

## Until the Issue is Clarified

By John A. Brownell

The nature of the field of study known as "English" is under considerable discussion in the United States and Canada. In the last three years Northrup Frye, Archibald MacLeish, Alfred Kazin, William Riley Parker, Albert Marckwardt, H. A. Gleason, John Ciardi, William Leary and many other noted scholars and critics have disagreed with one another on the nature or existence of the unity of English as a discipline of knowledge. Meanwhile, instruction in classrooms must go on. In my judgment, under present course organization and teacher preparation it would be best to presume some kind of wholeness. In this essay I shall present some rather obvious and simple ideas on teaching in an interwoven fashion the three most common strands of the elementary and secondary English curriculum in the United States. I leave to others the vital theoretical problem which must be solved for genuine improvement of the curriculum. Inasmuch as the most glaring weakness in American English instruction is reputed to be composition, I shall give emphasis to it in my suggestions.

In teaching composition we've grown accustomed to students' exploring their personal observations, happenings, imaginings, and reflections as sources of ideas for compositions. Because of this habit we have undervalued two other provinces in the domain of English: literature and language study. The richness of these two issues from their being integral parts of the whole realm of language. Together with composition I say, somewhat glibly, that they form the structure of English. I say "glibly"

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in that while mathematics is the calculus of thought of well-formed problems, English is the calculus of thought of ill-formed problems. Nevertheless, the discourse about literature, composition, and language is venerable, worthy, and interrelated.

The notion of relating composition to literature at all school levels flows from the conviction that composition is not merely the art or skill of arranging words and forming sentences. It is an important way to order experience; to discover ideas, evaluate them, render them more precise, and communicate them to others. Thought and composition are intimately related: to write clearly means to think clearly. Thinking and writing require substance—facts, ideas, preferences, images—and the syntax of thought. Literature can provide the substance and models of thought for composition. In a most profound way, composition becomes a way of knowing—that is, we tell ourselves what we know—and in a narrower sense, a way of knowing the meaning of literature. If these arguments hold, the notion becomes a principle of teaching: composition tasks developed from literature should begin in the earliest school years and continue each year thereafter.

Teaching composition in relation to the study of literature demands a definition of literature and a posture for its study and teaching. Though literature may be defined as the total of preserved writings belonging to a given language or people, specifically I shall define it as that part of the writings which is deliberately shaped for aesthetic effect. In this sense a literary selection is a work of art, complete in itself. As E. M. Forster observed, "All great art tends to be anonymous." The aim of the study of any selection at any grade level might be stated simply as full comprehension of the work. The method of comprehending a work is reading. In this effort reading involves, first, discovering the sense of the author's words, his feelings about what he says, his tone or attitude toward his

readers, his intent, and, then, reflecting on their significance. Composing and writing one's own thoughts about these discoveries is the method *par excellence* for realizing the significance of what one has read. As compared to conversation, composition requires more exactness of thought, firmer organization, and more deliberate word choice.

The meaning of this posture regarding literature should be made categorically clear: no amount of literary history or study of authors' lives, nor of socializing, psychologizing, or philosophizing *about* literature should constitute the study of literature for elementary and secondary school students. Elevation of these worthwhile but subsidiary activities above the reading of the poem, story, novel, play, or essay discourages elementary and secondary school students from developing a continuing interest in reading literature. In short, the principle for the study of literature in grades one through twelve is this: it is the reading of the literary work itself which commands our attention, even our devotion.

I would advance another proposition at this point. There are no second-class citizens in the dominion of English. All students are entitled to study literature. No condition of age, sex, family back-ground, grade in school, intellectual capacity, achievement level, or vocational aspiration should disqualify a student from an encounter with readings notable for literary form and expression. As a corollary, all students at every level should have the opportunity to study some appropriate prose and poetry each year. We have good reason to believe that even young children have powers of intuitive thought which can be developed in the earliest school years as the basis for the study of literature and its corollary, composition.

Now let's turn to the other lightly esteemed source for composition tasks—language study. What is it? For my purposes I shall define the study of language as the study of that human

attribute, speech, of the sounds used in speech, of the written symbols for the sounds, and of the methods and conventions of combining these auditory and visual symbols which are used and understood by a considerable community of persons. Thus, language study includes theories of communication, theories of meaning, analyses of the means of communication, studies in diction and linguistic geography, historical and comparative studies of languages, and detailed studies of the structures of languages, or grammars.

