

# THE ORGANISATION OF ENGLISH IN THE SECONDARY MODERN SCHOOL

---

by

R. J. HARRIS

Chartesey Secondary School

GENERALISATIONS, WILDLY unsafe. All those articles on *The Child*, consider them, and the lost children. The mother smiling her secret reservation, while the child-expert lectures; the laughter in the staff-room, when the Divisional Inspector has departed; the separate I's, pricking the seat of the broad-bottomed Third Person Singular. And here's another of them, *The Secondary Modern School*, rising embarrassed, or not embarrassed and that is worse, to make public pronouncements—but 'that's not me, that's not me' each separate school says with silent sharp laughter grimacing behind the merciful page, 'that's not how I do it, that wouldn't work here, fat lot he knows about me!'. Wildly unsafe.

Must go on, though, pretending not to see the me's. What have I known in practice? Two secondary modern schools, a technical, a grammar, a comprehensive. Not much to go on. Particularly successful in organising English in any of them? Not particularly. Well qualified, then, to give the average score—might get the individual variations and disagreements to give tongue, produce the true answer, answers by the hundred. Some use in the rash word if this happens. Better try.

Assume a real identity in the broad-bottomed abstraction of the Secondary Modern School, and one recognisably different from that other pantaloon, the Grammar School. More pupils, for example, to each class; a longer ladder of intelligence, though with the top rungs missing; less interest in school, a place of comparative failure, the apple fallen from the growing tree—and here and there a wasp crawling out, naughty, to plague the junior teacher, a swarm even, in the C-stream, bruised windfalls; a home background often down to the raw canvas of the linguistic picture, not much there to stimulate rivalry or emulation, or to make imitation charm; in short, enjoyments in which literature plays no part, ambitions which words hardly help to fulfil. Is all that fair to the Secondary Modern Child? Pretend so far. ('Not to me, not to me.' Of course not.) And the curriculum—free it seems, broad, general, do what thou wilt, go in all directions at once even

if only a little way, there is sure to be a gate to this maze and at fifteen years it opens. Often—usually?—the traditional examination subjects without the carrot or the goad; less direction or guidance from a G.C.E. donkeyman, but less ability to make a pasture of this freedom. No homework, naturally; and not easy to get a team out on Saturdays—mostly got jobs, you know; in the dinner-hour there are a few clubs and societies—it's difficult after school, don't you think, even if the boys would stay—trains to catch, and so on. Little chance of real creation in those Modern School trousers, busy on the paper round, or running for the Tube. Ghastly emasculation of the three-school system. Not another topic really—English is a social, a community subject, its richness is interchange, context—but what full context is there, where the units in the machine run off at various bells, are held by the conscription of the lesson in separate chapters, like a set of Grammar Book examples? After the Pupil, the Curriculum, the Social Pattern of the Modern School, what remains to complete the identification? The Staff. I remember, for example, D. H. Lawrence, and it is true, nothing more so, that University degrees alone do not make a writer, certainly not a teacher; and some forms must have a safe pillow, a permanent general-subjects teacher, escaped from the Deserted Village. But in the Modern School there are too few specialists even with a first degree in their subject, few enthusiasts disciplined by knowledge or practice (plenty of enthusiasts, and anyway English is not a special subject, we all speak English), and few who will not lack the pleasurable excitements of skill, not as educationalists, but in the craft of words.

So there. That is the material.

What is the English teacher trying to do with it, and what are his special difficulties?

The general aims of English teaching are the same in all types of school. I take it they fall into two main groups—to produce efficient readers, writers, talkers and listeners, that is the first group; and to improve knowledge, social poise, experience of values, vocational prospects, that is the other. The first is neutral, the jungle, the real hunting-ground of skill; the second is not specific to English, it is shared by all teachers, it rouses missionaries to emerge from the riverside bungalows to throw Bibles at crocodiles, it is propaganda, it is irresistible—to the teacher. But the first is unattainable—to the pupil. It is in the first that the difficulty hides. It could be stimulating if teachers thought of English rather as a craft like woodwork than as a shrine of literary values or an Open Sesame to spiritual ones. Payment by results was pedantry of the narrowest sort, and reduced the idea of skill to a convention of spelling; but there is an equal danger in the vague and powerful worship of psychological and social aims in which by some magic a valuable experience

is to be attained without (like the angel) any visible means of support. Both pedantry and the neglect of craft avoid the full difficulty and lose the full reward of striving for the requisite skills—the linguistic skills, correct observation of the manners of usage, aptness and elegance of diction, pattern and variety of structure, and so on. Without primary skill the secondary and more important value experiences are not finally possible through the medium of English. It is this skill which is noticeably lacking and potentially limited in the Secondary Modern School. All the gods in the democratic and communist pantheons are to an English specialist not worth one elegant sentence on house-breaking and the art of murder. This may seem facetious. But without linguistic skill how shall we know what the loudspeakers mean when they cry 'equality' in those threatening contradictions? It is unfashionable among English teachers to discuss the subject at the level of a craft; we prefer spelling or the Messianic experience. If I have talked at length of this level, it is because in its lowness in the Modern School is the deepest moat against the English teacher's success in overcoming apathy, hostility, and the poverty of experience. Of course, skill does not exist in vacuo; interest and skill are points in the same circumference; I would only suggest that it is at the point of skill that the Secondary Modern hoop is chiefly dented.

