

## ON LEARNING THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE.

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The child commences the study of language in the cradle. One of his first perceptions is the sound of his mother's voice, and perhaps his first lesson in grammar is to translate his mother's words into the vernacular of infancy. At a very early age, he knows whether she is pleased or displeased, whether she is upbraiding or soothing him. Long before he can walk without assistance, he has learned a little language, not so as to speak it, but so as to comprehend all that is said to him, and much that is said about him. At the close of his second year, he knows the names of all the objects in the house that are in common use, and understands the language of the family so far, at least, as it concerns himself; he is subdued by threats, encouraged by approbation, and stimulated by promises. Before he is four years of age, he has passed from the purely recipient into the productive stage. What he knows he can tell; he has a name for every object of his knowledge, an expression for every idea, every feeling and emotion of which he is conscious. From this time until he begins to go to school, every day adds to his stock of words and to his power of combining them. He astonishes his parents by the readiness with which he picks up strange words, and the facility he has in weaving them into sentences. If he could only go on as he commenced, if he could only learn as much of his native tongue in the next six as he did in the first six years of his life, what a foundation would then be laid for extensive and accurate scholarship!

At six years of age, the child is in possession of a language, limited, it is true, imperfect and incorrect, but still adequate to his wants. At twelve years of age, after having been six years at school, how much more does he know of his native language than when he entered school? (And here let me remark parenthetically gentle reader, I am not speaking of *your* school: I know *you* manage these things better. I refer to Mr. Smith's school; and I do not speak of the head boy in Mr. Smith's school; I speak of the average American boy in the average American school.) At twelve years of age he has been "through the Dictionary," I presume; but is his stock of words in common use much larger than it used to be? Or is he more careful in the selection of them? Or has he greater facility in the use of them? Does the boy of twelve actually express his ideas with greater ease, clearness, or force than the child of six? He has been "through the Grammar;" but does he speak grammatically? and, if he does, is it because he has been through the Grammar? As a matter of fact, is his language more correct than it was six years ago? He has learned to spell, to parse and to write; but can he write ten lines on any subject without gross errors in spelling, syntax or punctuation? There must be something wrong in the method of education that is so barren of results.

Assuming that nature's plan is the better one,—for in six years nature has done much, and in the next six years the teacher does very little towards the acquisition of language,—let us inquire what nature's plan is, and how it differs from the methods of the schools.

Nature begins her lesson by placing the child in circumstances in which the knowledge of language is desirable and necessary. The child sees an object: he has a desire—almost, if not altogether, instinctive—to name it; for the mind never recognizes its knowledge as complete until it is named. The child wants the name, lies in wait for it, or asks for it,—gets it, and keeps it. Who ever had occasion to tell a child twice the name of anything he wanted to know? He has an idea, but he has no mode of expressing it. The idea returns again and again, and the desire for the expression becomes stronger and stronger. The appropriate expression, after long waiting and watching, is heard, seized upon, treasured up and remembered, not only without difficulty, but without conscious effort. How different from much that is learned at school,—learned with toil to-day, forgotten with ease to-morrow! Or, conversely (for our object-teachers must remember that the child sometimes travels from the word to the thing as well as from the thing to the word), the child hears a new word; he is not likely to ask the meaning of it unless it be about something in which he is deeply interested, but the context gives him some vague idea of what it means. The mind, however, is not satisfied, with this half knowledge. The child hears the same word again and again, and every repetition adds to his stock of knowledge, till at last he gains a clear conception of it.

On the other hand, at school, children are required to learn what they have no desire to learn, and can see no necessity to learn. What child ever desired to learn Grammar as commonly taught? What child ever felt the necessity of learning all the definitions in the Dictionary? And yet these two books, the Grammar and the Dictionary, are the main instruments used for teaching language.

Nature teaches language indirectly: the child fancies he is learning something else (and is learning something else, or does not think of learning at all), but all the time he is learning language unconsciously, but not the less really. These indirect processes of nature are very beautiful, and well worth the attention and imitation of the teacher. The child thinks only of appeasing the natural appetite of hunger, but in so doing he is building up his constitution. He yields to the natural desire for muscular

exercise, and thus aids in the development of his bodily organs. Every legitimate gratification of a natural propensity yields, not only the transient pleasure proper to such gratification, but also a permanent result, which is not the less real and valuable because it comes unsolicited.

