

Some Old Answers to Some Current Questions

About Teaching English

by

Ken Donelson

Given the screaming headlines about the state of English teaching, English teachers currently are doing nothing right. If "Johnny Can't Read" or "Jenny Can't Write," doesn't depress us, headlines like "English Teachers Badly Prepared" and "S.A.T. Scores Reflect on English Teachers" will. The furor might lead a number of us to wonder why we ever got into the field or why we bother to stay in it. A bit of historical perspective helps. If we take the time to look at old articles on English teaching, we may discover that the same battles we fight today have been fought before and the attacks that seem so modern are not at all modern.

Below I've listed several questions that are going around along with an old response. The old words may not solve our modern problems, but they just might give us some reason to keep on going. Teachers in the past apparently survived their onslaughts. Possibly we might, also.

WASN'T ENGLISH TEACHING FAR BETTER IN THE OLD DAYS?

"English is probably both the least-taught and the worst-taught subject in the whole educational field. It is bad in the grade schools, worse in the high schools, worst in the college, while the university reaps the full benefit of this evil *crescendo*. The 'English' of the modern curriculum varies from a silly combination of 'Mother Goose' and the jargon of science or the shibboleths of religions to a disingenuous synthesis of antique philology and emasculated literature. No wonder some of the men and women who speak and write their language well would extend to prose the judgment passed upon poetry: English untaught is taught best. A teacher of English is so often a spoiler of English."

(Alexander F. Chamberlain, "The Teaching of English," *Pedagogical Seminary*, June 1902, p. 4)

WHAT'S BACK OF THE "BASICS" IDEA?

"Certain influences are at work in public education today which indirectly affect to a considerable degree the problems of teaching English. One is the program of financial retrenchment and the three R's for national defense. Another is the current organized attack upon the left wing of progressive education by a group of men who disapprove of its social, economic, and educational views and are at the same time committed to a program of reduction of costs in the public schools. Still another is the effort on the part

of certain leaders in education to reduce the time and recognition given to English in the schools because of their conviction that, as it is now taught in many places, it makes little contribution to the fundamental objectives of secondary education today. A fourth is the lively dispute in progress throughout the country over a return to the old emphasis upon mental discipline through a program of the critical and analytical reading of the 'great books.'

(Dora V. Smith, "Today's Challenge to Teachers of English," *English Journal*, February 1941, pp. 101-102)

HOW CAN WE TEACH ENGLISH IN THIS SKEPTICAL, SCIENTIFIC AGE?

"This is a skeptical age. But it is also an age, as I see it, in which the search for truth, by the people as a whole, is more earnest and intent than it has ever been in any previous age. It is a hard-boiled age, an age in which youth is not accepting dogma from its elders without checking up for itself. There is a new generation just now coming along which did not experience the war disillusionment. How that generation will react to life is still a mystery. I think, sometimes, that I see signs that it will not take quite such a hard-boiled view of everything. But I can sympathize most heartily with the generation, now in the thirties, which saw all of the old standards, everything that it had been taught was right, thrown overboard and smashed by the war. Everything it had been taught as truthful — or so these poor youngsters believed — turned out to be a lie.

All the old standards of honor and conduct seemed to crumble before its eyes. It came through the war utterly disillusioned and skeptical, but with an intense desire for new standards, for standards that it could prove and cling to, a yearning for the bald, naked truth such as has seldom been felt by any such considerable number of people at one time. And the books which it has read most eagerly, accepted most heartily, have been the books which purported to interpret the world of today in terms of life as these disillusioned young people believed it to be, and not in terms of an antiquated code, which had failed them and the rest of mankind when it was most needed.

I think I can discern signs that the literature of disillusionment is beginning to be replaced by a more constructive literature, that creeds which will work better than the old ones are beginning to be set up and accepted, and that the books which will win the greatest popularity in the decade to come will be those which exalt the new standards — standards and ideals compatible with what youth of today knows to be the truth about life, or believes to be the truth, which amounts, after all, to the same thing."

(Frank Parker Stockbridge, "What Are the 'Popular' Books — And Why?" *English Journal*, June 1931, pp. 448-449)

"We are living in an age of science. Our atmosphere is surcharged with the problems of chemical affinity, of electrodynamics, of biological evolution, and of the solar universe in general. Those of us whose studies lie in another direction, who deal with the phenomenon of human character in its historic continuity, know well — without

especial reminder — that it yearly becomes harder to get a hearing from this onrushing materialistic generation."

