

ENGLISH IN OUR SCHOOLS. *

"Students after matriculation are found to be unable to understand lectures in English when they join a College.... Many students pass through the entire University course without acquiring anything approaching to a command of the language, and proceed to a Degree without even learning to write a letter in English correctly and idiomatically."

These are grave charges and they have been framed by no less a body than the Indian Universities Commission. The Commission, however, cannot be credited with the *discovery* of these gross evils, for a diligent search into the Calcutta University Minutes brings the fact to light that in the previous history of the University these evils have been pointed out from time to time by earnest workers in the field of Indian education and the remedies suggested by them have been adopted by the authorities with a view to remove the evils. But none of the suggested alterations and modifications of the Rules for Examination have much improved matters; nay, matters have gone from bad to worse during recent years. It is premature to judge how the Draft Regulations now before the Government of India will affect the question in the years to come. Let us however hope for the best.

Some people observe that no improvement, no remedy, no novel method can be devised that will remove these evils and usher in a millenium. The deliberate plan of imparting knowledge through the medium of a *foreign tongue* and of compelling the learner to employ a *foreign tongue* for the expression of thought is so unnatural that it is bound to fail. The evil here is as deep-rooted as the taint of original sin and there can be no such virtue in Rules for Examination as to make the impossible possible. Scotchmen, Irishmen, Americans, argue they, are not always correct or idiomatic in their English,

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and you cannot expect the Indian to acquit himself with credit in a matter wherein even Scotchmen, Irishmen and Americans are on unsafe ground. The Indian is therefore bound to write and speak incorrect and unidiomatic English to the end of the chapter.

This is, no doubt, the truth, but by no means the whole truth. Whilst admitting the force and the justice of the argument, I am at the same time unwilling to subscribe to the sweeping generalisation involved in it. It is as hasty and therefore as untenable as the assertion of Epimenides "All Cretans are liars." A little reflection will bring it home to all candid minds that there have been, and there are still, men among us who can speak and write English with as much ease, fluency and correctness as Englishmen of culture. It is superfluous to mention well-known names. Suffice it to say that our late Chancellor, a man noted as much for his academic culture as for the rare gift of oratory, had the candour to express his admiration and envy at the facility with which educated Indians spoke English—and he certainly was not swayed by partiality to the Indian or by the love of exaggeration. It is patent, therefore, that the thing may be difficult but it is by no means impossible. Since so many eminent Indians have obtained a mastery over the English tongue, the difficulties of acquiring English for practical purposes as a ready instrument of thought cannot be insurmountable. What man has done, man can do. We need not therefore despair. What is necessary is that the real difficulties of the problem, the true requirements of the case should be realised and a sounder and more rational system of teaching (and examination) should be carefully evolved and worked out.

Three things, then, are to be borne in mind in dealing with this grave problem—viz—(1) English is a foreign tongue to Indians; (2) English is to be learnt by Indian students not as a 'second language' (e. g. as an English boy learns German or French), but in such a manner that it may become 'a second

native language to them, if I am permitted to employ such an expression ; (3) English is a living language of a vigorous growth.

The existing system of teaching the subject in our schools is too well-known to require any detailed description. Its special features are these :—

(1) *English is invariably taught now-a-days*, in our Province at any rate, *by men to whom it is a foreign tongue*. There was a time when Englishmen worked as Head Masters of Government College Schools. The change has of course been due to the spread of English education in India which has produced an adequate number of competent Indian teachers of English. Many of these teachers, however, are not only *not* Englishmen, but they have never come in contact with Englishmen in the whole course of their school and college career. The whole of their knowledge is therefore derived from books, and books are often unsafe guides in matters of pronunciation and idiom. Their pupils are in consequence taught many things wrong. Probably the employment of Certificated Teachers in future will set matters right in this direction.

(2) *The work of the lower classes is confided to ill-paid and ill-equipped teachers* and thus the student's English is corrupted in the very source. The improvement of the status of our teachers is an imperative necessity. I am even ready in this connection to hazard the paradox that the very best men should be employed for the purpose of teaching English in the lower classes, the mischief resulting from the employment of second-rate or third-rate men in the higher classes being infinitely less than that proceeding from the existing arrangement.

(3) *Indian teachers of English employ, oftener than they should, the vernacular as the medium of instruction*. This is unavoidable in the lowest classes but as soon as the pupils have obtained some grasp of the language, the employment of the vernacular both by the teacher and the pupil should be the

exception rather than the rule. Only where the teacher suspects that the pupil has not fully grasped the sense of a passage owing to some difficulty of construction or of thought, he should encourage his pupil to express his thoughts in the vernacular with a view to obtain a sure test of his accuracy and correctness, and when the pupil fails in his attempt the teacher should come forward with a clear exposition of the thought in the vernacular. The intervention of the mother tongue in season and out of season hampers the pupil in obtaining a thorough grasp of a foreign tongue.

