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ENGLISH: THE MAIN INSTRUMENT OF CIVILIZED LIVING

*A Letter from Walter Lippmann, author of
"Public Opinion," etc.*

WHEN you asked me the other day to put on paper ideas about the teaching of English in New York public schools, you were aware of course how great are my disqualifications. I do not know how English is actually taught today, except as I have had some chance to talk to children who were being taught. Nothing I shall say, therefore, is meant as direct criticism, and I shall have few if any practical suggestions to offer. I shall confine myself to sketching the problem as it presents itself to me.

My impression is that the canons of English teaching were formed in an environment very unlike that which now exists in New York City. They assume that the pupil studies English in order to discipline, refine, and enrich his native speech. They assume that he already possesses the idiom of the language, and that at home and at play he is in contact with the living sources of English. But, of course, for a very large part of the school children of New York such an assumption is untrue. The speech which they

This letter addressed by Mr. Lippmann to Mr. John M. Avent, president of the New York City Association of Teachers of English, was published as a foreword to Bulletin XXIV (Oct. 1922) of the New York City Association. It is here reprinted through the kind permission of Mr. Lippmann and with the approval of Mr. Avent. The bulletin, of which it is a part, presents results of a questionnaire sent to some 75 cities with a population of 100,000 or more, and analyzes the conditions under which the English language and literature are taught in urban high schools of the United States

Copies of the report may be had for 10 cents each by addressing the New York City Association of Teachers of English at 60 West 13th St., New York.—Editor.

learn at home is a second hand and acquired English. It is a language learned by their parents rather late in life, if they have learned it at all; and it is a language learned hastily and wholly for the purpose of a quick adjustment to immigrant conditions. This urban immigrant dialect is a kind of convenient sign language rather than an expression of personality and experience. It tends to abstraction and not to imagery. Its rhythms and its idiom draw upon no folklore and no folkways, but instead upon the standardized language of newspapers and advertisements. You cannot assume in New York City, therefore, as you might still assume in the country districts or in England, that from outside of school the sap of native English flows through the pupil's mind.

Lacking the sense of language, acquiring the language learned by his parents to express their immediate wants rather than their whole sense of life, the child comes to you with a pitifully insignificant fund of words. His words are so colorless and meagre that in the attempt to express himself, the modern city child uses the same words so often and in so many different meanings that at last his speech is a series of ejaculations. Everything is a "thing." "Things" are grand, swell, awful, nice, terrible, pretty, interspersed with "you know what I mean" and "do you get me." It is not a language that describes and communicates experience in a world of shapes and colors and movement, but a language of seeking and demanding and giving and refusing accompanied by exclamations of approval and disapproval.

But experience that can't be described and communicated in words can not long be vividly remembered. For words more than any other medium prolong experience in consciousness. And then because experience can't be expressed and can't be remembered it soon ceases to be noticed. That is one reason, I think, why in a modern city like New York the enduring interests of the race seem so

neglected. When you have looked at the stars once and remarked that they are grand, and then again only in order to say that the heavens are swell, why not look at the Wrigley chewing gum sign on Broadway which is equally grand and equally swell? Without words to give precision to ideas, the ideas themselves soon become indistinguishable. If you go through life as so many city people do, knowing objects only by the general species to which they belong, the individuality on which all true judgment and all genuine appreciation depend is soon lost.

The Book of Genesis is wise in these matters. You will remember that the Lord's first act after the creation, even before He made Eve, was to bring every living creature to Adam "to see what he would call them." But if you ask an ordinary movie audience in New York City to tell you the name of natural objects, you know what the response would be. How many stars could they recognize and name? How many plants? How many trees, how many animals, how many parts of their own bodies? You find, I think, that the purely urban person has almost no sense of and no words for the main activities by which he is fed, clothed, housed, transported, or even amused. The whole cycle of the seasons and the weather, of ploughing and sowing and reaping, of carrying to market and distributing is a blur in his mind. Unless he happens to be in a certain trade he is shut out of the very rich and expressive language of labor, of shipbuilding, and carpentry, and plumbing, and tailoring, and cooking. The names of tools, the names of structural parts, the names of different sorts of joining and cutting and welding are mysteries to him. You search his mind in vain for the sharp aspects of real perceptions. The substances with which his imagination can work are impoverished.

Yet the business of living in what Graham Wallas calls the Great Society is an ever greater tax on the imagination. For the bulk of public questions deal with matters that are out of sight, and have, therefore, to be imagined. These questions are reported to us in the thin and colorless language of the newspapers. We read this language, and unless we read it with a mind stored with concrete images, we can come to no true realization of what it all means. How can you hope, for example, to find a sound public

opinion in New York City about the farmer's politics if the whole circumstance of the farmer's life is hidden and unconceived? Yet that is just the difficulty we are facing every day.

As you know I have no belief that this underlying problem of our civilization—the problem of enabling men to master an unseen environment—is soluble without a very great development of our machinery of accounting, analysis, record, and reporting. I have dealt with that elsewhere at some length. *But nothing is more certain than that the teaching of English in the public school is a critical factor in the whole affair.*

On the teachers of English our society depends for the formation of habits of speech, which are in reality habits of thought that will equip the modern citizen to give precision to experience by naming it. Our social life depends on the presence of enough people who can tell different things apart and discern identities where they exist. It depends, therefore, on people who use words without confusion as to their meaning, to whom the name of this and that is the name of this and that, and not of half a dozen vaguely related things as well. It depends on people, who in language at least are what the Mediaeval schoolmen called Nominalists, on people who do not mistake general terms for objective facts, on people who can penetrate phrases like Bolshevism, socialism, democracy, liberalism, radicalism, Americanism, and can arrive at candid vivid understanding of the particular persons, acts, hopes, fears that these omnibus words are supposed to cover.

A large order, but to be teacher in a republic is in itself a large order. An easy and inconsequential life is after all a dull one. *But to teach English in a community like ours is to be dealing every day with the main instrument of civilized living.* To give that instrument edge and point and temper is a sacred task.

WALTER LIPPMANN

THE TEACHER'S RESPONSIBILITY

The teacher—whether mother, priest, or schoolmaster—is the real maker of history; rulers, statesmen, and soldiers do but work out the possibilities of co-operation or conflict the teacher creates.—H. G. WELLS.