

A WORD OF ADVICE TO SOME CHINESE STUDENTS OF ENGLISH

by

R. T. H. CHEN

As the title implies, this article is addressed primarily to those students of English who have taken no more than a perfunctory interest in the pursuit of a knowledge of this most important foreign language, and to those who are too prone, for some reason or other, if not because it is merely a foreign language, to regard it as an unnecessary evil in their curricula, and only too happy on the slightest excuse to consign it to the limbo of oblivion, rather than, as they should, study it *pari passu* with their own mother tongue. Yet these students, many of them votaries of Mrs. Malaprop, studying for a career based on a knowledge of English, aspire to pursue their studies in a higher branch of learning in English-speaking countries! What they hope to attain with no more than at best a superficial knowledge of the language, assuming, through some miracle, they could procure admission to these higher institutions, only Heaven knows.

Then there are the "grasshopper" or Micawberistic type of students who prefer to devote the beneficial hours to day-dreaming during classes, and to vapid and futile conversations after, in the delusion that they will be able to retrieve lost ground by dint of burning the midnight oil in summer, of all seasons. In short, a painful case of the perennial "I'll do it one of these odd-come-shortlies." In their present state of mind, they will never be able to regain anything worth the candle without starting from scratch. From the fact that some even go to the length of wishing, aloud, it were a language that could be mastered overnight, or the instructor were thaumaturge enough to transfer his knowledge by telepathy, it is evident that these spiritless youths are gradually disintegrating into abysmal ignorance and self-defeatism.

While such students are, admittedly, in the small minority, it is nonetheless a sad, if at times frustrating, experience to teach these young people, more especially as they are not unintelligent, nor are they wayward,

but possibly suffering from a heavy dose of inferiority complex. Whether they are actuated by sheer laziness, or frustrations, if one will, there is no reason why they should persist in following this misguided course, which can end only in regret, and it is imperative that they rouse themselves in time and turn over a new leaf in the interest of knowledge which can redound only to their own advantage and benefit.

Finally, there is another class of students who, after having acquitted themselves creditably with a better-than-average performance, are apt to "rest on their laurels," and refuse to budge an inch further, as much as to proclaim they have nothing more to learn. This is indeed very strange attitude, coming, as it does, from promising students, and all the more inexplicable considering that Chinese students in general are noted for their industry and intelligence. At least they must realise that the nett result of their six years' work of a few hours a week in English in the middle schools falls far short even of the standard of grammar schools abroad, and there is certainly still very much more to be accomplished by further intensive study before that stage is reached.

Such a mentality, while understandable, if in keeping with their desire to concentrate more on their mother tongue, which is a much more difficult language, is hardly in harmony with the dictates of the times with which our life is inseparably linked. Obviously at this particular juncture one can ill afford to be parochial, and one would be well advised to do a little introspection.

Is a knowledge of English essential? To this oft-repeated question put to the writer by students both past and present, his answer has been without exception, and still is, an unqualified "yes", more so today than at any other time in the past, by reason of its ubiquitous influence, notably in science, medicine, international intercourse, literature, and other languages, to cite but a few examples of its impact on various fields of human endeavour in pace with the march of progress.

That English has established itself already as a language understood and spoken throughout the world, influencing, as it does, other tongues,—for example, the modern version of our own language,—finds emphatic expression in the fact that in radio broadcasts beamed to the world English never fails to assert itself as a fulcrum in the scheme of things, and in the fact that it has been adopted as the official language of some Asian and African countries, eloquent enough testimony to its versatility,

unparalleled in the history of languages for its simplicity and strength of expression.

To the student with an eye to a commercial career, to the student engaged in literary pursuits, no less than to the medical student, equipped, as he must necessarily be, with textbooks in English, a knowledge of that language is, obviously, of paramount importance, and since it is an indispensable part of his major studies, it is incumbent upon him to devote himself to its acquisition, if he is to gain direct access to the knowledge toward which his labours are directed, i. e. the "open sesame" to the treasure trove.

To the students sceptical or unconvinced of its importance, I need go no further than to point out that in schools abroad where foreign languages are stressed, English takes precedence, and is a compulsory subject, as with us, and English continuation classes, some of them with excellent instructors dedicated to the propagation of this language, can be found choc-a-bloc in our very midst, further attesting to its popularity and usefulness.

There may be circumstances to extenuate the extraordinary failure to develop a simplified, practical system of instruction adaptable to the needs of the students, but whatever the cause, the fact remains that too much stress is laid on theory and learning by rote, and on foreign methods. What used to be acceptable once upon a time no longer obtains today, and what are perfectly natural methods in foreign countries are not necessarily so with us, since what is sauce for the goose is not always sauce for the gander.