(4) Many teachers have a very hazy idea about explanation in English and *the silly mechanical process of paraphrasing* (by which I mean the substitution of synonyms) *is systematically gone through* at a certain stage of the pupil's progress in the knowledge of the language. These teachers lose sight of the elementary fact that the real object of explanation is the clear exposition of the thoughts of the author in simpler and easier language. Paraphrase goes but a little way towards the fulfilment of this object.

(5) *Too much stress is laid on the technical knowledge of grammar.*

(6) *The provision for Composition is very inadequate, specially in the lower classes. Besides what little is done in this way is purely mechanical work.*

(7) *Exclusive attention is paid to the class Reader or text-book throughout the entire course of school-work both by teachers and pupils. No encouragement is given and no provision made in class-work or class-examination for outside reading.* Most schools in the mofussil possess no library at all, and both teachers and pupils live, move and have their being within the text-book's 'scanty plot of ground.'* The text-book thus takes the place of the subject, Keys and similar nuisances supplant the Dictionary and cram and coaching leave no room for self-help and honest work.

It cannot be denied that the system of examination that

obtains in the University is mainly responsible for some of these unwholesome features of the prevailing system of teaching, for it is a notorious fact that our teachers do their work with an exclusive eye to the examination. The ambition of the great bulk of our teachers is not to teach their pupils thoroughly and well but to make them pass their examination. They are not entirely to blame in the matter, considering that the public, the managers of schools, nay the University itself judge of the quality of work turned out by a school by the results of the University Examination.

‘Hence every *school*, to one lov’d blessing prone,
Conforms and models life to that alone.
Each to the fav’rite happiness attends,
And spurns the plan that aims at other ends,

I propose now to deal more fully with the last three questions as I am deliberately of opinion that no improvement, no remedy, no reform is possible unless and until the two fetishes of *grammar* and *text-book* are smashed down, and *practical composition* and *wide general reading* substituted in their place. And this is all the more necessary considering that the knowledge of English we expect in our boys should be more thorough and extensive than that of ‘a second language.’ We should never lose sight of the fact that this foreign language will have to be deliberately adopted as the medium of expression of thought throughout the entire course of school and college education.

As to grammar, English is so totally unlike the classical languages in the number and variety of inflexional forms that a previous knowledge of the rudiments of grammar is quite unnecessary here. The method of beginning with simple reading-lessons and leaving the young learner to deduce the rules of grammar from them may very well be pursued. This is done to a certain extent; only the teacher’s well-meant but injudicious practice of giving unnecessary help by the formulation of rules should be discarded. He must see that his pupils draw their own

conclusions from the cases observed by them. The teacher should be an educator in the true sense of the term. At the next stage a knowledge of the broad outlines of grammar (e. g. the few inflexional forms that the language possesses and the rules of concord) suffices for the practical purposes of (1) 'ability to write and (speak) clear, simple, and correct English and (b) intelligent comprehension of plain modern English prose on familiar subjects,' to quote the words of the Draft Regulations.

The text-books of English grammar generally in use are, on the other hand, full of technical terms and technical definitions based upon subtle philosophical distinctions and technical information derived from the scientific enquiries of scholars like Morris and Kellner with constant references to Anglo-Saxon and Latin. All this is of absolutely no use to junior students whose one object must be practical and not scientific. Advanced students only may take up these linguistic and philological researches with advantage when they have obtained a thorough grasp of the language in a practical way. The elaborate treatises of Rowe-Webb and Nesfield are absolutely out of place at the school stage. Besides, a great part of these so-called treatises on grammar is taken up with a more or less exhaustive treatment of the idiom of the language, and compiler and teacher vie with each other in recommending the students to commit to memory long lists of idiomatic phrases, appropriate prepositions *et hoc genus omne*. A more idiotic plan of learning idiomatic English can hardly be imagined. Considering that our students pick up their phrases and idioms thus, it is not at all to be wondered at that they misuse them. Vaguely conscious as they are of the real sense, they lug them in by hook or by crook, in season and out of season, without rhyme or reason, and sow them thick and fast in their crude composition, thus earning for their style the undying title of 'Baboo-English' (of which I have given you a fair specimen by the way.) The proper method of learning the idiom of a language, it is almost

superfluous to add, is the constant habit of wide and careful reading of the best authors.