(J. M. Hart, "The Scientific Method in English Literature Teaching," *The Academy*, April 1892, p. 125)

WHAT'S HAPPENED TO THE GOOD OLD-FASHIONED STANDARDS WE USED TO HAVE IN ENGLISH?

"Why, in spite of the increasing emphasis upon English, and the improvement both in the editing of English classics and in textbooks on rhetoric, do high school graduates continue to fall so far short of the eminently reasonable requirements of the normal schools? Why are they not only slipshod in expression and indifferent as to spelling and punctuation, but also sometimes glaringly ungrammatical in speech and writing? Why are their ideas so vague concerning the fundamental qualities of good composition and the obvious characteristics of the novel, the drama, the lyric? Why do they remember so little of the literature they have studied? Above all, why are they so unaccustomed to thinking for themselves and to asking questions about what they do not understand? They are earnest in spirit, and their interest in things of the mind, if not always a vital motive force, is at least easily aroused; but when it comes to ability to stick to a point, to exclude irrelevant matter, to follow logical order, to find the right word to clinch an important conception — to say nothing of knowledge of ordinary means of securing emphasis — in these acquirements they are often deplorably wanting."

(Sarah J. McNary, "A Few Reasons Why," *English Journal*, June 1912, p. 351)

". . . ask a group of business men in any city and they will tell you that they are driven to distraction by stenographers who cannot spell and by clerks who cannot add, much less compute fractions; yet these persons have been educated in our public-school systems at great public expense. Having had some experience in teaching classes of adult business women in the essentials of English usage, I know that they clamor for commas and rules governing them, for vocabulary, spelling, and for rules governing the use of 'who' and 'whom.' They say if they had been taught the rules, they would not now grope for the right expression. They are spending money for something which it is their right to have learned as graduates of our public high schools in recent years. Have we not swung to the left far enough, and is it not time to steer our course toward a saner middle ground?"

(Myriam Page, "The Other Side," *English Journal*, June 1937, pp. 443-444)

"I find that the greatest lack in our Freshman is in grammar," ran one comment, and it continues: 'My experience is that a very few come to us particularly well trained in grammar. But the overwhelming majority of students evince practically no knowledge of the subject. They often do not know even the parts of speech. I believe that grammar is suffering the most in college preparation.' Another teacher declared that 'the chief difficulty, beyond the crudest of errors, is perhaps in general organization.' From still

another college comes the complaint that 'students are not so much at fault grammatically as they are empty of ideas. My struggle has been against a sleepy and easy rhetoric.' A fourth professor declared, 'We should like to have our incoming Freshmen able to read and write. Some possess only third-grade reading ability; many only sixth. Too many cannot spell, put periods at ends of sentences, or avoid gross grammatical errors.'

(J. W. Beattie, "Does the High School Prepare for College English?" *English Journal*, November 1939, p. 714)

SHOULDN'T ENGLISH TEACHERS TEACH GRAMMAR?

"A great many people seem to think that the study of grammar is a very dry subject indeed, but that it is extremely useful, assisting the pupils in writing and in speaking the language in question. Now I hold the exactly opposite view. I think that the study of grammar is really more or less useless, but that it is extremely fascinating. I don't think that the study of grammar, at least in the way in which grammar has been studied hitherto, has been of very material assistance to any one of the masters of English prose or poetry, but I think that there are a great many things in grammar that are interesting and that can be made interesting to any normal schoolboy or schoolgirl.

The chief thing is not to approach grammar from the side of logic or abstract definitions. What is wanted is to show that language is a living thing and what that means. When children begin to learn about cats and dogs they don't start with the definition of what a cat is or what a dog is, but they learn that this animal, which is very interesting to them, is a cat, and this other animal which is perhaps even more interesting to them, is a dog, and then perhaps after many years they will advance so far in their study of zoology that they would be asked in an examination the question, 'How would you define a cat?' or 'How would you define a dog?' — though I don't believe that even in the case of zoology you would think of asking that sort of question. Now, then, why should we start with definitions of nouns, adjectives, and verbs, and all these things? I don't see that there is any reason in that.

