

THE EDUCATION OF THE TEACHER OF ENGLISH

An enquiry into the need for a study of the role and status of the English teacher as seen by himself, by his colleagues in other disciplines, by parents and by pupils.

by

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A. The increasing pressure to accept a 'diffuse' role

IN DISCUSSING the contribution of English in the humanities the Newsom Report asks two questions before any others: 'Have aim and method in teaching English kept pace with what we know about young people, how they learn? And does English teaching take sufficient account of the relation between school and the world beyond?' These questions and their prominence in the argument of the Report epitomise trends in the present conception of the aims and role of the teacher of English and represent indeed general movement in at least the theory of education towards a child-centred and outward-looking and away from a subject-centred organisation of the curriculum. Little is known even by teachers of the expectations of parents and children in this matter, but evidence would seem to suggest¹ that they do see the teacher first as a moral guide, then as an instructor in special skills and knowledge, and only after that as an instrument of social adjustment, a guide to good personal relationships or even to vocational advancement. A persuasion to accept a generalised or diffuse role for the teacher is practically universal in educational writings and may be observed not only in Governmental reports but in the published views of professional bodies and in the recommendations, indeed exhortations, of influential writers on the art of teaching. The aim of art teaching, claims Herbert Read, is 'to provide better persons and better societies rather than works of art'. 'Good teaching,' says Marjorie Hourd in *The Education of the Poetic Spirit*, 'rests upon two kinds of understanding, an appreciation of the intrinsic values of the materials to be taught and a knowledge of the nature of children.' Research also would seem to bear out the idea not only that the role of the teacher has become more diffuse, embracing parental functions and the skills and interests of the social worker² but that the teacher who can recognise and work with the individuality of children is more successful than another who works by an

authoritarian class-structured method. Thus, Stern, Stein and Bloom³ reporting student teachers' attempts to portray the teacher at work, comment that 'students rated as more successful teachers introduced greater individuality among the children portrayed, and tended to draw them as active among themselves or with the teacher. The less successful differentiated the teacher figure more clearly in terms of size and status symbols, introduced more order and regularity'. Again and again, successful teaching is seen as focused in the child himself, in his attitude to learning and in his growth as a mature person. The assumption is made that 'where the pupil is "involved" his control of language is sure' (*Beloe Report*, Appendix 8); 'through this process (of using language) his personality and inner self develop and in teaching English we foster that development'. (*N.A.T.E. Criteria of Success in English*).

These assumptions and their implications may well be valid and their expression is no longer novel, but they have reached a state of general promulgation in the educational world which places the teacher of English in a peculiar difficulty, in so far as the boundaries of his subject matter as taught in the schools and training colleges have become exceptionally ill-defined—or if he is of an older generation, out of date—while at the same time provision to help him in the newly established roles of parent substitute, vocational counsellor, provider of social experience, and pedagogic psychologist has been but scantily offered. Nor is it at all certain that he has willingly accepted the duties which are implicit in the accretion of roles at one time peripheral but now central.

B. The special difficulties of the English teacher in the diffuse role

It is not difficult to suggest how the expectations which the teacher of English works to fulfil may have become confused, even contradictory. The needs of the child, the teacher's respect for his own subject, and the demands of society and of the educational system as represented by the school structure and the content of examinations do not always fit harmoniously together. The teacher may in part reject society's demands, be ignorant of some aspects of his own subject, be indifferent to the needs of the child or feel incapable of responding to them—these points are touched on below. For the moment it is sufficient to apprehend that the generalisation and diffusion of expectations may have created in the teacher of English a feeling of great uncertainty as to his role, as to his ability to play it usefully and efficiently. Multiplication of roles is likely to affect him more than most subject teachers, in that the use of English as a skill overlaps and interpenetrates most of the departmental specialities. His responsibility is therefore wide but is seldom lessened in actual practice by any purposive assistance

from other subject specialists. The skills of communication are furthermore so difficult to achieve that the amount of time left to English as a specialist body of knowledge is very limited in school until the sixth form, and this tendency to reduce the specialist field is at variance with the general movement (especially in secondary schools) towards greater specialisation, a movement perhaps well illustrated by the gradual disappearance of the general subjects teacher in the secondary school. Even the teacher of a 'backward form' is now frequently termed a remedial specialist, and it may seem paradoxical that at the same time this tendency and the stress on a child-centred or socially-centred curriculum can coexist. The explanation may be that the responsibility for the generalised curriculum falls on the humanities, and especially on English—thus the uncertainty of the teacher of English as to his precise role and status re-emerges.

C. The grounds for uncertainty in the teacher of English

It is perhaps worthwhile to examine some of the particular causes of this uncertainty. Such an examination may enforce the conclusion that if the uncertainty did not exist, it should do so.