The entire field of language scholarship is in ferment. Elementary and secondary school language study is too narrow—grammar, mechanics, punctuation, spelling, usage—and the study lags about a century or more behind what is known. Organizations of teachers of English such as the Modern Language Association and the National Council of Teachers of English have recommended systematic attention to aspects of language study beyond the usual grammar and usage, attention to such aspects as vocabulary development and lexicography, diction, linguistic geography, and the history of the English language.

In keeping with advances in scholarship, English grammar may be defined simply as the study of how English is used—the observation of the forms and arrangements of English words used singly or in combination to convey meaning. Grammar covers two types of phenomena: first, changes in the forms of words and the relationship between these changes and meaning—or what linguists call morphology; second, changes in the order in which words are placed to convey meaning—or what is called syntax. The study of usage, however, is the study of word choices, preferences, and the standards by which these choices are made. It may be considered as separate from the territory of grammar.

Modern English grammar comprises the study of the basic

sentence patterns or word orders and the way in which these basic patterns may generate other patterns. Second, it contains the study of modification by adjectival or adverbial elements—word, phrase, and clause. Third, it comprises the study of connection of sentence elements by conjunctions and adverbs. Fourth, it includes the study of subordination of ideas by a clause, a participial phrase, a modifying phrase, a single word, or an appositive. And finally, it contains the study of combining ideas through Parallel structures—participial phrases, prepositional phrases, infinitive phrases, or modifying clauses.

My next proposition is this: language study as broadly outlined here should be the source of composition tasks beginning in the earliest school years and continuing each year thereafter. Again, all students are entitled to study the full scope of language, and each year all students should have the opportunity to study appropriate materials in such areas as diction, usage, history of some linguistic aspects, phonology. We have some evidence that even young children have intuitive powers in language study and it is these very powers which should be brought into play in the early years of the study of language.

Now even if all that has been said were granted, mere identification of these natural sources for composition would be only of minor merit. The real enterprise for the teacher is the blending of these resources into a program to teach the arts of composition.

The basic strategy for such teaching is to perforate permanently the interior boundaries of the realm of English causing composition, literature, and language to form an aggregate. Perforation first suggests to me breaking up the usual order of writing assignments by setting the kinds of writing tasks which students may do before they read, while they read, and after they have completed reading. For example, before

reading, "What does the title lead you to expect?"; during reading, "Keep track of the obstacles in the path of the protagonist as you read."

Second, the composition problem may be to reproduce the original work by a simple retelling of it, by writing a summary, a precis, or a paraphrase of the original. These tasks may begin in the earliest school years and stretch through grade twelve into adult life. Some may be more difficult than others and hence more appropriate for older students, although beyond identifying retelling as the easiest, I'm not certain I can order them.

Third, the composition problem may be to adapt the original by writing a parody, that is, by writing in the language and style of the author but for comic effect; to adapt by writing a dramatization of the original which conforms to meaning, characterization, plot, diction and so on in dramatic form rather than in prose or poetry; or to adapt by modernizing the setting. We need to consider the importance of imitation which teachers of modern foreign languages recognize so clearly. A problem consisting of the imitating of the style of a literary work seems warranted.

Fourth, the composition problem may be to expound upon the original story, poem, play, novel, essay; for example, "Why I Liked It or Didn't Like It"; or to make detailed analysis of specific aspects of its form and thought; not "Where did Silas bury the money," nor "How did Hester win her letter?" Jerome Bruner in his address to the National Council of Teachers of English convention in Miami in November, 1962, said that the shape or style of one's mind is the internalization of language; That to maximize awareness, emphasize contrasts with what students have as their styles. Analyses bring out points of style.

Fifth, the composition problems may use the reading for a springboard. Students can be asked to use the statement of

an idea in the literature selection as a topic sentence for a paragraph or theme; e.g., Tom Paine's "These are the times that try men's souls," or Thoreau's "Beware of all enterprises that require new clothes," or Dickens' opening lines in the *Tale of Two Cities*, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness . . . ." Students can be asked to borrow a situation from the story or selection into which each student puts a character of his own creation; e.g., take Pepe's stabbing of his assailant in John Steinbeck's short story "Flight," or perhaps Wilbur's winning of a prize at the fair from "Charlotte's Web," by E. B. White. Students can take as the narrator another character than that used by the author and write the tale anew from this perspective. Have the "Most Dangerous Game" with General Zaroff the narrator rather than the author's omnipresent one. Actually, the composition task based upon writing *from* the selection read presents an almost inexhaustible supply of ideas.

