

The Reappearing Dais

- Alan Proud. *Read and Reflect*. London: Edward Arnold, 1978, 71pp. Paperback, n.p.
- W.D. Wright. *Learn Good English*. London: James Nesbett, 1979, 65pp. Paperback R2.10.
- Tina Pierce & Edward Cochrane eds. *Twentieth Century English Short Stories*. London: Evans Brothers Ltd., 1979, 168pp. R2.40.
- Anthony Adams, Norrow Butterworth & Esmor Jones. *English Skills*. Books 1 & 2. London: Harrap. R4.70 each.

Just over ten years ago Whitehead 'oversaw' the disappearance of the dais! But recently, in English particularly, a reaction by educational 'traditionalists' against 'progressive' teaching methods (the terms were always unsatisfactorily schematic) has gained impetus. No doubt this partly indicates the inevitable swing of the methodological pendulum, while unfavourable economic circumstances, too, may be playing a part. Today the school-leaver both in England and South Africa - unlike his counterpart of the last decade - is uncomfortably aware of the relative scarcity of employment opportunities: that in the market place, if not on the more 'agitprop' campuses, the three R's are definitely a saleable commodity; while some teachers - no doubt encouraged by a recent British enquiry into the declining state of literacy - have re-installed the dais.

Of course, I am exaggerating the extremes of 'progressivism' and 'traditionalism'. Whitehead himself always

advocated that a sensible balance be maintained. However, it is true that many of his disciples were not as circumspect, with the result that a generation of pupils and teacher-trainees was encouraged to show a somewhat cavalier disregard for punctuation and syntax; for formal methods and individual - as opposed to group - activity. Thus it is that Alan Proud in *Read and Reflect* (which provides practice in reading and comprehension for senior primary pupils) can say with tongue not altogether in cheek:

When I was Head of an English Department, I was frequently asked by my colleagues in a somewhat self-conscious way whether we had any 'old-fashioned' comprehension pieces. This might have been a throwback to the days of the teachers' own schooling when we called a clause a clause. It might also signal a feeling that some relief was needed from the all pervasive thematic work. The collection of exercises - to use another old-fashioned word - would be my belated answer. It gives over twenty opportunities for children to sit down quietly and reason their way through a piece of prose which is new to them.

The extracts on which questions have been set are drawn from non-literary sources and some make use of alternate ways of presenting information, such as tables, diagrams and illustrations. The questions are designed to test both an ability to extract information as well as deductive skills, while answers demand to be presented in complete sentences.

Proud - rightly, it seems to me - believes that 'children cannot eat cake all the time', and that they need a periodic return to 'bread and butter regimen where they can tick their answers and feel that they are making some progress towards mastery of the printed word'. His book fulfills its aim, yet its 'bread and butter' - a little jam is permitted - is not unpalatable: imaginatively selected passages tell of fascinating facts about the human skeleton, of football training methods and of the solar system, while the reproduction of newspaper articles, space-research data and school attendance registers offers unusual challenges of information retrieval. Finally, should pupils consider themselves hard done by on a diet of bread and butter, they might be consoled after reading the extract, 'School in France': Saturday is a schoolday and there are not even opportunities for a natter when the teacher is away from his dais - a non-teacher *censeur* maintains discipline (those Saturday morning classes sound forbidding, but what teacher would object to having a 'Heavy-weight' in the corner to guarantee peace and quiet

Like *Read and Reflect*, Wright's *Learn Good English* (which has a place both in first- and second-language primary and junior secondary schools) is also concerned with the possibilities of a more structured approach, in this case particularly towards correct sentence construction and sound grammatical usage. Each section (comprising one lesson) is unpretentiously yet informatively illustrated, and covers basic syntactical and grammatical concepts: for instance, the difference between sentences and phrases, the correct use of plural forms, negatives, tenses, apostrophes, verbs and pronouns; practical application is lucidly demonstrated, while short exercises provide written reinforcement. The book is not merely analytical, but aims rather at encouraging mastery of the English sentence (something so often depressingly absent not only in students' essays at secondary, but also at tertiary level).

A phenomenon of the last twenty years has been the proliferation of study-centres, especially in Britain and the East, offering post-school courses in English as a foreign language, with students ranging from Japanese hotel-keepers to school-leavers, who wish to improve their standard of English prior to seeking places in British and American higher educational institutes. *Twentieth Century English Short Stories* is intended primarily for those foreign students who have already done three to four years of English and are preparing to take the University of Cambridge First Certificate; in South Africa this book would be most suitable for second-language students planning to follow a practical English course at the tertiary level. The exercises, which follow each story, comply with Cambridge Certificate requirements: multiple choice listening comprehension, reading comprehension, discussion and written work, oral situations, and common grammatical errors. In line with common E.F.L. teaching objectives, there is emphasis on the spoken word in living situations, each section concluding with a vocabulary list of colloquial words and phrases.

A problem for the South African teacher of E.F.L. (particularly the teacher of English to those Africans who have suffered the disadvantages of the 'Bantu Education, home-language instruction policy) is that books from abroad naturally tend to be aimed at the student in England; colloquialisms and allusions are often contiguous with the general culture. *Twentieth Century English Short Stories*, however, is not limited in this way: the stories, by writers such as Graham Greene, Ronald Dahl and

Grace Ogot, transcend their immediate environment to speak forcefully of common human experience, while questions are thoughtfully phrased so as to encourage not simply an understanding of the text, but also a sensitive response to character motivation, humour and nuances of tone. Thus the ambitious teacher can adapt his approach to a wide range of abilities.

English Skills, on the other hand, has limitations in the South African context. While the six thematic units in each book include many stimulating suggestions for imaginative writing, the photographs and the topics have a too distinctly British flavour (exercises are based on street maps of English cities). Yet, I am unaware of any locally produced books which vividly combine (as these do) high quality 'mood' photographs (attractive presentation is so important), inventive suggestions for written expression (for instance, directed responses to long-, medium-, and close-up shots of the same subject), lively passages with carefully structured questions aimed at introducing rudimentary literary appreciation, and exercises designed to develop the skills of short story composition (the creation of convincing characters, the tactics of the surprise opening, of suspense and of ironic conclusions). This series (Book III and a Teacher's Book are also available) is probably most suited to the needs of the gifted junior secondary school first-language pupil, and may help to redress a possible imbalance after the concentration of formal language work inspired by the above-mentioned books. For the teacher who regrets Whitehead's apparent eclipse, *English Skills* will offer exciting opportunities for - dare I use the term - 'creative writing', as well as for controversial discussions.

This has a ring of nostalgia: for those heady days of the 'sixties when a pupil's individual identity depended upon his long hair and his automatic writing- before today's educational radicals had begun asserting the value of the re-appearing dais.

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