(i) Lack of knowledge of modern subject material

The field of the subject has become vague and indefinite, not only at the advanced edge of study where infinite extension may be expected and desirable, but at the elementary stages of instruction and testing. A fundamental example of this may be seen in the modern approach to linguistic theory. The utility and validity of the traditional Latinized and prescriptive forms of English grammar and the picture given in them of the structure of English have long been questioned⁴ and numerous attacks have been made on their continued use in the classroom⁵. But as yet, the majority of teachers of English have little precise knowledge of any new formulations of the structure of the language. This is not a situation which can lead to self-respect in the specialist teacher, or to the respect of colleagues in other departments.

(ii) Loss of precision in examination procedure

Authoritarian if mechanical definition is also diminishing in the testing of English goals by examinations, which have hitherto outlined the territory of the English teacher—or fenced it in, as some would maintain—and so clarified the aims of instruction. The limits of the examination have proved increasingly unsatisfactory to many constructive teachers, and the charges against English examinations are well known—that, for example, they assess too narrow a range of skills, encourage cramming and teaching in too set a pattern, and condition school work when they should reflect it. But the

charges are now stated with a new emphasis. Such traditional instructions as 'write a letter . . .' are said to be 'not worth examination time' (*Criteria for Success in English*, N.A.T.E.) and examination exercises such as identifying metaphors, supplying synonyms, correcting errors of punctuation and of grammar, are equally condemned. Nor is this merely an idealistic or iconoclastic echo of the enthusiasm of some reformers, but rather it reflects an attitude increasingly embodied in the texts of actual examination papers and in the procedures of the examination room. Thus a panel (East Midland) may abandon set texts and literature papers, or allow texts to be brought into the examination room; extra time may be given, and even permission to discuss an object before writing about it. A sample of the candidate's 'own creative work' may be required, and may carry as much as 30 per cent of the allocation of marks. It may well be that for the better teaching of English this is all to the good; but it does remove some of the props used by the weaker and narrower teacher.

(iii) *Wider variations in accepted usage*

The limits of authority in speech and in conventional written usage are similarly blurred or extended. The recognition of the local social validity and linguistic equivalence of dialect forms undermines, however justifiably, the authority of the teacher, who must now advocate, not demand, an attempt to master standard English. It becomes more than ever important, if the wider ability of standard English to communicate is important, that the teacher should be able to speak and write it himself. The linguistic if not social equivalence of dialect forms may be acknowledged out of an admirable democratic instinct or by the objectivity of a scientific description, but it may also reinforce a timid and parochial urge in teacher or pupil to seek shelter and comfort in a confined social group. There have been attempts to list universally accepted forms of error in writing but the consensus of opinion as to what is an error is surprisingly small.

(iv) *Inaccessibility of the experience of literature to certain pupils*

There is a long and respectable history of reliance on the experience of literature as a means of inculcating linguistic skills and values, and of securing the involvement of the child in experience of value. Certainly the teacher's acquaintance with established works of literature, and his knowledge of literary history, have always delineated one of the central areas of his specialist authority. However, the history of literature has become associated in the minds of some teachers of English with 'the handing out of secondhand opinions' and 'a complacent acquaintanceship with dead facts'. There may indeed still be a belief that if cognitive objectives are developed there will be

a corresponding development of appropriate affective behaviour. Such a supposition may well be the basis of a continuance of instruction in out-moded grammatical terminology referred to earlier. Research summarised by Jacob⁶ queries the tenability of the assumption and seems to point to the development of affective behaviour depending upon appropriate learning experience—as with cognitive behaviour itself. There may indeed be an inverse relationship between growth in cognitive and in affective behaviour, and knowledge of literary history may if acquired without having read and enjoyed the literature itself, lead to less rather than greater love of reading. The imposition, for example, of rote learning exercises in poetry has been known to fix knowledge and dislike of the poems learned in about equal proportions. There seems little doubt that literary history without literary experience is nugatory. But here the teacher of English will often be in a quandary and will find yet again a diminution of the value of his specialist knowledge and authority. The low verbal ability, and the cultural poverty of many pupils in a system of compulsory universal education has made it hard to find accepted works of prose literature which can in fact be read with understanding and enjoyment in the classroom. Where the language is felt to be too difficult or the experience too remote recourse may be had to castrated versions of the original texts or else to a hotch potch of works which may or may not be good, and in judging which the opinion of the non-specialist is as likely to receive credence as that of the teacher of English. It seems possible that the success of schools in spreading reading ability as widely as has been done has to some extent rebounded against the teacher of English and made further progress difficult, because commercial literature, advertising, and certain sections of the mass media have an interest (to which the poorer reader only too readily responds) in keeping content, style and values at a low level.

D. The consequence of accepting the diffuse Role

Nothing that has been said here diminishes the central importance of English in the curriculum. But it may serve to suggest that the teacher of English has more than most teachers a need to rethink the boundaries of his subject and to decide what are his aims and the means to achieve them. In particular he may have to decide what is the basis of his authority in the classroom and in the school hierarchy, and to do this he must assess how far the social and personal roles additional to his subject speciality are acceptable or important to him or within his competence. It could be that the generality of teachers of English have already yielded to the pressure of expectations commonly expressed in the professional literature that they should accept a much more diffuse role than heretofore. But it may be that 'the fat boy

becomes easy-going or jolly because he is expected to'. No certain knowledge is available.

