

ENGLISH IN THE PREPARATORY SCHOOLS

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English in the Preparatory Schools by Ernest W. Huffcut

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Monographs on Education

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IN THE

PREPARATORY SCHOOLS

BY

ERNEST W. HUFFCUT

INSTRUCTOR IN ENGLISH IN CORNELL UNIVERSITY



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THE changes that have taken place in recent years in the methods of language study have done much to advance the cause of good learning. Every teacher owes a lasting debt to those who have wrought out, and to some extent perfected, these new and practical methods. The debt of the teacher is, however, but a tithe of that due from those who have thus been spared laborious and well-nigh fruitless gropings through the labyrinths of a complex grammar and the blind by-paths of inexplicable idioms. Where the new methods have been wisely held in check by a recognition of the legitimate functions of grammatical study, the results have been in the main entirely satisfactory. Languages are now learned much more rapidly and easily than was the case a few years ago, and are thus the earlier brought into requisition as the means to some other and better end. Parrot-like knowledge of inflections and rules has ceased to be the goal of linguistic scholarship: the ability to use a language as a medium between the possessor and something to be sought in literature or life, is now more generally recognized as the purpose of such studies and the main reason for them.

It is somewhat astonishing that, in view of all this, some more practical and rational method has not been adopted in the study of our own language as a vehicle of thought. In many of the colleges and universities there is, to be sure, a well-defined mania for philological research and an abnormal

appetite for Anglo-Saxon roots. In our common schools this tendency is to some extent imitated by an unwearied attention to the minutæ of grammatical structure and the puzzles of syntactical forms. Of practice and humdrum drill in the use of English, there is little, in either school or college, in comparison with the importance of the subject and the needs of the students.

This lack of proper training in the use of English is due largely to two causes ; first, the want of some efficient method in the teaching of English ; and, second, the reluctance shown by our best teachers to engaging in this branch of work. Possibly the second reason may be the result of the first ; possibly it is the result of some inherent prejudice, or some unconfessed doubts as to the dignity of this kind of work. As to these last reasons, it must be acknowledged that, under the existing methods, the work is far from agreeable or inspiring to either teacher or taught, and no teacher can justly be blamed for preferring to avoid it whenever possible. The question may well be asked, however, whether this very reluctance is not one main cause why this important branch of work has been so long neglected, and whether, if our best-equipped and most earnest teachers were to apply themselves to a solution of the problem, it would not soon be solved as easily as were numerous other knotty problems in educational methods.

The writer has had occasion to test at college entrance-examinations the familiarity of applicants with the forms and use of their mother tongue. The results have been in the main unsatisfactory, and at times discouraging. The commonest grammatical forms seem entirely unfamiliar ; a composition of a dozen sentences exhibits the most utter disregard of the simplest grammatical and rhetorical constructions. Students who construe Virgil with ease, who are on familiar terms with Homer, and see no serious difficulties in Euclid, stumble and hesitate and fail in the use of their own language. To illustrate. At

a recent examination the students were asked to decline the pronoun "thou." A large per cent of those examined failed utterly. Here are a few examples of how this inoffensive pronoun was treated :—

1. Thou, thine, thou ; their, theirs, them.
2. Thou, yours, thou ; same.
3. Thou, thine, thy ; they, theirs, they.
4. Thou, thine, thee ; they, theirs, them.

These four are fair examples of the whole list of failures. Nor must it be supposed that these young gentlemen had not been prepared in schools that stand fairly well. One was a graduate of a Massachusetts high school ; one was a graduate of the preparatory department of one of the largest colleges in Ohio ; two were prepared in New York high schools : the four taken together represent the educational system of three of the wealthiest, most populous, and most progressive states in the Union. In other simple grammatical forms a like ignorance was displayed ; as, for instance, when one student declined Moses thus :—

Moses, Moses, Mosaic.

Such examples might be multiplied indefinitely, but these will suffice to prove how utterly inadequate is much of the preparatory instruction in the simple forms of our almost grammarless tongue.

When the work of writing English is considered, the results are almost equally barren. Scarcely an applicant for admission can write the simple essay required at the examination, without some blunder in orthography, punctuation, capitalization, and, what is worst of all, grammatical accuracy. I say nothing of the faults in logical arrangement and rhetorical effectiveness. These qualities might, and indeed should, be taught in the preparatory schools ; but I am sure every teacher of English in

the colleges will be fully satisfied if students are sent up well equipped for writing English with grammatical correctness and some degree of ease. Such a foundation as this would enable the teacher to begin at once the work of aiding the student to acquire a clear and forcible style, instead of wasting time, as is now necessary, in doing the work of the preparatory schools.

The trouble seems to be that the preparatory schools do not, as a rule, give enough attention to the study of English. There is in the grammar schools a certain amount of grammatical drill and of analyzing and parsing. Much of this is good; much is worthless. So far as any useful end is concerned, the mere ability to analyze and parse an intricate English sentence counts for little. The ability to write a simple English sentence with accuracy and effectiveness would be of vastly greater advantage to the student. When the student attempts to pass an examination in any first-class college, this fact is made clearly evident. The main requirements at such a time are three,—first, the ability to recognize the few grammatical inflections that still persist in English, and to illustrate these, together with certain sentential constructions, by examples written at the examination; second, the ability to point out in sentences given at the examination the examples of false syntax and of offences against idiomatic English; third, the ability to write, on some familiar subject, a short composition which shall prove that the applicant possesses a reasonably full vocabulary, and is able to construct grammatical and idiomatic sentences and to combine them with ordinary skill. Of the three tests the last named is by far the most important.

This brings us to a consideration of the work necessary to be done in the preparatory schools, in order to fit students for college entrance-examinations in English, and to give those who do not enter college a fair working knowledge of their mother tongue. In sketching this I shall not attempt to be exhaustive, but simply to indicate the main lines on which preparatory work ought to proceed.

I.

THERE ought first to be a thorough grounding of pupils in the inflections of English. This does not imply that pupils should be put through a severe course of training in all the niceties of grammar, but simply that the necessary inflections should be made perfectly familiar. For the accomplishment of this end, any one of the numerous "methods" of language study may be profitably employed; but it is my conviction that patient drill, accompanied by constant practice in the use of the various grammatical forms, is the best and simplest method. It cannot be too emphatically impressed upon the teacher that there ought, under any method, to be constant illustration, in actual work, of all difficult points in grammatical structure. It is especially important that the student be thoroughly drilled in the use of idiomatic English, and be taught to observe the distinction between closely related forms, — as, for instance, "shall" and "will," "may" and "can," and other forms which persons ignorant of the idiom of the language are likely to confound.

It has become fashionable of late years for educators to decry the study of English grammar, and to echo Jack Cade's indignation against men "that usually talk of a noun and a verb, and such abominable words as no Christian ear can endure to hear." Nor can it be denied that there has been much provocation for this reaction. The old senseless routine of nomenclature learning, the droning march of the parsing class through *Paradise Lost*, the long and fierce conflicts waged between contending factions regarding the exact syntactical relation of some disputed word or phrase, were indeed abominations calling for invectives as fearless as those of Jack Cade. But after all, the reaction may, perhaps, have gone too far or too much astray. English has grown by revolution and evolution from a synthetic and unmixed language into a highly analytic and composite