

NON-ACADEMIC OR C-STREAM ENGLISH

Notes for an introductory talk at a symposium on English teaching for the Cape Division of the South African Teachers' Association (1968)

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There really isn't much reason for my introducing a discussion on C-stream English. For the past five years I have lived almost exclusively in the uplands of Std 9 [Grade 11] and 10 [Grade 12] English. However, an interest in the non-academic pupil and about 18 months of reading about English for the less able have led this year to my taking English in two what-one-might-call non-academic Std 6s [Grade 8s] – although these two classes have a range of ability too wide to make them real C-stream: there is, in fact, no streaming as such; pupils are in these classes simply because they don't wish to take a third and fourth language. However, these are my impressions after a few months with 6c and 6d.

Impression – indeed, Conviction – Number One is that these pupils suffer every bit as much as the above-average pupil in our inflexible prepare-them-for-the-kind-of-exam-they're-likely-to-get system. Instead of the grind of formal grammar, the fiddle-fiddle of the form of the business letter, the slow, summarising plough through setwork books, they need – I believe – the following:

In all their English work, they need more freedom, more loosening-up, more imaginative treatment than any set syllabus allows them. Of course, I'm not saying that they don't need to know the basic skills: they do; but they don't need to know that, where most transitive verbs take an object, an incomplete verb takes a complement.

They need to be excited by language, by experience, by the discovery that communication through language can be fun, can be demanding of their thinking and their feeling, and can be rewarding.

Basically, we should do three very obvious-sounding things with non-academic English pupils: we must read a great deal to them and they must themselves read a great deal; we must get them to write a great deal; and we must get them to talk a great deal.

For the first: what we and they read needs, first of all, to be exciting, even moving: *Allan Quatermain*, *Zane Grey*, *Huckleberry Finn*, 'My parents kept me from children who were rough', 'Timothy Winters', *The Ancient mariner* – anything genuine and good – anything which feeds and stimulates both their sense of real experience and their sense of fantasy.

Since they themselves read aloud rather poorly, much should be read to them by the teacher – but read well (which implies prepared beforehand). The reading aloud they do should take place in as informal an atmosphere as possible with much stress on communicating what they are reading to their hearers. This is best done in small groups of no more than four, sitting around in a circle outside on the playing field or on the floor in the library, where the reader has a smaller audience and a more intimate situation.

Perhaps you get the whole class to read a chapter of their setwork book at home and each pick out a half-page section they particularly liked. Then, in their groups of four, each student tells the others which section they liked and then reads it to them. So, they're a) prepared to do the reading and b) engaged in what they're reading.

The awful 'Now stand up in front of the class and hold your book up properly and speak up' situation inhibits such pupils fiercely and is usually a fairly unpleasant ordeal for everyone – and reading should never be that.

If the material is right, if the reader has been excited by what he has read and wants to communicate it to the others, most things come right naturally – the finer techniques of reading aloud can be filtered in naturally by sympathetic teacher-class discussion. (Incidentally, great stores of what I have called 'the right material' can be found in David Holbrook's various books,¹ and in the Oxford University Press books, *Reflections*, *Things being various* and *Every man will shout*.)

For the writing: again, they need to be able to write freely – and often. The pupils I take at the moment each have their own 'rather special' book for their writing, called by such flights of fancy as 'My Thoughts and

Dreams', 'Crazy Pages' and even 'The Malan Special'.

They have done many pieces of writing so far. And so far I have given no directions concerning the form of the writing – whether it should be in verse or in prose or in dialogue: they suit themselves – and I have given no instructions as to length. Generally, I'll provide some sort of spark or trigger: I'll read them a poem, or show them some photographs or a painting.

I have also never *marked* any of these pieces, by which I mean I have put no red squiggles or Xs or grades on their work. All the pieces are read by me, notes and a card-index system are kept on each pupil's work, the most interesting – never called 'the best' – pieces are typed out and roneoed, read and discussed in class and pinned up on the wall pin-boards.

And then, talking: freely, clearly and correctly. The new methods of 'Oral Communication' which most teachers are by now familiar with are invaluable with non-academic pupils. The simple giving of instructions, passing on of information, transmitting of messages, directing someone from somewhere to somewhere else, sharpening of observation, delineation of description: these things teach pupils much of what is set out among the official aims of teaching English. Flesh these out in games and drama-situations, make them fun, and interesting, and exciting.

