

PROBLEMS OF RESEARCH IN S.A.

(PART II).

I think I may have got from you some measure of agreement in my plea, first for a collective and systematic approach to research in English studies, and then for a concentration on South African literary materials. I say this because, although the idea of an organised research programme on the part of a conference such as this may be new, the research-content remains literary. But I am prepared for a certain amount of good-natured disagreement with regard to the direction I am about to suggest our subsequent research should take.

Before I broach the subject, however, I would like to return to a point I made earlier in this paper: namely, that South Africa is a young country, and that hence we are not justified in regarding the work we are called upon to do here as necessarily similar to the work we would be doing in a University in Britain. No university work is without its problems, but our problems in South Africa are largely different, and we should see them as such. Further, we must recognise clearly the part we are called upon to play in moulding the future of a country such as this.

Nothing is further from my mind than the lowering of academic standards in our efforts to assist the young people we are called upon to train. Indeed, it is the very poverty of such standards in South African education as a whole that has led me to the somewhat unorthodox view of our function as university teachers of English that I shall propound. It cannot be said that South Africa has yet succeeded in evolving a system of education that suits its particular requirements. In this respect we lag far behind the United States of America, which, although a comparatively new country, has established an educational system which seems to suit itself, whatever we may think of certain aspects of that system.

What is first required, I venture to say, is a change of attitude on our part. Let us divest ourselves of any preconceptions we may have about our function in the universities of South Africa, and see our task for what it really is—again a pioneering task, and one requiring all the energy and initiative we can bring to it. And we have to admit that our whole system of education in South Africa is in need of a complete overhaul, especially as regards the teaching of English.

But few of us realise, I think, that it is our work to help to formulate a new system of education in this country, and to do so by applying our research ability to problems concerning the teaching of English. I

repeat: it is our work to help to formulate a new system of education in this country, and to do so by applying our research ability to problems concerning the teaching of English. And that is the point I want to make.

Apart from the research aspect, that this matter is one which falls within our orbit is plain from the fact that after our Inaugural Conference in Johannesburg three years ago, we agreed to exchange ideas on ways in which the teaching of English might be improved in the schools; for we had found that most of our difficulties arose from inadequate school training. A couple of Regional Conferences followed within a year, held in Bloemfontein and Potchefstroom, where matters affecting the teaching of English in Afrikaans-orientated university institutions were discussed and agreement reached on a "nucleus" course for First Year English, which the representative of the Division of External Studies of the University of South Africa also agreed to adopt. After a meeting of heads of university English departments in June, 1947, however, the important matter of improving the standard of English in schools was allowed to lapse; and it is this that I propose to resurrect.

According to the Report on both Regional Conferences, the procedure to be adopted in making resolutions effective was that the findings of the Conference should be communicated to the Joint Matriculation Board, the Directors of Education of the four provinces, the Union Department of Education, the Universities, the Regional Committees (or their equivalents) of Normal Colleges, and the Teachers' Associations. It was also resolved to create action committees in the Transvaal, the Cape, and the Orange Free State. And there, as far as I know, the matter still rests. But we should not allow it to rest.

Granted, then, that we are concerned, and vitally so, with the teaching of English at levels other than our own, it should not be too much to ask that not only should we follow up what we have already done in the way of making recommendations, but also that we should be prepared to undertake a comprehensive programme of research on the subject as a whole. That we should constitute ourselves a research body in English studies I have already suggested. What I now propose is that our attention be then turned to a systematic consideration of teaching methods. Yes, I know what has been said by wits like Jaques Barzun on "methods" as a soporific that comfort the weary and sustain the poor in mind; but we have to remember that Professor Barzun is writing of the American scene at a time when the study of teaching methods there has reached saturation point. But in this country we cannot say that the subject has received the expert attention it merits. And the fact that

a good deal of nonsense is bound to be talked on educational theory and practice should not deter us from applying our own training and experience to the objective study of specific problems arising from the teaching of English in South African schools.

I am not suggesting that we should concern ourselves with the award of degrees in English for individual pieces of research in teaching method; the award of degrees in Education for such work by postgraduate students is a matter which belongs to the Faculties of Education concerned. Personally, I feel that research in the teaching of English is too important to be left entirely to postgraduate students. We should undertake it ourselves, and the older and more experienced we are, the more fit are we for the task. Not all postgraduate students are researchers, as I have said; but the better among them might well be used to clear the ground, in the preliminary stages of a far-reaching investigation such as this, by examining a certain amount of material and compiling the necessary statistics.

