

MINIMUM ESSENTIALS IN ENGLISH APPLIED TO HOMOGENEOUS GROUPING

MINIMAL objectives in composition, oral and written, is only one item of a series of objective standards laid down by the new State Course for the measurement of achievement in English. It is with only one phase of this objective, minimum essentials in written English, that I shall attempt to deal and my treatment will be even further restricted, yet, I trust, made more humanly interesting by the application of these essentials to classes in which the children have been grouped on the basis of their average abilities, or homogeneity of achievement.

About ten years ago, say before 1914, we had hardly heard of minimum essentials in this part of the world, yet now they are running the project hard for first place in educational fads, fashions, or methods, as you will. Probably the reason that they haven't supplanted it is that they utilize the project for their successful accomplishment. These minimum requirements or objective standards for all phases of English have sprung into being, it seems to me, in response to a great need, which brings us directly to the human element in the case.

Since the World War there have been pouring into our high schools—I am speaking of our Southern and Eastern high schools, and, particularly, of those of Virginia and Lynchburg—a steadily increasing number of children who usually, ten or twelve years ago, fell out of the educational procession about the sixth or seventh grade to go to work. In Lynchburg, the increase in our school population for the past ten years exceeds the increase in the population of the city by 1500. Our high school enrolment has doubled. I believe that the case is fairly typical for many Southern cities. Because of our national advance in material prosperity, the parents of these

children, largely from the industrial, or at least non-professional classes, earn better salaries, have more comfortable homes, enjoy greater leisure than ever before in their history, and these facts more largely even than the compulsory education law account for the increased enrolment in our high schools. These parents seem ambitious, even eager, for their children to have the advantages that they have lacked, and demand for them every opportunity that our public school system can offer. Education has become stylish. There must be more people, now, trying to obtain a so-called education than there are folks buying Fords.

Many of these children have practically no opportunity for any further kind of culture than they can achieve in our overcrowded classrooms. They come frequently from homes where there are no books, in the real sense of the word, no such thing as home-reading except of the newspaper, a trade journal, fashion magazine, or *Motion Pictures*. One boy on his home-reading list gave a high recommendation to the *Police Gazette*, and another a year ago, told me that the principal thing read and discussed in his home were the files of the newspaper covering the entire Garrett case, that put Appomattox *again* so prominently on the map of Virginia. He said, "We have a pile of them most a yard high!" They find, at home, no inspiration and little encouragement to use correct English. Yet they are eager to come to high school, to enter into its manifold activities, and they show a strange and pathetic desire to do well in English, especially in English grammar, which they tell you in that remarkable definition of Emerson and Bender "is the study that teaches you how the best writers and speakers use the English language," and almost at the same time they will ruefully regret it "ain't no use for them to try."

You may ask how such pupils get to the high school? From two sources: the younger, the more poorly prepared, and yet the more promising type comes largely from

the country and small town schools, where the teaching force, equipment, and length of session are insufficient to give these pupils the same background and training that are offered in the better type of city schools. Yet these pupils, after an initial failure that they make in learning *how* to get started, often develop into, first, promising, and later, capable students. The second and more difficult type is those that come from the regular city schools—the so-called retarded group, who having sat in one class, for two terms, through most of the grammar grades, and who, having outgrown the grammar school physically and socially, even though not mentally, are shoved on to the high school with what a grade teacher once called a P. S. after their names, which, being translated, is “promoted on service.”

Of course, the proper place for such students is a first class junior high school where they should stay until they are ready to graduate into some field of profitable work, for which, be they girls or boys, they have been given sufficient technical training to earn a living, and concerning which they have been taught to express themselves intelligently and correctly in both spoken and written English. Not having a junior high school in Lynchburg, we are forced to receive them directly into our eighth grade, or first-year high school classes and to do for them what we can. Whatever they get in the way of better thinking, better doing, and consequent better living, we must give them. We are confronted with a fact, not a theory, but we have had to build up a theory or two, to cope with the fact, and the name of one of these theories is *minimum essentials*.

By these essentials or objective standards of measurement, for certain skills or abilities in the different phases of English work, we can, to some extent, measure the student's power, and gauge his ability, or inability, to carry on further work of the same kind.

For each of our high school grades we

have tabulated a definite set of requirements in the mechanics of writing, on which our students are required to make, not a mere passing grade, but an average of 90-100%. We have modeled our requirements largely from *The Minimum Requirements in the Mechanics of English Composition for use in High Schools of the Inland Empire* published at Missoula, Montana, but we have adapted them to fit the content of our own courses and shall continue to modify them as we test them out.