For just one example, get the whole class to walk quietly and in a relaxed way to the far end of the rugby field; get them to run back like mad; sit them down in pairs and have each describe to the other exactly what they felt: their muscles, their lungs, their breathing, their eyes, etc.

Use drama often and adventurously: its whole wide-open field offers opportunities for language-experience in both real- and fantasy-situations.

What does the teacher need to succeed in this kind of teaching? He needs, first of all, small classes (by which I really do mean classes of at most 20 – I have 40 in each of my classes), he needs language laboratories, tape-recorders, extensive class-library facilities, drama-equipment, vast reserves of energy and resourcefulness (because the kettle must always be kept boiling – allow the excitement, the activity, to flag and the lesson is gone), and he needs a *great deal of free time* for preparation. For, make no mistake, this is extremely demanding work, and it's work which must be planned – thinking of what you're going to do with 6d while you're walking along the corridor towards 6d does not work.

While I'm enjoying it a great deal, I account my work so far this year with 6c and 6d as more or less a failure – failure, largely, due to the fact that I do not have all these things. I do not have small enough classes. I do not have enough free time. I do – in short – think of what I'm going to do with 6d while I'm walking along the corridor.

AN APPENDIX

A mini-anthology of two non-academic Std 6s I take this year and with whom I am doing a lot of informal creative work. Ashley writes about someone he knows well:

MY OLD MAN

He can make me laugh.
He can make me sigh.
He can also make me cry.
He can even make me tall.
He can give and take.
Oh no! he is not a fake.
Who can it be, you may ask?
My own old man of course.

What more could a father want than to have his son say of him, 'He can make me tall'!

A little bit of I-don't-know what from Paul, entitled

THE LARK!

'Hark!' said the Lark
On the first day of spring
As he walked in the forest.

He hopped on a log
and what did he see?
It was a worm!

The next writer, Michael, looks exactly like one of the children Stephen Spender's parents kept him from. This is one of his pieces:

MY HOME THAT WOULD NEVER EXIST

This place is a quiet place,
With gardens and valleys,
And woods of pine trees,
But it's far from home.

There's no killing or fighting,
But just peace and quiet,
And the people are happy,
But it's far from home.

But when I think of this place at night,
How I wish it could exist,
So that there would be peace and quiet,
But this place would be far from home.

Ashley on:

A NASTY EXPERIENCE

Walking down a street
One wintry night
The leaves were falling like tears,
The wind was singing a mournful tune.
A revolver shot rang out.
Then a scream of terror.
The silence of the night
Came back with a sigh.

After reading 'Jabberwocky', the class all went on their own hunts, having alarming encounters with Oogle Oggibles, Gobmanklers, Goey Gumdys, and Anthony's

SPRICTECT

Out of the blarckness I glazook.
What was that?
It the Sprictect.
Stand sfrong.

The blade of my harjavepick
Shlitters
 slaker slicker
 through and through
Off with its trololable skrud
And off I went malarching home.

That everyone can write, that everyone is able to get his poems pinned up on the board to show all the other teachers, that everyone has something inside him to say which is worth saying, is shown by this piece written by a boy who, though in Std 6, plays in the under-19 rugby team and who doesn't really achieve much academically. After hearing Spender's 'My parents kept me from children who were rough', Ruby writes:

AS I GO HOME FROM SCHOOL

Every day on my way home
I pass the Good Hope Girls' School.
Those girls.
Whistles and shouts come out
from the windows.
And the teacher's voice saying
sit down, sit down girls.
Then I go red and feel like blushing,
and move off home fast,
and I can't wait for the next day of school
to finish at 3 pm.

Finally, watch out for the image at the end of this poem of Colin's:

AS I GO HOME FROM SCHOOL

As I went home from school one day,
I saw a small tough-looking boy,
Who looked at me as if I were his prey.
His eyes stared so very
Grey.
He wore a leather jacket
and on its back it had 'Ray'.
I wanted to turn and walk away,
But I didn't have the nerve.
He came straight for me.
My body started to shiver,
My knees quiver.
Ten paces away the sweat was
trickling down my face.
Then like a cow and with its grace,
He walked away.

¹ David Holbrook's books on education are all published by the Cambridge University Press, They are:

The secret places
The exploring word
Children's writing
English in the Certificate of Secondary Education

His course-books and compilations are:

I've got to use words (Books 1 - 4)
Iron, honey, gold (Books 1 - 4) (Verse)
Thieves and angels (Drama)
People and diamonds (Books 1 - 4) (Short Stories)
Visions of life (Books 1 - 4) (Prose extracts)

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