I strongly deprecate also the practice of setting apart a certain number of hours in the class scheme for grammar-lessons; the rational process of teaching grammar is in connection with the reading-lessons and composition. Concrete illustrations and practical applications of the abstract rules can alone impress them permanently on the mind; and the practical test of a student's grammatical knowledge lies not in the flawless reproduction of the rules from memory but in the correctness of his style. From this point of view I strongly condemn the riddles we come across in the question-papers at the Entrance Examination, of the supply-the-missing-word or supply-the-missing-letter type as puerile and superfluous. Surely the papers written by the candidates afford a test of ability to write and spell correctly as adequate as could be desired. The time now unprofitably spent over dry and formal grammar lessons should be utilised by devoting more attention to wide general reading and the practice of composition.

I now come to the question of *text-books*. The critical study of a small portion of literature with a view to obtain a thorough grounding is all very well. But this is overdone in our schools. The quantity prescribed for such reading in the eight or nine classes of a secondary school is ridiculously small. I once made a calculation which revealed the startling fact that our boys go through 378 pages of English reading in the eight or nine years of their school career! Even if this is eked out by adding the number of pages they have to read in History (the only other literary object in the curriculum, a subject, however, which they get up by sheer cram), the quantity, I must say, is hopelessly inadequate for the purpose of obtaining a wide command of the language with a view to adopt it as a second native language, as I have said before. Once again I

must urge upon educationists the consideration that English is to be deliberately adopted as the medium of instruction as well as the medium of expression of thought in all subjects. Looked at from this point of view, the practice of paying exclusive attention to a series of short Readers must be pronounced to be radically wrong, especially because there is absolutely no provision for supplementing the work by outside reading. Our teachers often forget the primary fact that the great object of the student is to obtain mastery over the language, and not over certain books. The text-book is at best a means to an end, not an end in itself. It is as gross an act to substitute a text-book for a subject as to substitute an idol or an image for the Infinite and the Absolute. 'The student must learn to live largely in the general element of the language, and minute accuracy in details is not to be sought before a fluent, practical command of the general currency of the language has been obtained. He must devour everything greedily that he can lay his hands upon.' These weighty words of one of the greatest of language-teachers of the last century (John Stuart Blackie) should be worn as frontlets between their eyes by all teachers of English. For this purpose, encouragement should from the very beginning be given to wide reading and room should be made in class-examinations for testing outside reading even in the lowest classes. In the four upper classes, whilst the class Reader, which is more a hindrance than a help, is retained for critical study, it should be given a very subordinate place and adequate provision should be made for wide general reading.

A singular fallacy prevails in certain quarters that this arrangement amounts to the disuse of a Reader for purposes of class-teaching and it is apprehended that the ridiculous practice of getting up phrases and idioms from manuals specially prepared for the purpose will be accentuated by it. But as I have already said, a critical study of a small

portion of literature has its use, even if no actual examination is held in it. What I strongly deprecate is the sad and inevitable result of the practice of prescribing a text-book, namely, it confines both teacher and pupil to a limited number of pages within which they live, move and have their being like veritable frogs in a well, without ever breathing the free atmosphere of wide general reading. Let the teacher form a clear idea of the capacities of his pupils and fix the standard they are expected to come up to. This done, they should be given full liberty to 'browse at will upon the fair and wholesome pasturage' of English literature, to use the felicitous words of Charles Lamb.

Further, the teacher should by no means introduce his pupils to styles that have gone out of fashion, however excellent they might have counted in their days. The prose styles of Addison, Johnson and Gibbon, Goldsmith and Cowper, De Quincey and Macaulay have become classical, we admit; they have had their imitators and admirers; nay, they have a permanent value and deserve and obtain as much admiration today as they did in the past. They are 'not of an age but for all time.' But what is sorely needed for the *practical* requirements of Indian school-boys is that they should be conversant with English as she is spoken and written at the present day. She has grown for centuries and yet she shows no signs of decay or stagnation. 'Age cannot wither her nor custom stale her infinite variety.' In plain words, English is a *living* language with a rapid and vigorous growth and it is impossible to practically profit by its study unless we keep pace with the rapid strides it has been taking in these days. It has been going through changes as subtle as those of Proteus of old and he alone can seize it and hold it who is familiar with its newest phase. The process of learning it should therefore be totally unlike that of learning a classical language with its stereotyped forms of speech. Let the advanced student derive profit and pleasure from a study of the great masters of old and familiarise himself with the historic development of the language and its literature, but the beginner should have as little to do with literary fashions and forms of a bye-gone age as possible. To him

the newest tale of Stevenson, the latest article in the newspaper of the day is of more practical value than the elegant periods and the nicely balanced and highly Latinised style of an Addison or a Johnson, a Burke or a Macaulay. I may remark by the way that a Saxon diction is the prevailing mode nowadays and Freeman, Kingsley and Tennyson are better models today than Addison, Johnson or Gibbon. The English race have overthrown the domination of Rome in Church and State and their latest victory has been won over the Latin element in their language. This up-to-date style the student should familiarise himself with and choose for his model,

