

ED 022 764

By - Barnes, Douglas

THE DIRECTION OF ENGLISH TEACHING IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN BRITAIN.

Pub Date 68

Note - 5p.

Journal Cit - The English Quarterly: A Publication of the Canadian Council of Teachers of English; v1 n1 p105-8
Summer 1968

EDRS Price MF - \$0.25 HC - \$0.28

Descriptors - COMPOSITION (LITERARY), CREATIVE TEACHING, CULTURE, DISCUSSION EXPERIENCE, *ENGLISH INSTRUCTION, GRAMMAR, *LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT, LANGUAGE ENRICHMENT, LANGUAGE USAGE, LITERATURE, ORAL EXPRESSION, PATTERN DRILLS (LANGUAGE), *PERSONALITY DEVELOPMENT, PERSONAL VALUES, *SECONDARY EDUCATION, STUDENT REACTION, TEACHER ATTITUDES, *TEACHING METHODS

Identifiers - *Britain

Because of changing attitudes toward culture, language, and the individual student, marked changes in the attitudes of English teachers toward teaching have occurred in Britain during the last 12 years. "Culture" as a set of acceptable things to do and say has given way to a concept which stresses the ability to respond personally to the cultural legacy; consequently, literature teachers have turned from teaching the "right answers" about the "Classics" to choosing works and teaching techniques meaningful to the pupils at their particular stage of development. Since linguists have discouraged the idea of a "good" English, teachers now favor language, oral as well as written, which is appropriate to the objective situation and adequate to render the speaker's subjective intention. Emphasis in composition is placed on topics, audience, and preliminary discussions involving creator and audience. Although such teaching approaches are both difficult and challenging, they stress the unity of development between the child's personality and his language; for by developing in pupils the control of oral and written language necessary for personal expression, the teacher contributes to the development of the individual's ability to hold to his own purposes and values. (LH)

the English quarterly

A Publication of the Canadian Council of Teachers of English

James S. Stone, Editor
University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Ontario

Ruth E. McConnell, Associate Editor
University of British Columbia, Vancouver 8, British Columbia

R. R. Dubinski, Assistant Editor
University of Waterloo

Executive Committee of the Council

President

Merron Chorny

Vice-President

James Stone

Secretary-Treasurer

Jennie Wilson

Members-at-large

Roy Perlstrom

Muriel Kerr

Editorial Board

Brian Salsbury

Ves Thomas

B. H. Smeaton

Lionel Wilson

W. P. M. Denham

Mary Campbell

Michael Brian

Harry McFarlane

Donald Stephens

Design, Layout and Illustrations

George Roth

Bob Murray

University of Waterloo

Vol. 1, No. 1 Summer, 1968

ED022764

ED022764

TE000666

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

[The Dartmouth Seminar] would urge the widespread conception of an English workshop—equipped with stackable furniture, sound-proofed tape-recording booths, space readily available for movement work, drama rostra, etc. (John Dixon, Growth Through English).

The Direction of English Teaching in Secondary Schools in Britain

Douglas Barnes

During the last twelve years in Britain there have been sharp changes in English teachers' attitudes to their work. This has certainly affected what teachers are ready to admit to in public; how widely it has in fact changed classroom methods is not clear.

Teachers now recognise that the child comes to school with a highly developed linguistic competence and that this is all the time being specialised to new uses outside the classroom. The teacher no longer sees himself as controlling the whole of his pupils' linguistic development, but rather as setting up situations in the classroom which will compel the pupil to extend the boundaries of his uses of language.

Beyond this, however, can be recognised a related, and greater, change in our whole attitude to culture. In the past 'Culture' seemed to be the possession of a high-status group, a set of acceptable things to do and say. It defined for the 'cultured' not only their accent and dialect, but what books they read, and what they said about them. The outsider who wished to join the high-status group had to take over their 'culture'. In taking it over, it was of more importance to 'know about' and to conform outwardly than to know at first hand. The teacher's task was straightforward: he possessed a body of 'culture' which he was to hand on to outsiders who wanted it.

This version of 'culture' has been under sharp attack from both literary critics and linguists. The critics have insisted that received opinions and 'knowing about' literature are of little value as compared with the ability to respond for oneself. In the classroom this has meant that teachers no longer choose 'The Classics' because 'everybody out to know them', but aim to choose works which the pupils can find meaningful at their present stage of development. In

teaching, emphasis has moved away from 'knowing the story', from notes on character and style, and from the writing of the 'Appreciation', since all of these imply 'right answers' and the need to 'know about'. (Nobody ever expected a child to write unappreciatively in his Appreciation.) Now the crucial idea is 'response': teachers see themselves as developing pupils' responses to literature.

More recently, the socio-linguists' insistence upon the diversity of language forms has discouraged the old idea of one kind of 'good English' which can be applied in all circumstances. Teachers have heard of linguistic 'registers'; a few are hesitantly passing on this awareness to their older pupils. Increasingly, language is treated not as a right/wrong matter that can be judged by clear objective criteria, but as a complex matter, to be judged as more or less appropriate to the task in hand. Nor can all language be judged only by its appropriateness to audience and situation; all our more personal utterances must also be seen in relation to our subjective intentions, analogous in this respect to works of literature. Thus it has become impossible to see English teaching as leading pupils to use language in ways based upon models. The old 'English Essay' with its prescribed high style is no longer insisted upon; the teaching of spoken English is far removed from what used to be called 'elocution'. There is no one form of English to be learnt, but a myriad of subtle adjustments to subjective intention on the one hand and to the objective situation on the other.

