleasure in sitting down for an afternoon with "Pendennis" than of amusing himself with conjugating the Greek verbs in μ .

In teaching the student to use language there is also, apparently, a false ideal among teachers. The aim seems to be to produce well-turned sentences which shall violate no rules of grammar and which shall be free from everything which may be considered inelegant.

It is significant that we see in the papers every now and then a list of objectionable words and phrases, an *Index Expurgatorius* of heretical expressions, prepared by some professor for the guidance of his students. Usually we find no discrimination between offences of different grades, as if, in a code of conduct, articles six, seven, and eight of the Decalogue were sandwiched in between directions to shut the door after you, to wipe your feet on the mat, and not to pour your tea into the saucer to cool. Inelegancies are as heinous as ineptitudes; an unfashionable word is no less an offence than a word used in a misleading sense. Now, judged by any worthy standard, that is good English which expresses a clean-cut thought

in the mind of the speaker and impresses sharply the very same thought on the mind of the hearer. Usually this result is best reached by language which conforms to the rules of rhetoric and of grammar, and to polite usage. But one is not master of the tongue who does not know when he can best say what he has to say by breaking any of these rules, or who hesitates, on occasion, so to do. Shakespeare, the King James Bible, Swift, Bunyan—here we have the English language at its best, covering, certainly, a very wide range of thought, and yet no four English authors could be named who are less regardful of the niceties of speech. To be always on one's guard against a "split infinitive" or a "continued passive" or against ending a sentence with a preposition is a sure way to be a nerveless, ineffective speaker or writer.

Slang used habitually indicates a want of precision of thought or insufficient command of words, yet one who knows English well and who has a sense of fitness will sometimes make his speech more effective and more appropriate, as well as more picturesque, by a phrase taken from "the man in the street." In speaking of an alert, shrewd, circumspect person, it is better to say that he is "well-posted" than that he is "well-informed." The word connotes something of the neatness, the precision, the promptness of the bookkeeper in transferring the scattered items from the other books of account to the proper ledger heading—something, too, of the limitations of the information thus carefully collected.

Not that the use of language is a light and easy thing to acquire. "This sort goeth not forth but by prayer and fasting." One must read widely, must weigh the derivation, the associations, the shades of meaning, the rhythm and sound-quality of words. He must be quick to recognize a familiar thought in a better form—"What oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed"—and to see in what the superiority of form consists. He must, above all,

take pains that whenever he speaks or writes, his words are an expression of a clear thought. He must, therefore, in order to improve in his use of language, always be learning, always adding to and broadening his knowledge, and, consequently, must always be enunciating to himself his new ideas, and restating his old ideas in their new arrangement.

It is very true that most of the language teaching which is done by teachers of the deaf is of a grade very much lower than that of which this paper has treated. It does not follow, however, that this paper has no practical bearing on the work of teachers of the deaf. Education is one connected whole, from the kindergarten to the university. An improvement at one end of the system may often be usefully applied at the other. In the college it was found that the bench-work in the laboratory taught valuable lessons as to the inexorable exactness of the world of matter and the need of veracity in deeds as in words—lessons which were not as well learned from the Greek lexicon or the integral calculus. By applying the underlying principle, the primary schools are teaching the same lessons through manual training.

To apply to elementary work the principles which have been indicated above as governing the right teaching of English would make this paper too long, and would be quite unnecessary. The writer does not think himself capable of instructing the readers of the *Annals* as to the details of their work. He hopes only that he may have presented a view of the work from another point than the usual one.

It is true, as well for children and of their simple reading as it is for grown men, that "books are not absolutely dead things, but do contain a potency of life in them to be as active as that soul was whose progeny they are." It is true that in reading as in morals, "the letter killeth but the spirit giveth life;" that a study of language which

ends in studying language is profitless and wearying, while a study of language as a key to the world without and the world of mind and soul within, is the most inspiring and fruitful of all study. It is true that in teaching a pupil to write nothing more than sentences which will earn a good mark, we give him a training not much higher than if we spent our time in teaching him euchre, but if we lead him to express his genuine thought adequately in words, we make him, in a very true and deep sense, master of himself and a fellow of his brother men.

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THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF INSTRUCTION FOR AN ORAL CLASS OF BEGINNERS.

It is my purpose to emphasize some general truths derived from a careful consideration of the task of the teacher in charge of a beginning class of oral pupils. Their importance is obvious in the light of the consideration that the degree of their practical observance gauges the success of both teacher and taught.

An examination of current educational aims and methods proves the existence of some false ideas in regard to the philosophy of education. There is one very common mistake to which I would like to call attention; that is the placing of beginning classes in the hands of inexperienced and imperfectly trained teachers. This practice is due to a lack of perfect understanding and a proper appreciation of the difficulties and the importance of this class of work.

Language, as defined by Dr. Culling, "consists primarily of a sequence of variously related sound symbols, definitely adjusted to a corresponding sequence of ideas