Teachers are apt to forget this trick of nature. We think that language must be taught directly, dogmatically and scientifically; by definitions, rules, diagrams and formulas. We forget that the language which we use ourselves was learned in no such methodical way; but was picked up unconsciously here and there along the roadside of life, in the nursery, at the dinner table, in the playground, from our parents or companions, our story books, our newspapers, our preachers, our favorite authors. What plainer proof can there be of this than the well known fact, that many teachers who are good "grammarians" (so called) speak bad English, while many persons who know nothing of "grammar" habitually use grammatical language? \*

Left to himself, the child acquires his knowledge in the most rational philosophical way,—by induction. He ascends from particulars to generals, from an acquaintance with individual facts to a knowledge of universal principles. In other words, he proceeds from the concrete to the abstract. Under the guidance of his teacher, or rather of his text-book, the child is expected to acquire his knowledge in the most irrational and unphilosophical way,—by deduction. He is expected to descend from generals to particulars, from general principles to individual facts, from the abstract to the concrete. I say the child is *expected* to do so; but, in point of fact, I do not believe he ever does it. The knowledge he seems to acquire in this way is either acquired in the other way, or is not real knowledge at all, but only sham knowledge. I believe a healthy, active young mind makes its own generalizations, and does not readily adopt, and apply the generalizations made by another. For example, consider how a child acquires an idea of a chair. He does not get the abstract idea of a chair first, and then try to apply this idea to particular objects; but, by becoming acquainted with a number of chairs singly, and observing their common qualities, he naturally and necessarily, though unconsciously, acquires the abstract notion of a chair. But a grammar (from which children are popularly supposed to learn language) consists essentially of a series of abstract propositions, to be learned as abstractions, and afterwards to be applied to individual cases. If language is ever learned in this way, it can only be by doing violence to nature, and by a useless sacrifice of time and labor.

Nature gives us, usually, the object or idea first, and then the name; the schools, or rather the school-books, give us the name first, and the object afterwards, or not at all. When the animals passed in review before our first parent, he gave to each an appropriate name. His conceptions of each individual were incomplete and unsatisfactory, until he had tied them together, and labelled them with a name. Had one of our old-fashioned schoolmasters had the supreme direction of affairs, he would have given Adam a list of names and volume of definitions; and, after causing him to commit them to memory, he would have sent him through the garden to find the objects corresponding to the description. He would have made Adam say *elephant*, spell *elephant*, read *elephant*, write *elephant*, and parse *elephant*, before allowing him to see the elephant.

The following corollaries will serve, perhaps, to give a practical bearing to what has been said above. They will, at least, be useful to the thoughtful teacher as theses for argument, which he may either affirm or deny:—

That the method by which children, before going to school, learn their simple and limited language, may be applied to the learning of their native language in all its extent and complexity.

That language, being an object, may be studied objectively.

That children should be taught to use good language, by correcting all their improper modes of expression, before they can understand the grammatical reason for the correction.

That, as children learn to speak by speaking (not by learning the rules of speech), so children may learn to write by writing, without learning the rules of composition.

That, as people become fluent talkers by beginning early and talking much, people may become ready writers by beginning early and writing much.

That, as soon as children are able to speak, they should be taught to speak in definite sentences and pure English; and as soon as they are able to use the pen, they should be taught to write in definite sentences and pure English.

That, as children never talk of that of which they know nothing, they should not be asked to write of what they know nothing.

That, as a means of becoming familiar with language, children should be taught to write down, frequently, their ordinary conversations.

That school recitations may, with great advantage, be conducted in two ways,—orally and in writing.

That the teacher should take advantage of interesting events within the knowledge of his scholars, and require them to relate them orally and in writing.

That, as the common words of our language are learned by hearing them often in connected discourse, so the less common words should be learned by reading them often in connected discourse.

That, as words learned by the ear are not thoroughly appropriated until they are pronounced by the tongue, so words learned by