With this new attitude has come a decrease of emphasis upon linguistic table-manners. In the written language, for example, spelling and punctuation are seen as important, but not of the first importance. Increasingly, teachers are understanding that social class dialects are not the random errors of carelessness and ignorance, but systematic variants. Such developments as these are probably related to the general desire to extend Secondary education to the whole population; control over one's mother tongue is no longer indissolubly linked with the linguistic conventions of one social group. Nor does this imply a loss of standards; standards lie in appropriateness to situation certainly—though not all situations demand the behaviour of 'polite' society—but they lie too in adjustment to the subtleties of the speaker's intentions. Working-class pupils no longer need feel rejected.

The linguists's message that the old latinate grammar is not intellectually respectable has reinforced a long-standing attack on its use in schools. It is still taught in many schools, but its advocates call it 'formal English' and seldom speak out in public. More teachers know of the research which has indicated that the old grammar increases neither pupils' accuracy nor their control over linguistic structures. There is little sign of its replacement by any of the new grammars, since teachers assume that they will be no more efficacious. In Britain, very few teachers have argued in public that grammar should be studied as an aspect of man in society; there is more interest in socio-linguistics, though this is not yet widespread.

What is universal is a new interest in spoken English. The teacher in British schools is exceptionally free to choose; he does not have to teach to a prescribed sequence, or work through a textbook chosen by someone else. English departments usually choose books by agreement; any course-books will be supplied for the teacher to use or ignore as he wishes. Constrictions have come only from external

examinations, and from the teacher's self-imposed submission to a course-book. The course-book is now sharply under attack, and the emphasis upon spoken English has reinforced this. As soon as pupils are encouraged to join whole-heartedly in discussion, the teacher is no longer in total control of the situation; the pupils contribute as much towards the lesson's direction as does the teacher's deliberate planning, and his interventions become at best inspired improvisations. This open-ended conception of English teaching informs most published writing today; but it would be foolish to imagine that all English teaching is like this.

'Spoken English' does not imply so much the preparation of formal lectureries and so on, as a new emphasis upon an exploratory 'thinking aloud'. Whenever we take over a new conceptual framework we need to 'talk it over', to try our hands at using it in conversation whose reciprocity will enable us to adjust and modify what we say. This has led—in other subjects as well as English—to a renewed interest in small group work. Discussion in the small group can be intimate, exploratory, hesitant and inexplicit; this can be treated as a preparation for discussion of the same topic in full class, where the size of audience will demand a style of utterance which is more public, explicit, confident and 'finished'. And this in its turn may prepare for the still greater explicitness of some kinds of writing. But this rationale is not perhaps what the teachers themselves would offer; they would be more likely to speak of enabling more of the class to take part in discussion, and of helping pupils to bring their own experiences to bear upon the task in hand.

Much of the attack upon the course-book has been an attack upon 'English exercises', the practising of 'skills'. (The very word 'skills' is unacceptable in England.) The assumption now is that pupils' control of language is most likely to be enhanced when they are communicating something which matters to them and to people whose response they value: it is the artificiality of 'exercises' which damns them. The old exercises assumed that to learn to write well the pupils must practise separately each abstractable element of writing: spelling, vocabulary, grammar, paragraph structure, and essay planning. This assumption disproved itself when the resulting essays were dull lumps of commonplace. Writing is a complex ability that cannot be analysed in this way. In writing we attend to meaning, that is, to what we want to say, which depends partly on subject matter and partly on audience and purpose; we give no attention to grammar as such. Thus, in the teaching of writing, teachers in Britain have moved to emphasizing the topics given, the audience for whom the writing is intended, and the preliminary discussion which both opens up the possibilities of the topic and demonstrates that there is an interested audience. The pupils have something to say; if they can be persuaded to want to say it as well as possible, this itself will develop their language. Such is the argument behind the approach known (unfortunately) as 'creative writing'; the development of the child's personality and of his language are held to be so indissoluble that one cannot be developed without the other. Most teachers today uphold this belief, though not all have fully developed its classroom implications.

The tendency is towards a very fluid 'classroom conversation' in which a lesson may include speech, improvised drama, composition, literature, without separating these from one another. The teacher,

choosing a 'topic' which he expects to be of strong interest to the class, brings in works of literature related to the topic (or arranges films or visits etc.), and leads discussion both of the works and of relationships to the children's lives: the discussion may transmute itself from time to time into improvised drama, or writing, and back again, may go on in groups or in whole class, and may last for a series of lessons. Wider reading of literature can be assumed to be going on in parallel with this. It would be absurd to suggest that the majority of teachers work in this fluid manner, but there is widespread interest shown. (Although advocates of such teaching stress that the teacher should choose his own material, many books of 'topics' have been published and are widely used.) It is implied that the class should be its own audience—though some of the more personal writing would be for the teacher alone—and that the writer or speaker expects a reply to what he says, and not merely a comment on how he says it. At its best the classroom conversation is vivid, outspoken, and challenging: however, it is extremely hard work, especially for an inexperienced teacher.

Thus, teachers in England and Wales would say that their task was not to teach 'knowledge' but to develop their pupils' control of language. This control would relate not only to objective tasks, such as business letters or an account of a chemistry demonstration, but also to the use of personal language. In fact there is a marked tendency to stress the latter, mainly because our power to represent our own unique experiences and purposes to ourselves through language is probably an important basis of individuality, and of an individual's ability to hold to his own purpose and values. (Surprisingly, in Britain one hears little about the function of personal language in sustaining the shared attitudes and trust upon which any joint action, even society itself, must be based.) It is from the importance of individual values that comes the teachers' stress upon improvised drama—which is used widely and well—upon the pupils' own writing of poems and stories and about their own first-hand experiences, and upon literature. Teachers do not see this as 'free expression'; they believe that discipline is to be found in the need to speak or write precisely and fully to an interested audience. To develop this is to develop the responsibility both to oneself and to one's fellows which adult life demands.