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THE IMPORTANCE OF ENGLISH AS THE VEHICLE OF EXPRESSION.

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THE cry "More and better English in the school programs" has voiced one of the most popular demands in contemporary education. It appeals to everyone. The primary teacher appreciates the need in the daily battle with bad grammar; the secondary teacher is familiar with the trials of slovenly speech and incoherent writing; the college professor grieves over the failure of his students to give back in their examination any clear indication of the longed-for response to his efforts to inspire a clear-cut and accurate statement of fact and opinion. Nevertheless, there is less advance toward the attainment of the desired end than was to be expected.

It is, perhaps, difficult to explain this. There has been some slackness in the schools, some want of courage in the colleges. When a student does not pass out of the school, or into the college with credit in English, there is a strong tendency to make excuses, accept conditions, and otherwise palliate, if not entirely overlook, the failure. But on the whole, both school and college have been in earnest. The school-teacher feels ashamed of his pupils' bad spelling, inaccurate sentences and incorrect diction. The college professor is hampered by the incapacity of his students to express themselves clearly. The school-teacher means to secure better results; the college professor knows the men who are so deficient in the mother tongue are out of place in college. The real problem seems evasive, however, and neither school nor college has truly solved it.

Here is a boy, for example, who has read and studied the books required for admission to college. He can tell the stories so as to show familiarity with them. He can answer questions of historical and literary criticism. He is full of facts. But when he takes up his pen to express what he knows, he shows, even in the most simple answers, a total inability to write straight-forward, correct English; and in the brief composition his ideas, which are often good enough, have to be guessed at or reconstructed by uniting to the incorrect and vague statements of the writer the knowledge of the book possessed by the examiner.

When carefully considered, it becomes evident that the true difficulty with the student is an inability to express what he knows, thinks and feels.

Is not this due to a common defect in all our teaching? Is it not true that we generally neglect the whole field of expression as a department of education? And is it not further true that the great importance of English in our educational work is because it is the vehicle of ordinary expression? That is to say, that English as a language, as a literature, is for this purpose subordinate.

No one seems to forget that man must know and must think. But hundreds seem to forget that man must express what he knows and what he thinks, and in the largest conception of life, what he is. I once knew a very learned man upon whom a familiar comment ran, "His mind is a cupboard of knowledge with the door shut fast." He was a learned man, but a poor teacher; a gentle and affectionate man, but few ever found it out. Education had reached no worthy goal in him when he was trained to know, to think, to feel, but left with knowledge which blessed neither himself or others, with thoughts that cheered and feelings that charmed none except himself.

A very large part of the most wearisome blunders in the examination papers of pupils are the outcome of careless expression. A recent paper informed me that "in the second century the *costumes* of the heathen and the Christians were entirely different." Inquiry brought out the fact that *costumes* was written where *customs* was the word sought. And in looking over a long list of school blunders recently published in one

of our magazines, I have been struck by the large proportion of them which were due, first, to want of care in preparing the examination paper,—*i. e.*, to indifference to the expression of knowledge painfully acquired; and, second, to want of ability to state an idea which required thought,—*i. e.*, to incapacity of expression. The following examples are quoted from a paper on the humorous side of such blunders. These first cited are clearly due to mere indifference or carelessness:—

“A volcano is a burning mountain that has a creator and throws out rocks.”

“I came sore and conquered.”

“His brain was teething with grand ideas in all directions.”

“Stored in some trouser-house of mighty kings.”

Another class show the utter failure of the power of expression:—

“A triangle is sometimes regarded as standing upon a select inside which we then call the base.”

“The apex of the heart is placed downwards and slightly upwards.”

“Fiction is something which is believed in but which is nothing.”

Such examples are far removed from the ludicrous mistakes too often met with which involve ignorance of facts, false analogies, and mistaken inferences. Those above noted are apparently due to carelessness in stating simple facts correctly conceived, and to incapacity to express in language ideas once correctly conceived but which at the time could not be recalled with accuracy. The latter class are constantly to be found in papers of schools which demand that answers shall be given in the language of the teacher. The attempt to reproduce the language in which a statement not fully understood has been made is a common cause of ridiculous blunders. We may see something of this in such an answer as the following:—

“Climate is an imaginary belt of the globe parallel to the equator; it is so called by earlier geographers because the difference of these climes depends upon the proper inclination of these spheres.”

Here is inaccurate memory supplying ammunition to an uninformed mind for a shot at a mark beyond the intellectual vision.