I may now offer a few hints on the plan the teacher should follow in his class-work. In the time-table for the four upper classes, *two hours a day* are devoted to English, *viz. one* hour to the text-book, and *one* hour to Grammar, Composition and Translation in alternation. All this should be changed. I have already said that the quantity of Grammar needed for practical purposes is by no means heavy. A great part of it will be done in the lower classes and what remains to do at this stage should go hand in hand with reading-lessons and Composition. No time, therefore, is to be set apart for Grammar by itself. *Two hours in the week* will do for the *text-book* or class Reader, considering the subordinate place given to it under this scheme. *Three hours in the week* for Translation (both kinds) will not prove inadequate. The remaining hours should be divided between Composition and general reading, these two things being of paramount importance. Under the head of Composition, Essay-writing (a somewhat ambitious term by the way) and Letter-writing are usually done; these are somewhat formal affairs and the work is often done mechanically. Summarising long stories or chapters of a historical or romantic narrative, story-writing from bare outlines supplied, reproduction of familiar stories—these methods are less irksome and at the same time very useful. The teacher should read out stories or newspaper articles or paragraphs (not of course for the purpose of political training!) to the class and ask his pupils to summarise or reproduce them on the spot, or to explain difficult passages occurring in them, permission being given them to use a

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Dictionary. I may remark by the way that the multiplication of Keys consequent upon the system of prescribing *text-books* has rendered the consultation of a Dictionary a work of supererogation with our students. A regular plan should be followed in the matter of general reading. Books should be recommended for home reading (this is not meant to shut out voluntary reading) and the pupils examined in their contents at school, the teacher helping them over their difficulties. Last, not least, the work of the class should be conducted throughout in English and the pupils systematically drilled in speaking readily in correct English. This habit, considering its many advantages, cannot be too highly valued. Besides the paramount importance of the tongue and the ear in matters of pronunciation, the ear should be trained from early years to be a judge of correct English so that all errors may jar upon it. The habit will, again, be of great service to young men on their entrance into life, whatever profession they may choose for themselves. Correct speaking then should be the first step to correct writing.

I have reserved the question of Translation for the last as it involves a somewhat contentious point. I have remarked in a former part of my paper that in the course of the reading-lessons at any but the elementary stage, the intervention of the vernacular should be avoided to the uttermost, as constant references to the mother-tongue rather loosen than strengthen the learner's hold on a foreign tongue. I have for many years thought that one indirect cause of the defective knowledge of English in present-day students is the very rapid development of the vernacular literatures of India, especially Bengalee. Thirty years ago there was no juvenile literature in the vernaculars (except the school text-books made to order) and young people turned to English literature for amusement. Nowadays in place of story-books for children written in English we have a growing juvenile literature in the vernaculars and what is gain in one direction is loss in another.

The ideal method of acquiring a foreign tongue is by having as little to do with the mother-tongue as possible and by deliberately setting about to read, write, speak and think in the foreign

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tongue. This, then, precludes all necessity of Translation. But we must take things as they are. We cannot change our environments at our sweet will; it is neither feasible nor desirable that Indian school-boys should cut off all connection with the mother-tongue. Then, again, they are taught by teachers of their own nationality. Under these circumstances I am of opinion that a constant comparison of the peculiarities of English grammar and idiom with those of the grammar and idiom of their vernacular is of very great value. Nothing brings this difference to so much prominence and drives it home to the mind so forcibly as the two-fold method of Translation—viz.—from English into the vernacular and from the vernacular into English. Translation also enables the learner to master the vocabulary of the foreign tongue with quickness. For these reasons, Translation is of the highest importance. Considering the political condition of British India, it is absolutely necessary that we should everyone of us be bilingual i. e. be able to express our thoughts with equal facility and correctness in the mother-tongue as well as in English, which should be, as I have said more than once, a second native language to us. *Arjuna*, the ideal *Kshatriya* in the *Mahabharata* could shoot with equal facility with either hand; modern India likewise should possess equal facility in the use of either language as a vehicle of thought.

The working out of the scheme will depend on the capacity and intelligence of our Teachers. I have complained in a former part of my paper that the work of the lower classes is often in the hands of ill-paid and ill-equipped men. There is no hope of improved teaching before this crying evil is remedied. I am at the same time aware that we have veteran Head Masters among us who have a clear conception of the needs of the situation but who are unable to do their level best for lack of opportunities. The new Regulations, let us hope, will go a great way towards removing those drawbacks in the system of examination which have all along hampered them. And hearty co-operation with the spirit of the new Regulations on the part of all concerned is bound to produce excellent results.