For the first half of the first year there are twenty, more than for any other period, and as concrete as brass tacks. They read as follows:

REQUIREMENTS FOR PASSING I-A WRITTEN
WORK

1. Write a legible hand.
2. Be able to copy accurately ten to twenty lines of prose or poetry.
3. Observe proper margins, indentation, and placing of title.
4. Use capitals properly in titles to themes.
5. Habitually use capitals when needed and refrain from using them when not needed.
6. Show properly where one sentence ends and another begins.
7. Do not use a phrase or a dependent clause as a sentence. Develop “sentence sense.”
8. Properly cancel incorrect expressions.
9. Spell nineteen out of any twenty words in spelling lesson.
10. Learn, and put into practice, the four most helpful rules in spelling.
11. Write our common compound words solid.
12. Divide no monosyllables at end of lines; divide words between syllables, not elsewhere.
13. Use apostrophe correctly to show possessive case of nouns, and refrain from using the apostrophe in possessive case of pronouns.

14. Be able to spell correctly in short dictated sentences.
15. Observe the common rules of punctuation. (General use of period, question mark, exclamation point, comma, and the colon in letters.)
16. Regularly paragraph and punctuate conversation properly.
17. Observe the ordinary rules of syntax.
18. Write interesting compositions of one page length acceptable as to form and spelling.
19. Write a personal letter, or note, perfect so far as form is concerned.
20. Write reports in "Parallel Reading" clearly and neatly.

The first first-year test is having the pupils legibly and accurately copy these requirements into their note books, and, as throughout the term, the students are trained and tested on each and all of the requirements, the results for each individual are tabulated so that each member of the class can check on himself for his weak and strong points. Having student committees make class charts, or tables, and *record* each student's rating, under each requirement, as satisfactory, or unsatisfactory stirs up competition, and develops interest and effort, thus making a competitive project out of what would otherwise be stultifying work. The requirements for each term following are a new set of definite objectives, built on the habitual use of those of the previous term, and all of the requirements correspond to definite data and topics on their Lewis and Hosis's *Practical English*, their spelling book, and their *Century Handbook of Writing*.

But you say, "Such work is deadening. It kills the spirit. Some students hardly need it, as they will readily learn it if they wish to be accurate." That is true, and minimum objectives, I believe, will never quite work by themselves. They must be built on another theory, the theory of homo-

geneous grouping; that is, we must by means of preliminary tests, general intelligence tests, and the ratings of former teachers, group our pupils in sections of average ability.

For the A, or more gifted sections, very little drill is needed on the mechanical requirements, except when the student is notoriously weak on spelling, or very careless in the use of the apostrophe for possession. This group soon masters the requirements as a kind of game, and what is more important, these students *are held up to practicing them* because they know that they must maintain an average of 90-100% on their use. They soon, habitually, put their work into correct and attractive form, and at the same time they are able to cover not only the full content of the course in literature, etc., but also, through group, or individual projects, do much more than we could require or guide them in, if we had some of these students in a mixed group of C's and B's.

The B group, of rather average ability, and usually fairly earnest workers, need much more practice and checking on mechanics and the full content of the course in literature may have to be abbreviated, or at least taught in a more objective and circumscribed form. Generally the drill and checking on the mechanics, as applied to their written English, and the content work in literature run about 50-50.

With the C group, however, made up of pupils whose ability is below the average, or of pupils whose preparation is incomplete, these requirements become not only friendly guide posts, but sometimes the definite end of the journey for that term. For, even though a pupil can get into the high school without being able to write a paragraph of correct sentences, with correctly spelled words, capitals, etc., it is our business to stop him there in the first year and teach him *minimum essentials*, show him what he has to learn. The pupils in this group can assimilate only the most objective kind of

instruction. Everything taught them must be concrete, and their instructions must be very definite. The practice work on these requirements must be an almost daily task. The composition to which these requirements are applied must be done almost entirely in class, and related largely to their everyday interests. If their literature includes the classics, it will have to be taught almost entirely in class and made as objective as possible. To this group the *Odyssey* and *Sohrab and Rustum* will be only stories. They do catch, I believe, a kind of contagious enthusiasm for certain beautiful passages read aloud to them, but their main interest is objective, and they express the facts that they gather in their own peculiar vernacular, and reflect them through their own little unglorified imaginations. Yet, I believe they get something, even though one wrote for me in explaining how Rustum fulfilled his promise to his dying son, "Rustum taken him back home and gave him a grand burrial with plenty of flowers." The highest point of interest reached by one class studying the *Odyssey* was the discovery, from the map, that Iliias was really Troy, and that it had a location that they could identify in their geographies, for it precipitated the to them very interesting question, "Warn't them Trojans Turks?" I have had pupils disliking Treasure Island because of the wicked *patriots*, and I have even discovered *scandals* on the feet of the Abraham. Yet I would not discard the classics for this group. But I would have the teacher, there, do most of the work, for if these children get any kind of historical or legendary background, the teacher must create it for them almost entirely. I should also, however, require that these pupils do much home-reading of books more suited to their mental horizons—such books as *Little Women*, or other of Miss Alcott's, *Understood Betsy*, *Emmy Lou*, *Huck Finn*, *Tom Sawyer*, *A Message to Garcia*, *The Mutineers*, *Captains Courageous*, and all the good narrative or simple lyric poetry they