I received a paper some months ago from a young woman who was attending a course of lectures given under University Extension auspices in one of our large cities. She was able to take notes in shorthand, and made an earnest effort to profit by the course, which was on "The Development of the United States." This paper is an answer to the question, "What were the causes of the American Revolution?" It is a gem of its kind.

"When the colonists came to America, they had no written government except a charter given to them by their king. In this charter very little liberty was given to them by the king, so they agreed to form a group and make a set of laws for themselves. It was absolutely necessary for them to do so, for in the charter granted by the king, the men of the settlement did not even have the right to choose their own governor.

"In the cabin of their vessel men gathered and made a set of laws upon which they all agreed, and on landing, they ran and hid them in a tree which was afterwards known as the Charter Oak. The cause of their hiding them was the fear of the strict rules of their old country, and on this account they were obliged to do many immoral acts which they would not have done had they had a little more freedom.

"This England positively refused, thus causing a bitter feeling between her colonists and herself, which, as we have learned, has been the principal cause of the American Revolution. She compelled the people to pay a very heavy tax which she laid upon them, and if they refused, they had to undergo a very severe punishment for refusing. A feeling of hatred was continually growing until it was suppressed by the war. She passed a law imposing a heavy tax upon tea, and compelled them to pay the same, but they were strongly opposed to this, and utterly refused to drink the tea. In one of the shipments from the Mother country there was a cargo of tea sent to the Boston Harbor, and the people were compelled to buy it. This enraged them very much, so they formed a party and at midnight boarded the ship and threw over all the tea.

"This event was afterwards known as the Boston Tea Party, which was practically the cause of the Boston Massacre. These petty quarrels continued until the war broke out, which settled all the difficulty."

To return, then, to our main thesis, the child blunders because he neither knows what he is trying to express, nor the vehicle of expression. In his development the teacher must constantly give attention to the three considerations of knowing, thinking and expressing. It is easy to teach facts—but hard to resist the temptation to teach facts in fixed formulas. To repeat the statement of a fact in the identical language used by the teacher in communicating it does not prove that the child has learned the fact. To change the statement may show that the fact has been correctly grasped, but the teacher may be content to accept a very poor statement, if a grasp of the fact is but shown in it. Yet education is dependent on the combination of correct information, precise mental action and clear verbal expression.

It is, of course, true that the power of expression is one of the latest powers to be matured. But it is also true that it is dependent on training. This training should go hand in hand with growth. The immense value of English composition appears here. It is one of the greatest burdens that the teacher has to bear. But compositions must be written, carefully studied, and rewritten, if any real power is to be developed. If the early instruction is devoted to clear and correct statement, to the expression of facts and ideas in simple language, with little or no effort to secure any very original thought from the pupil, good reading and intellectual growth will do the rest. One of the worst features of the older teaching of composition was the constant striving after rhetorical finish. One of the worst defects in graduating essays to this day is the abundance of artificial flowers with which they are garnished, and the frequent note of insincerity struck in the ringing quotations from authors with whom the writers are unacquainted.

This leads me to the last point which I wish to make. The highest note in all education is the expression of self,—of what a man is. It is essential for this that a man have a mastery over his mother tongue.

If a man is to be a lawyer or a minister of the gospel, every one sees clearly enough his need of mastery of spoken and written discourse. But, though in a different form, it is equally important to the man of business, the engineer and the physician. The quantity of speech does not measure its importance.

A business man may have more at stake in a page of a letter than a lawyer in fifty pages of a brief. The page of that business letter should be so clearly conceived, so accurately expressed, that any contract made upon it should be beyond all doubt and controversy. The plans and specifications of an engineer or architect require clear and correct statement, and too often possess neither.

But quite beyond mere business affairs a man's speech, his letters, his use of language should be a true expression of himself. A man who is straightforward and clear-cut in character should be able to make men know it by what he writes and speaks; a man who is gentle and kindly should know how to make his tongue utter the goodness of his heart; a man who lives in the sunshine of God's love should know how to speak a word in season which will shed some of that sunshine on the path of others.

Practice is indispensable to perfection. Precept counts for little in the perfecting of expression. Infinite pains alone brings success. But even those who have no hope of attaining to perfection must strive and struggle to attain to that degree of power by which a man may live.

SUMMER.

CHARLES AUGUSTUS SCHUMACHER, ONEONTA, N. Y.

Are those fields Elysian
Fairer, full in vision,
Than are these?
Are there trees
Some other-where
That lift in air
Such majesties?

How the clouds go sailing,
Silver wings availing
Through and through
Endless blue,
And magic nights
With moon's long lights
Make world anew.