

H. M. Inspectors, Teachers, Managers, and many others—have expressed to me their conviction that English children learn their words as separate and individual existences; and many of them go farther, and affirm that classification is useless, if not impossible. Thus, for the child, our language sinks nearly to the level of Chinese. The essence of European thinking is classification; but, so far as the notation of our language is concerned, we are out of the European sphere. And it is this tedious and mindless process that costs the country so much: the improvement of our methods would result in an enormous cheapening of the process. This is a consideration which cannot be too earnestly pressed upon the attention of the education department, school boards, and school managers. In the schools I have visited in every part of the country, I have always found both teachers and children working with far too much strain against these difficulties, beating up against contrary winds, driven hither and thither by the cross currents and chopping seas of our different notations, and accumulating solid and trustworthy experience—at the expense of the country—in the slowest and most laborious possible fashion. Just as twenty-five per cent. of base or depreciated coin thrown into the circulation of the country would upset all commerce, and turn bargaining into barter or merely individual transactions, the twenty-five per cent. of anomalous notation (and this is a very moderate estimate) turns almost all the mental effort of the child into a momentary shift—into a series of hand-to-mouth transactions. In other words, the child cannot accumulate experience with ease or economy; he is constantly meeting with new complications which his past experience cannot unravel—in fact, he works as if he had no past, or—what is worse than no past—a past of broken habits and loose perceptions, behind him. No wonder, that the lower classes find it difficult to learn to read; and that even the middle classes find it difficult to learn to spell.

There is a passage in "Alice through the Looking-glass" which describes, as if in a parable, the difficulties felt by most children in their attempts to master the reading of our mother-tongue.

"Whenever the horse stopped (which it did very often), he fell off in front; and whenever it went on again (which it generally did rather suddenly), he fell off behind. Otherwise he kept on pretty well, except that he had a habit of now and then falling off sideways; and, as he generally did this on the side on which Alice was walking, she soon found it was the best plan not to walk quite close to the horse.

"I'm afraid you've not had much practice in riding," she ventured to say as she was helping him up from his fifth tumble. The knight looked very much surprised and a little offended at the remark. "What makes you say that?" he asked, as he scrambled back into the saddle, keeping hold of Alice's hair with one hand, to save himself from falling over on the other side.

"Because people don't fall off quite so often when they've had much practice."

"I've had plenty of practice," the knight said gravely, "plenty of practice!" Alice could think of nothing better to say than "Indeed!" but she said it as heartily as she could. They went on a little way in silence after this, the knight, with his eyes shut, muttering to himself and Alice watching anxiously for the next tumble.

"The great art of riding," the knight suddenly began in a loud voice, waving his right arm as he spoke, "is to keep"—Here the sentence ended as suddenly as it had begun, as the knight fell heavily on the top of his head exactly in the path where Alice was walking. She was quite frightened this time, and said in an anxious tone, as she picked him up: "I hope no bones are broken?"

"None to speak of," the knight said, as if he didn't mind breaking two or three of them. "The great art of riding, as I was saying, is—to keep your balance properly. Like this, you know—". He let go the bridle, and stretched out both his arms to show Alice what he

meant, and this time he fell flat on his back, right under the horse's feet.

"Plenty of practice!" he went on repeating all the time Alice was getting him on his feet again. "Plenty of practice!"

"It's too ridiculous!" cried Alice, losing all her patience this time. "You ought to have a wooden horse on wheels, that you ought!" "Does that go smoothly?" the knight asked in a tone of great interest, clasping his arms round the horse's neck as he spoke, just in time to save himself from tumbling off again. "Much more smoothly than a live horse," Alice said, with a little scream of laughter, in spite of all she could do to prevent it. "I'll get one," the knight said thoughtfully to himself. "One or two—several."

"The great art of riding is to keep your balance properly; and the great art of reading is to know when to give this sound, and when to give another sound to the same letter, and to keep your mental balance among all his confusion. Alice found it was the best plan not to keep quite close to the horse; and children very soon instinctively learn that it is the best plan not to keep quite close to the letters, but to be ready to give a new sound to the old friends at discretion or indiscretion. And thus a want of firmness, confidence, and mental clearness is generated which probably delays the acquisition of other subjects, and which may in fact stick to the pupil all his life. For the attitude of the mind in learning to read English is not a simple one—like the mental attitude of the German child. It is a threefold state of mind. The child has to do not one thing, but three things:

1. He has to notice when he must *not* notice (in the case of silent letters);
2. He has to notice when he must alter his translation of a symbol—or be false to his past experience;
3. He must notice when to give the old translation, or keep true to his past experience.

It is very difficult to make one set of movements with the right hand, and a different set with the left; but if we had to keep up a third and still different set of movements with one of the feet, it would be a very slow and difficult thing to learn.

The language contains more than 1300 words the notation of which is not in harmony with the pronunciation; and these 1300 words are the commonest—the most in daily use. Of these, 800 are monosyllables—and these, too, in most common use—words like *too*, *said*, *they*, *brought*, *one*, and *once*. The problem of teaching to read a true notation, is to train children to co-ordinate with and fit to the *eye-language* (the printed symbol), which they do not yet know, the *ear-language*, which they have known from their earliest days. But what if the eye-language refuses to be fitted to the ear-language? What if they have long bid each other goodbye and taken separate paths? What if the task becomes for the child a merely arbitrary and entirely forceful linking of the one to the other?

The important question now arises. *Is there an antidote to this state of things?* The two diseases or malformations in the language are plain to every one; and they are perpetually present to the elementary teacher. What are we to do?

The analogy in human affairs points to the fact that the presence of a great defect in one direction, points to the presence of a great power in another direction; and the question arises: Is there, for the enormous deficiencies and absurdities in our notation, some countervailing advantage in the language?

I believe there is an antidote—a very simple, but a very effective one. The antidote is to be found in the language itself. It is easy, by the invention of diacritical* marks, to guide the child to the ordinary pronunciation, but then these diacritical marks are

* Such marks, I mean, as are used to indicate silent letters, &c., &c.