If the wider aims of English teaching are indeed accepted certain consequences follow which are highly critical in the training of teachers of English and in the formulation of an English syllabus. The conditions and the requirements for a fruitful acceptance of a role that is diffuse yet still with specialist status and authority may be summarised thus:

(1) The teacher will wish to expunge inaccuracies and to re-establish his special knowledge of language on a sound basis. There may be, for example, a need for in-service training in the new linguistics.

(2) The conclusions of relevant research and the views expressed in important conferences should be made available to the teacher as a matter of course both when they relate to subject material and to teaching or testing methods. There will possibly be a need for a regular widely distributed bulletin containing this information and asking for comments and guidance, so that a two-way flow of active interest would be established and maintained.

Both the above points concern the teacher as a specialist in English.

The points that follow are directed to his responsibilities and to gaps in his knowledge where the more general roles are to be considered.

(3) If the teacher of English is to develop his subject as a co-ordinating element in the general curriculum, school policies will need to be shaped with this in mind. The allocation of staff and time to the subject may have to be reconsidered. At present, it seems probable that little but lip-service is paid to the concept of integration of skills, and that compartmentalism between subjects is as strong as ever. If this is not so, information about successful co-ordination should be made available to English teachers, heads of schools and others concerned.

(4) The teacher, if he rejects the narrower values of prescriptive usage or of grammar, will need to decide the criteria by which to judge and achieve standards of acceptable speech and writing, and to have a clearer understanding of the nature of communication itself. This may well involve some acquaintance with sociology, with for example the social mobility and the work ambitions of the neighbourhood in which he teaches. This in turn may necessitate frequent meetings and discussions with parents and employers, and considerable extra-curricular activity. Successful adoption of these functions will imply also an accurate and sympathetic understanding of the parents' expectations and of the pupils' too.

(5) If the teacher concurs with the expectation that he will act less as an authoritarian functionary and more as a person in a context, i.e. if he relies for his authority on being known to the child and on knowing him and his

motivations, he will acquire certain personal qualities which may include, for example, a demonstrable enthusiasm for English. The teacher should be 'continually returning to the sources of his inspiration', should in short be an active reader and probably an active writer. This if true may call for facilities for critical discussion of books suitable for children of different age groups, of modern adult literature, and even for publication of anthologies of writings by teachers. This also might need to be organised as an on-going process and not merely as an occasional conference. Will a child read or write, or think these things matter, if his teacher does not?

(6) Similarly, the teacher will need to develop certain skills to a higher or perhaps a more conscious level than is the case at present. These skills and areas of knowledge are largely psychological, and include for example knowledge of child development and of group dynamics. Such subjects could be explored in training courses for beginners but perhaps even more profitably in follow-up courses for experienced teachers. 'All therapists have as their effective core the inter-personal relationship'—if this hypothesis is applicable to the teacher/pupil as to the therapist/patient relationship, the importance of the teacher's understanding of his own role and motivation or of his pupil's is apparent.

E. Information required for the proper erection of English study and training

The resolution of such questions as the following may therefore be of importance in assessing the functions and in re-structuring the training of the teacher of English:

- (a) Is he satisfied with his status as a subject specialist at present?
- (b) Is he satisfied with the state of his knowledge of his subject in all its branches; in which, if in any, is he aware of deficiencies?
- (c) Is he clear about the standards of speech and of writing that he advocates; and does he see himself as authoritatively enforcing these or as attempting to relate them to the social environment?
- (d) Does he hope to influence his pupils by the example of his own enthusiasm and skill—and if so does he read or write much?
- (e) Does he rely for effective work on an imposed discipline or on the stimulation gained by the provision of adequate experiences in school or class, either through suitable reading, drama, speech or through extra-curricular activities?
- (f) Does he expect to modify his aims or the standards of achievement of his pupils in accordance with the relationship to an abstract conception of correct or standard English, or with one to the social setting in which the pupils work?
- (g) Is he satisfied with his knowledge of the psychological motivation and

inter-action of pupils and teacher and of the growth of the child?

(h) How do parents in the school neighbourhood envisage his function? Does he feel that their view is important? The same questions could apply to pupils, colleagues and employers.

(i) What does he consider the effective basis of his instruction and of his authority? What further help, if any, in consolidating this basis does he require?

(j) Does he accept responsibility, and to what degree, to act towards his pupils not only as an instructor in English, in the forms of current or profitable usage, but as parent substitute, friend and counsellor, guide to a suitable job, adviser in the social graces, etc.? Are these and similar roles aids or hindrances to his success as a teacher of English?

(k) What, in short, are the aims and expectations held in the teaching of English by the teacher, the school, the parents and the pupils? In what respects do they coincide or differ? In what ways are they helped, hindered or neglected by present attitudes and customs of pedagogy?

To how many of these questions, if they are questions that matter, does the teacher of English know the answer?

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