It behoves us, therefore, to deal with this problem of instruction from a new approach, doing away with the "spoon-feeding" methods, the "guessing-game" methods euphemistically referred to as the "comprehension" methods, and the so-called "natural" methods, which by no stretch of the imagination are natural to the Chinese students, since, the two languages being poles apart, it is natural with them to think in terms of things Chinese, first and foremost. It would be a Sisyphean task to attempt to employ these methods unless explanations in English were introduced in the senior middle schools, with preparatory work toward that end being done in the junior middle schools.

English translation work, as is currently provided for, would, of course, be essential not as a substitute for, but as a preliminary step to, independent composition, and should be attempted only after the student is

well grounded in the basic rules of English grammar and idioms, while students should be required to translate the spirit, rather than the letter, of any text given, and to submit their work for correction and criticism, instead of being left to their own devices. To achieve this, regular oral and written reproduction or paraphrase of material in the textbooks and other suitable literature should be made compulsory, with insistence on idiomatic English being used as a *sin qua non*. This would go far toward minimizing, if not totally eliminating, the propensity of the students, untrammelled by grammatical considerations in their own language, to drift into false analogy. The proficiency thus attained would be an invaluable asset in helping to eradicate the stuttering and hesitancy so characteristic of the majority of students, who nearly always retire into themselves, tongue-tied and helpless in conversations particularly with our foreign friends, after disgorging the few set phrases learnt by heart.

The unremitting industry of the Chinese student is proverbial, and, always a "trier," he can frequently be seen pouring over his books with the puckered expression of an agelast in tense concentration, memorizing for recitation his assignments, which at times run into formidable proportions, now repeating aloud in accents reminiscent of a Chinese poet trolling a lay, now silently struggling with seemingly difficult passages.

In a word, learning by rote. And learning by rote consisting solely in memorizations after the fashion of the old school, where students are made to commit to memory and recite pages and pages of texts should be discouraged and best relegated to the past, for after all, such defunct methods are akin to flogging a dead horse, and certainly not conducive to the development of the imaginative powers inherent in the individual students. Interest may be shown at the initial stages where easy assignments are allotted but will last no longer than a flash in the pan as the quota increases and becomes, as it inevitably must, tedious and irksome. Brownd off, students slide only too willingly into sluggishness, treating the task in the light of a war of attrition between the instructor and themselves, with most kicking against the traces, looking upon the whole thing as a wild goose chase, which it truly is.

Turning to grammar, it is, unfortunately, only too true that saddled as they are with theories, students are none too familiar with its practical side, as they are never required to do independent compositions of any sort, apart from the completion of elliptical exercises prescribed in the school

grammar, and this can hardly be called composition. So overburdened indeed with theories untested in application to actual compositions, a "must" in every school abroad, that middle school "graduates" more often than not find themselves in the horns of the dilemma, torn by indecision between what is correct English and what is not, and usually come up with something diabolical, except for a few Joseph Conrads.

Surely, English grammar can be simplified and made interesting for the Chinese students. Far from arrogating to himself a didactic role, the writer would suggest that a practical yet comprehensive system be evolved with "short cuts" as the cardinal virtue instead of the laborious task of going through the whole gamut of grammar, which would take years to accomplish. Chinese students, as a whole, are extremely weak in verbs, and, the English verb being the most important Part of Speech, should begin by cultivating a thorough acquaintance with its ramifications, paying particular attention to the forms and uses of the various tenses in the Active and Passive Voices, throwing in the Noun and Pronoun simultaneously as they are easy enough to master, as also are the other Parts of Speech except the Preposition, which should come later in gradual doses leading up to the idioms, with emphasis on a numerous acquaintance based on a carefully laid scheme of exercises.

Analysis, Synthesis and Idiom as a prelude to composition should also be stressed, with copious examples and exercises, while rules should be short and to the point to make them easy to remember, leaving out the "frills" for a later period.

Compositions must be enforced at all times and presented for correction and criticism, bearing in mind that an ounce of practice is worth a pound of theory.

While grammar is not everything in English, at least a knowledge of its basic rules governing the structure of the English language is absolutely necessary, and students would do well to remember that English and Chinese are two entirely different languages, and to learn to differentiate between idiomatic English and Chinese English. "THE ADVANCED LEARNER'S DICTIONARY OF CURRENT ENGLISH" by Hornby, Gatenby and Wakefield should be a very helpful guide to the students and is cheaply available locally.

Lastly, students should map out for themselves, according to their individual needs, an intensive course of reading, embracing works by such

authors as Dickens, Lamb, Maugham, Priestly, Wells, Chesterton, Lynd etc., rather than restrict themselves to the necessarily narrow confines of their textbooks. Read to study, even if this should involve interminable references to dictionaries; study the styles of the various authors without becoming servile imitators, although one may be excused for playing the sedulous ape on occasion in the interest of practice; commit to memory any word or words, phrases or idioms which one feels will prove useful; and, wherever possible, use this accumulated vocabulary in conversations, compositions, letters, and other literary efforts.