The material; the aims and obstacles.

In this grey background, what to do?

Make English wanted, seen to be necessary. It is impossible to discuss adequately the English training of the Secondary Modern pupil without some consideration of the whole curriculum. Unfortunately, not many Staff meetings, in my acquaintance, have such matters on the agenda. Some Modern schools invoke the aid of public examinations to raise the status of subjects in the pupils' eyes. In so doing, these schools raise grave problems of organisation within the classroom for the practising teacher. It is rare for a sufficient number of genuine candidates for G.C.E. level English to be found in a Modern school to justify the separation of the candidates as a teaching group. Thus, the form carries many passengers who have embarked willy-nilly on the wrong ship, and a few VIP's who demand all the captain's attention. Alternatively, a simpler examination is entered instead of or concurrently with the G.C.E. Much simpler it must be, to give the majority of the pupils a true hope of a pass; or relatively little vocational significance, although there are always some employers who welcome anything called a certificate; but insidiously and at times greatly damaging to the curriculum in general and to the teaching of English in particular. This is especially so, if considerable flexibility be not retained in the examination papers—and what public examination can afford not to be rigid, not to repeat form and even substance year after year? The opportunity given to

the Secondary Modern School by the deliverance from public examinations has often been hailed in educational writings, but less often seized. Indeed, headmasters' speechdays commonly contain some reference to their schools' achievement in entering certain children for the G.C.E. There is some justice in this boast: I have yet to see (no doubt only my inexperience is to blame for this) the Modern school which gave any more to its non-examination pupils in their studies—I do not speak of the personal contact, influence and devotion of the staff—than a diluted and inefficient version of the old examination curriculum. Nor does the substitution of say basketwork for physics affect the principle here. The whole process is described as a general education, presumably on the assumption that if one multiplies subjects one will widen experience. Alternatively, one may find that a large number of barely related projects are launched, which demand enormous energy from the staff, and release some enthusiasm among pupils who in them discover, along with some real social ease and use, a ready escape from the difficulties of the craft of words, or of science, or of any other technique they find hard to master. The result for the children is bits and pieces: in English, bits of exercises without context, pieces of continuous writing on unlikely or hackneyed subjects, for an invisible audience, in a style rarely akin to that they will use after school, if then they ever write at all; and all of it untransferred when they come to history or science. In nearly all subjects, English is an important tool: to my mind, the proper organisation of English in the Secondary Modern school is not practicable without the complete integration of all subjects in a rounded scheme of education. Thus, for example, teachers of each subject should decide what is the fundamental material in their syllabus, and what of that can be taught to the pupils in their school. All should then combine to draw up a detailed and integrated plan of work for each age-group. The English staff too should produce a realistic syllabus, and discuss its desirability and practicability with other members of staff who are using English as their chief tool, and especially at the higher age-range its relevance to the sorts of language likely to be useful or used by the pupils. It should be possible in this way to organise a general attack on slovenliness and incorrectness, and a general encouragement of orderly arrangement of ideas. The isolated essay homework or punctuation exercise could vanish, and the virtues of accuracy, development of ideas, be valued in the context of work in hand. Working through other teachers and through other subjects (naturally, I would not exclude literature and entertainment as a subject too in their own right—would merely emphasise the craft and tool aspect of English) gives validity to what is written, and raises the esteem in which English is held throughout the school. More than subjects primarily valuable for the body of knowledge they contain, English depends on the com-

mon interest and active co-operation of all members of the staff whose work can use it. Such an interest can admittedly be fostered even where no real co-ordination of subjects exists; its benefits must however be more limited and accidental.

In organising his department, the senior English teacher has to plead not only for adequately qualified staff—he will not often be consulted in the Modern school before the appointment of a new member—but for staff who may be expected to remain with the school for a reasonable length of time. In some areas, and there especially in the Modern schools, it is very common for people from abroad to come to teach for a few months, maybe for a term or two, or even less, while they are training or seeking for employment in their real profession. In this way, it becomes possible for the powers-that-be to persuade themselves that there is no vital shortage of teachers—there is always someone in the classroom. Teachers who stay a short while in a school, cannot hope to contribute their full and best influence in such a subject as English. This is especially so in the Modern school, where the official syllabus, if not borrowed and lost by a temporary member of staff anyway, may well be too ambitious, and cannot be a safe guide to work with a class which needs nursing through individual difficulties. Again, forms whose week of English is divided between two or three teachers, and who can never rely on seeing the same guide from one term to another, lose the ground and confidence that would be gained with stable and undivided instruction, if only because it is in human nature for teachers who are busy and share a form, or who are going to be somewhere else tomorrow, to forget homework, or to fail to ensure that duplication of classwork is avoided, or that gaps are not left. For each form, one regular teacher, with the enthusiasm and at least a share of the knowledge of the specialist—that is something to plead for in the staffing of the English department, and to insist on in the arrangement of the time-table.