(Otto Jespersen, "Modern English Grammar," *School Review*, Oct. 1910, p. 530)

"It is now almost universally conceded that the time spent below the high schools in teaching technical grammar, is time absolutely wasted. This learning of definitions, this parsing and analyzing, have no result commensurate with the time and pains expended. Many of our best teachers have seen this for years; have put it in print; have proved it at Teachers' institutes. Why, then, do we keep on in the same ruts? Why not teach our pupils to speak by speaking; to write by writing? Why not apply that common-sense axiom, that the way to do a thing is to go ahead and do it?"

(*The Pacific Home and School Journal* quoted in *Journal of Education*, September 22, 1881, p. 183)

WHAT'S HAPPENED TO THE TEACHING OF COMPOSITION?

"Every practiced inspector of schools knows what dreary reading the average school essay is. Some accomplished men of letters have recently given us the benefit of their half-humorous but still valuable and forcible criticism on this subject. Now one who looks into the matter closely will find two reasons for the unreadableness of that remarkable production, the school composition:

1. The pupil has no first-hand knowledge of things, and hence puts no real freshness, or thought, or observation into his sentences.
2. His formal instruction has given him no adequate command of his implements, and he, therefore, lacks that ready and forcible use of English words and idioms which is so essential to all strong and valuable composition."

(E. S. Cox, "English in American Schools," *Addresses and Proceedings of the NEA Session of the Year 1885*, NY: NEA, 1886, p. 182)

"There is a spirit of unrest, a feeling of dissatisfaction in educational circles over the poor work done by students in English composition. It seems to be generally admitted that the present requirements are not fulfilling the desires or realizing the hopes of educators. The complaint is heard year after year that boys and girls are coming to college more and more poorly prepared in this subject.

(C. S. Duncan, "A Rebellious Word on English Composition," *English Journal*, March 1914, p. 154)

WHY DON'T YOUNG PEOPLE WRITE BETTER?

"At the risk of invoking the wrath of those twin departments of education and psychology, I might venture the suggestion that the almost universal use of the 'objective' type of examination question, from grade school through college, has done nothing to further the cause of literacy. The very obvious labor-saving convenience of presenting the student with a mimeographed, predigested set of answers, on which he places a check mark after 'true' or 'false,' selects one out of a multiple set, or writes a single word to complete a sentence, so that the whole may be graded by any assistant janitor who has the key — this, together with the comforting assurance that he is either right or wrong, that no element of individual judgment can enter into the final grade, and there can be no unfairness and no argument about it afterward — has thrust far into the background the much more difficult method of requiring the man to tell you what he knows."

(William L. Prosser, "English As She Is Wrote," *English Journal*, January 1939, p. 44)

"The defective preparation of college freshmen in elementary English is owing to the fact that most of the high schools have undertaken the work of 'fitting boys for the active duties of life.' "

(Francis D. Winston, "English and the High School," *Nation*, December 17, 1896, p. 455)

SHOULDN'T YOUNG PEOPLE READ THE CLASSICS AND IGNORE MODERN LITERATURE?

"The teaching of literature is sterile unless an understanding of modern as well as the older literature is taught. Current literature is a large part of the reading of most high-school and many college graduates. To teach only books of by-gone years because they have stood the test of time is to pretend that today does not exist, that only what is old is good. Modern people won't believe that, and if they are not taught to read current literature intelligently, they will read it unintelligently. Most college graduates preparing for teaching have not received instructions in modern literature as a part of their liberal arts course."

(Ernest R. Caverly, "The Professional Training of High-School Teachers of English," *Educational Administration and Supervision*, January 1940, p. 38)

"There is a peculiarly persistent Victorian affectation that there are some books that 'every child should know.' This notion has its roots in the renaissance, but it needs to have its branches pruned. Every child should know the world in which he lives as thoroughly as it lies in him to know it. This world includes traditional lore and characters, 'classic' tales and long-enduring, if not eternal, verities. It is well to assimilate a great deal of this intellectual background. But it is more urgent to learn the present world and the world in which he is going to live. Some children are inclined to organize their ideas on a basis of historical retrospect — they ask, What came before that, and before that? Others, however, no less intelligent and no less valuable as social assets, seem to be quite indifferent to what went before; they are the pragmatists who ask, What of it? — and look to see what can be done here and now. Moreover, while the classics should be accessible to all, it is worse than useless to cultivate an affectation of appreciation for 'the best' — and it is desirable to cultivate the realization that classics are always and everywhere in the process of making."

(Sidonie Matzner Gruenberg, "Reading for Children," *The Dial*, December 6, 1917, p. 576)