

## \* Special Papers. \*

## A DEFENCE OF GRAMMAR.\*

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AT the meeting of the Provincial Teachers' Association, held in August last, Mr. Rowe, Model School Master of Kingston, moved a resolution for the abolition of Technical Grammar from the Public School programme, and for the substitution in its stead of what is called Language Training. This motion is reported to have been carried; and thus is put in danger a subject of study, which, taught when it ought to be, and as it ought to be, I regard as one of the most useful subjects on the programme, whether looked at from the practical or from the intellectual point of view. How Mr. Rowe supported his motion, and the nature of the charges he brought against Technical Grammar, will be seen by consulting the condensed report of his address as printed in the EDUCATIONAL JOURNAL of October 1st.

In making his charges Mr. Rowe is sometimes definite and sometimes very indefinite; but notwithstanding his variety of speech, I believe that what was all the time in Mr. Rowe's mind as the object of his anathemas was that something that *used* to be called Grammar. I refer to that everlasting round of rules, disconnected statements, ready-made definitions, dry paradigms, and endless conjugations, which with little explanation, oftener with none, used to be assigned pupils to memorize and to recite parrot-like, without their being expected to understand it, much less to be able to apply it.

If any such absurdity as this is perpetrated anywhere now-a-days and called grammar teaching; if this is what Mr. Rowe calls technical grammar; if this is the sort of thing he wishes and is striving to abolish, I for one, in the name of common sense and humanity wish more strength to his elbow and cordially bid him "God-speed." Such cruel folly is open to all the charges Mr. Rowe urges; it merits the severest condemnation of every rational teacher.

But has the grammar teaching done in this Province for the past ten or twelve years been of this character? Has that done since the introduction of the Public school grammar been at all of this character? Don't Mr. Rowe's charges come too late? I am loath to believe that, in these days of Model Schools and rational methods of instruction, of enlightened teachers and active inspectors, there is a single teacher in any corner of Ontario guilty now-a-days of teaching grammar in the absurd way I have described and which I am as ready as any man to condemn.

This antiquated absurdity—this setting children to memorize rules, definitions, etc., *must* be the sort of thing Mr. Rowe condemns, for this only is open to the charges which he makes. But is this sort of thing technical grammar? To give the latter such a meaning, and then to condemn it and urge its abolition seems to me like giving a bad name to a good dog and then

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hanging him. I may call the memorizing of rules, definitions, etc., a bungling attempt to teach theoretical grammar. For when we speak of teaching technical English grammar, we mean, I presume, teaching English grammar technically; and teaching English grammar technically ought to mean what the teaching of other subjects technically always means. I ask myself what means technical education in any art—carpentering, iron-working, surveying, tanning, painting, teaching? If I am not mistaken, technical education in any of these arts is two-fold. It consists, first, of a theoretical part, *i. e.*, the imparting of a knowledge, definite, accurate and comprehensive, of the laws and principles that underlie that art; second, of a practical part, *i. e.*, an exposition of the best methods of applying the acquired theoretical knowledge to the perfect working out or practice of that art. Now, the first part may be taught without the second. For instance, I may be taught all about the nature of colors and the laws of perspective and yet never put brush to canvas. The second may be taught (or possessed as a natural gift), without the first. I may be taught to sing (in a way), without knowing music; or to paint as Benjamin West did at nine years of age. Again, either part may be taught and as much of the other as circumstances may permit. In any case, however, the best craftsman will, undoubtedly, be he who has been given a thorough knowledge of both parts; and any craftsman will be good to just the extent that the two parts—principles and practice—have gone hand in hand; in other words to the extent that he has received a technical education in the art.

Now, apply this to the art under discussion—the art of fluent and correct English speaking and writing—efficiency in which is aimed at by instruction in English grammar. This art is no exception to the rule just mentioned; natural gifts being equal, that boy or that girl, that man or that woman will be the most fluent and correct speaker and writer, whose knowledge of the principles of the language is most thorough; and whose ability to apply those principles readily and accurately in practice is most extensive. Moreover, as in other arts, those persons will be good speakers or writers just to the extent that principles and practice in their grammar lessons have proceeded together. I said that in a technical education, either part—a knowledge of principles or of practice—may be taught, and as much of the other as circumstances may permit. This hits exactly the position of grammar in our Public Schools. The age and mental capacity of our pupils, the shortness of the school-life of most of them and the fact that they are all the time hearing bad language out of school, make it incumbent upon us to begin the practical part of their grammatical education at an age which unfits them to grasp that knowledge of the principles that ought, when possible, always to accompany the practice. Little ones in the First and Second Books must be taught to express themselves in a certain way because it is right, and to not express themselves in a certain other way because it is wrong. The teacher's "do" and "don't do," is their ultimatum. At their tender

age, practice and precept are everything, theory *nil*.

By the time the Third Book is reached, however, the pupils will be sufficiently intelligent to understand *why* they must express themselves in certain ways and not in other ways; and the teacher, remembering that principles as well as practice are necessary to perfect workmanship, will begin to combine these by teaching the nature of the Sentence, and the Parts of Speech with abundant exercises thereon in some, such way as is outlined in Part I. of the Public School Grammar. Then, as pupils increase in age and in mental strength, the teacher will advance to the more difficult facts and principles which underlie and govern our English tongue. He will constantly appeal to the pupils' experience or observation to attest the existence of these facts and principles, and then, as soon as they are understood and mastered, he will show their application to every day language by embodying them in exercises, oral or written, as is done all through the Public School Grammar, and he will review and review till these facts and principles become so much part and parcel of the pupils' mental equipment that they can readily and rightly employ them in their daily speech and writing.

The foregoing is what I understand by technical grammar, and so far from such grammar "being a hindrance only," I feel sure that it is the best means of accomplishing that for which Mr. Rowe so earnestly pleads. I think it is evident that the result he wishes to bring about and the result I wish to bring about are one and the same, viz:—an ability on the part of our pupils to speak and write readily and correctly. As to the means to be used to bring about this result, Mr. Rowe and I partly agree and partly differ. Mr. Rowe says that the result can be brought about in one way only, viz:—"by making every lesson a language lesson, and by a careful course of oral and written composition extending from the beginning to the end of the Public school course." We agree as to the course to be pursued with First and Second Book classes; we agree that every lesson should be made a language lesson to the extent that both teacher and pupils should use nothing but the best of English; we agree that paramount importance should be attached to "oral and written composition from the beginning to the end of the course." We differ in this, that, from the lessons in oral and written composition, Mr. Rowe would, all through the Public school course, banish grammar as being "a hindrance only"; whereas I, from the Third Book up, would base these lessons on facts and principles learned in their grammar lessons.

Advocates of the course Mr. Rowe would pursue dignify it with the name Language Training; and they speak of it as something naturally and necessarily opposed to grammar teaching—as if there was a case in court, Language Training *versus* Grammar. Of course there is no real antagonism between grammar and language training. As well talk of antagonism between the principles of gas-making and lighting the streets; between Mathematics and ready and accurate sum-working.