Sixth, students can be asked to write in a certain genre or type of literature which has been studied. For example they may be asked to compose essays, short stories, poems, or specific sub-types such as the couplet or personal essay. In at least one situation with which I'm familiar, American fourth and fifth graders wrote English equivalents of the Japanese poetic form, haiku, with some outstanding results. Jerome Bruner has recommended the use of literary models in developing language mastery. Certainly students can imitate literary models of unity, coherence, emphasis, modes of discourse—narration, description, exposition, argumentation—methods of topic development, and a host of rhetorical devices from simile to paradox.

The borders between composition and language study can be crossed with only the smallest efforts of the imagination. While

using literature as the source of ideas, composition assignments can require the use of specific syntactic structures—prescribed sentence patterns, and methods of modification, subordination, connection, and parallel construction. Parenthetically I should add that these same kinds of structures can be discovered functioning in students' writing or in the literary works studied. Similes, metaphors, figures of speech have appropriate or requisite grammatical structures and their development may be posed as problems for student writers.

The history of words and languages, the poetry of jump-rope rhymes, the study of diction and dialect, the vagaries of grammars, the mysteries of cryptanalysis, the origins of names, these and hundreds of other topics derived from language study can spark the imagination of children, fan the spark to flame, and supply long lasting embers of interest in language, and, at the same time, provide substance for teaching composition.

If these suggestions comprise a strategy of teaching composition from the twin resources of literature and language study then certainly some slight mention of tactics is in order. Before the writing task is begun, time should be spent searching for an idea; identifying a purpose and an audience; limiting the idea, and planning an overall arrangement. Then each student must begin to perfect his plan by writing—excluding the irrelevant, and extraneous; consistently sticking to the purpose to establish unity; providing those necessary transitions for the reader which give coherence; deciding on emphasis for a certain element so that it is featured; developing an impressive beginning and ending; and checking the entire effort for appropriate style, tone, and usage. Through systematic correction and revision of themes and from teachers' commentaries about the logical and rhetorical effectiveness of his writing each student can not only learn to write but also

to develop grammatical concepts, a command of literary devices, and an understanding of form.

Barch and Wright in a study of "The Background of Good and Poor Writers" found some remarkable contrasts which should aid in tactical matters. They found that the good writer valued organization, having something to say, being specific, having a clear purpose in his writing, and being direct and to the point. The poor writer didn't worry about these things. Rather, he was anxious about spelling, vocabulary, and all sorts of mechanical matters. Poor writers, unlike the good, were unable to recognize good writing in others.

It has been my contention that persons who have read little and thought less—and that is relative to others of their age—will find writing an acceptable paragraph beyond their power. As Lucretius wrote nearly two thousand year ago, "nothing can be created out of nothing."

I have made this series of propositions about teaching composition as an integral part of English primarily as a curriculum assumption but also in response to that oft-heard student question, "What'll I Write About?" Language and literature do offer answers.

First, composition tasks developed from literature should begin, in the earliest school years and continue each year thereafter. In the study of literature with the young, it should be the literary work itself which commands our attention. There are no second class citizens in the dominion of English. All are entitled to study literature; all should have the opportunity to study each year prose and poetry appropriate to their maturity. Young children have powers of intuitive thought which can be developed in the study of literature. All older children and youth have some powers of analytic thought.

Second, composition tasks developed from language study in all its aspects should begin in the earliest school years and

continue each year thereafter. Each year, all children and youth are entitled to study man's most human characteristic, language, in accord with the best and most recent scholarship. Even young children have powers of intuitive thought which can be developed in the multiple studies of language. All older children and youth have some powers of analytic thought which can be employed in language study.

Third, the basic strategy for teaching composition well is to perforate the boundaries between literature, language, and composition: toward literature by writing before, during, and after reading; by reproducing, adapting, expounding about, or extrapolating from the literature read; by imitating various literary types, modes, and conventions; toward language study by, writing with certain grammatical and rhetorical structures and by writing about language.

Fourth, the tactical approaches which give momentum and increasing power over the written expression of ideas require self-discipline, consistency, and perseverance from both teacher and student.

Students who have exploited composition's natural resources of literature and language study should have ideas not only about what to write but, perhaps, even visions of the wholeness of the discipline of English.