What of the materials and the methods of teaching, when the integrated curriculum in which English is the tool, and the reliable and literate staff, have been granted?

Textbooks first. On first becoming a senior English teacher, one inherits cupboards full of junk. There are very few good courses of English, because they all try to cater for the widest possible market. In the Modern school, there is furthermore the special difficulty that the pupils' chronological age and their experience of life are often far in advance of their reading age. Unless the teachers are hopeless, or hopelessly overworked, there is almost everything to be said for doing without a textbook altogether: this lack would force teachers to think and confer, to use and adapt local material and the books being read by the classes. But teachers always are overworked,

and so if a textbook must be used, I would favour one which encourages children to use their senses and which stretches their experience in its quotations, rather than one which encyclopaedically isolates and illustrates points of grammar or usage; above all, one which does not do everything for the teacher or speak down to the pupils with determined gaiety. It should be a book in which each year's work is planned to produce some coherent physical evidence of progress—a diary, newspaper, adventure story, survey, for example. The skills are elicited in making something—making something primarily with words. Many projects can be wasteful of English time, if the periods are spent in building models or drawing maps.

Second, one should decide on the minimum essential usage, and this minimum is usually less than any textbook would lead one to believe. I should be content, at least, to establish in the first year a thorough competence in the use of the full stop. In marking written work, this limitation should be kept in mind and the pupil's eye focussed on the one major technical point. Success, too rarely known to Secondary Modern children, may elicit a demand to be taught some new point of technique—perhaps an unusual experience for a teacher. Plenty of repetition fixes correct habits, and the noting of progress sweetens necessary drill, which is not unpopular in the context of a real piece of work.

Third, one should repair the omissions of the background. Give plenty of opportunity for talking to each other, instead of shouting each other down. After all, the children will talk when they leave school far more than they will write. The problem of speech-training is itself worthy of a whole book. In Cockney districts, and I imagine in many others, there is an audible crack between the dialect of home or playground and that attempted in classroom and official conversations. Girls seem more anxious than boys to conform to a vague Standard English pronunciation, but when vocational ambition does not urge this conformity, the local 'dialect' has a very strong hold. In adolescence, particularly, fear or embarrassment at being different from one's fellows checks the would-be conformist. Many divergences from the received pronunciation are not considered bad form by adults; some, however, Cockney being one, are generally frowned on by educated people, and teachers do usually feel impelled to correct slovenly speech. The success of such correction depends very largely on the pupil's willingness. Special classes in speech-training may without this desire be simply exercises in self-consciousness. It is therefore important to sympathise with non-conformists, and to understand the cause of any apparently ineradicable or wrong-headed local mannerism of speech which has value as a social shibboleth or screen, and should not ruthlessly, scornfully, and vainly be attacked. Rather, the teacher should stress the proper ordering of ideas,

the sense of what is said, the enlargement of vocabulary, and other such processes acceptable to a pupil in any dialect. There is then hope that in due course irrational or purely parochial resistance to accepted educated speech-forms will be overcome.

In fighting the background, the noisy background, extra time for silent reading will be required, for many of the children will not read at home. This time is best used, in my experience, by withdrawing from the school library an interesting selection for each form to read in the classroom. Otherwise, too long can be spent in staring at the thousand and one titles on the library shelves. In the choice of a form set, the teacher has his chance to propagandise, but always remembering that his values will mean little without an honest care for the pupils' interests, and a wish to improve their skill rather than to have his own judgments as to what is valuable, confirmed or simply endured. Similarly, every means to attract interest in experience conveyed through words can be tried—the film, wireless, tape recorder, theatre—but here again, not too much out of a sense of Shakespearean duty, but keeping simple skill as the main aim. When pupils are eager to come with you, and pay their way, and after school hours, to see *Hamlet*—well, then you will have succeeded, and will hardly need to express the propaganda, which it would have been futile to express before.

I have tried to say something, necessarily in the most general terms, about the nature of the Secondary Modern School, the difficulties faced by the English teacher, and about the primary importance of improving skill in the English expression of its pupils; about the place of English in the curriculum, and the requirements of the subject in time-tabling and in staff; and finally, about the material, methods, and certain subdivisions of the syllabus. The picture I have given may seem rather pessimistic, and limited in its stress on skill. Perhaps an unbiassed assessment of the ordinary Secondary Modern School child's essays may excuse the stress on skill. My pessimism I may explain by my own experience of these difficulties and despairs, and, rarely, triumphs—and yet at the same time deny in the conviction that what finally counts in education is people of character, whose essence and opinions chime together. These people can be found equally in Grammar and in Secondary Modern schools.

*The article above is the first of a series on the organisation of English teaching in various types of school.*