Having organised ourselves into a research body in English studies, and proved our value by a collective piece of research that has long been needed, we should be in a position to moot the question of, and ask for representation on, a central research body. For the sake of convenience, let us call this the Central Education Advisory and Research Council. We would first have to overcome a certain amount of prejudice on the part of the educational authorities, who sometimes seem to think that a professor is the last person to know anything about teaching; though it must be said that some professors encourage this idea by their lack of interest in anything outside their own specialised field of study.

The Central Education Advisory and Research Council of which I have spoken might consist, inter alia, of representatives of this Conference, the teaching profession in all four provinces, and the Provincial and Union Departments of Education. The teachers on this Central Council should represent all grades of teaching, from nursery school to higher secondary, so that a complete survey of the educational requirements of the Union might eventually be made.

We should not be concerned with getting a majority on such an Education Research Council, but with having the proposal accepted and obtaining some representation, even if only in an advisory capacity.

To show that these ideas are in the air to-day, although my paper was written before I saw the reference in question, I shall read you a news item which appeared in *The Rand Daily Mail* of 2nd July—less than a week ago:

"A commission should be appointed to inquire into the whole question of Language education in South African schools, said Professor S. P. E. Boshoff, a former Transvaal Director of Education, at the annual meeting of the Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns in Pretoria yesterday.

"Members of the commission should be selected from experts from the academy, whose report should be studied by education authorities to bring about a reform in the Language education system.

"Dr. S. H. Pellisier, chairman of the Faculty of Languages, Literature and Art, said that too much time was devoted to other school subjects to the detriment of Language education, which was probably the weakest link in the education system."

A recommendation of this nature might well receive favourable consideration in view of the concern of the present central government with the weakness in English of so many of the younger Afrikaans-speaking generation. In any case, such a development would be possible only if the state was prepared to sponsor and finance a research programme of the kind I have in mind.

Primary and secondary education is, I know, the concern of the provinces; and it would be from the provincial Departments of Education that we should first have to enlist support. We could best do this by recommending the establishment of Provincial Education Advisory and Research Councils of the type I have mentioned. Curricula and syllabuses vary from one province to another, so that the obvious starting-point would be a comprehensive study of the teaching of English in each province by a provincial research body constituted more or less on the lines I have indicated. But we should not lose sight of our Central Research Council.

What I envisage is the machinery, not only to make possible systematic research in the teaching of English, but of all other basic subjects taught in South African schools. I repeat: the machinery, not only to make possible systematic research in the teaching of English, but of all other basic subjects taught in South African schools.

This machinery would necessarily be a complex one; but it is no use my proposing a far-reaching development of this nature unless I am prepared to sketch in the outlines. All important matters of educational theory and practice, I suggest, would first come before the Provincial Research Councils. If considered of sufficient importance, they would be referred to the Central Research Council, which could then institute research projects in education, to be undertaken by university institutions in the provinces concerned. The results of such research would come in turn before the Provincial and the Central Councils, if

recommended by the former. The Central Council might then draw up a revised research assignment in the light of previous experimental work, and refer it back through the provincial body to the university institution responsible.

In this way there would be a regular volume of worth-while research on teaching problems continually in operation. And further, both the Provincial and the Central Advisory and Research Councils would be able to balance the claims of various teaching subjects, and draw up comprehensive surveys of educational requirements.

The ultimate aim of such a development should be, I make bold to say, the standardising of school curricula and syllabuses throughout South Africa. Much may be said for diversity in school training, but even more, I think, may be said for uniformity. Under the old Cape Matriculation system, there was one form of training for all pupils in South African schools; and in the light of our present discontents it would seem to have been a good one. To say what I have just said is not to imply that the control of primary and secondary education should pass from the provinces to the central government. As an ex-Natal man, I can hardly say anything of the sort!

For too long now, important matters of educational policy have provided material for political strife. The dual-medium ordinance, with its narrow parliamentary victory and its equally narrow defeat, is a distressing example. Such measures belong to South African education, not South African politics; and ought at least to be fully discussed by those with a first-hand knowledge of what they are talking about. For this reason alone, a Conference such as this should support the principle of applying scientific research methods to educational theory and practice. It is easy to speak on an educational problem of which one knows little, to other Laymen who know less; but it is difficult to refute the considered findings of a group of research scholars on that same problem.

In this paper I have used the terms "teaching" and "education" as more or less interchangeable; but I want now to draw a distinction between them. Education should mean the full development of the individual, teaching a means whereby he may educate himself. Unlike education, teaching is practical or nothing. And it is primarily with teaching that we are concerned. So that organisation, method, and uniformity should not be looked down upon from an academic height, but valued for what they can do in assisting us in that most practical of all callings, the training of our young men and women. And it is in this spirit that we should be prepared to undertake research on the problems of teaching in South Africa.

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