can lay their hands on, as well as such magazines as *The American Boy*, *St. Nicholas*, *The Youth's Companion*, *Popular Mechanics*, etc., for nothing helps writing like reading. Of course there should be frequent class reports and discussions of this reading, first oral, and then written, which leads us back to the Minimum Requirements in written English.

You may have smiled at the simplicity of the second requirement—accurate copy of twenty lines of prose or poetry—and wondered if that were really necessary. You will hardly believe it possible that from a class of twenty-three I did not produce a single paper that was accurate copy of a fairly difficult half-page of the *Odyssey*. This work was done in class—and some members had to do the work over as many as four times, though more than fifty per cent. got it on the second effort. Yet the teachers of the A section had only three copies that were not accurate from a class of about twenty-five. For the C group it must be drill, drill, drill, practice, practice, practice—of course properly motivated, on these essentials in written English. Yet the objectives are simple, and the kind of abilities that this group can finally master—unless there be some member who shouldn't under any conditions get to high school.

The work outlined for this group, I realize, isn't high school work at all, in the real sense of the term, but *it is the work we are having to do* for some of our pupils—at least in Lynchburg. These students have outgrown the grades physically if not mentally, and if they wish to go on to school, it seems that we must receive them until some other agency is provided, and we must do the best we can for them. Minimum Essentials and Homogeneous Grouping make the task possible. By giving them this objective, by self-measuring, and by simplified training in written English, we have materially raised our percentage of first-year promotions, and, I believe, have also raised our standard of written work for all classes.

Our percentage of first-year promotions in English without this system, in the fall of 1922, was fifty-nine; with this system, in the fall of 1923, it was eighty-eight. In the spring terms for the two years the figures were sixty-two per cent and ninety-four per cent. This very decided increase was perhaps partly due to the fact that our C sections consisted of only twenty students, or under, and that we were thus enabled to get at the individual weaknesses of each pupil. This term our classes are larger, and I, at least, am not getting as satisfactory results.

Students of this type will never see college, and will probably leave us at about the close of the second year, unless we can keep them on for commercial courses, or some other form of vocational training. Yet I earnestly believe that they are entitled to such practical training and development in English as will enable them to use their mother tongue correctly, communicate their thoughts clearly and with some degree of force, and to have a sufficient background of good reading to enable them to use a public library as a beneficial means of recreation.

Our experiment in Lynchburg has thus far been worked out only in our first-year classes, but as it is applied through the succeeding years, we believe that it will solve many problems that now vex us. We even believe that our most gifted pupils in English will be constrained to write their appreciation in correct sentences, made up of correctly spelled words. Most of the essentials in written English for the last two years are grouped around sentence structure and the applied principles of practical grammar, with spelling thrown in. If we use them as we should, they will eliminate many of the weak spots and failures in college freshman English, for our pupils must maintain an average of above ninety on these essentials, and so we may even have to fail a senior who has the appreciation of a Keats and the imagination of a Poe.

Never again can one "get by," as did one of our most gifted graduates of 1923, saying, when a misnamed noun clause in his University of Virginia entrance examination was pointed out to him, "Such details never did interest me."

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ENGLISH NOTES

THE ENGLISH TEACHERS' SECTION OF THE
VIRGINIA STATE TEACHERS ASSOCIATION

WEDNESDAY, November 26, at 9:00 a. m., the English Teachers' section of the Virginia Teachers' Annual Conference met in the auditorium of Ruffner School, Richmond, President H. A. Miller, Jr., presiding.

If the greater the difficulties in gaining any desired end the greater the value of that end when attained, then what the English teachers assembled there gained from the meeting at that morning session was the most valuable thing anyone got out of the conference. In the first place the various grade schools in the building were in session and were preparing in the auditorium a substantial Thanksgiving donation for one of hospitals of the city. Various boys were receiving and packing the donations and preparing the stage for a program which was to follow. Then came recess. Meanwhile, the English teachers camped in one corner of the room and waited for a quiet moment.

Really the children made remarkably little noise under the circumstances and were very polite to us, the intruders.

In spite of the interruptions, the meetings of the day were very interesting and profitable and we believe the teachers attending carried away many valuable suggestions, which may well mean much to the betterment of English work in our schools.

The program of the 9:00 o'clock session was as follows: