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ABSTRACT

The Bullock Report, published in 1975, described English teaching practices in England and offered recommendations for improving those practices. This paper examines the background of the report and discusses topics in the report that are of particular interest to Americans, including the setting and monitoring of reading and writing standards, early language development, and classroom practices in teaching writing. The paper also summarizes the report's findings on school organization and teaching practices in English schools, touching on such areas as class size, amount of homework assigned, qualifications of teachers (and the kinds of secondary-level students that they are teaching), basic skills in classes for students aged six and nine, the typical secondary-school English curriculum, and language across the curriculum. Tables are included that show the English activities engaged in by students aged 12 and 14. (GW)

THE BULLOCK REPORT: SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR AMERICAN TEACHERS & PARENTS

by Gerald J. Brunetti

A Language for Life, commonly known as the Bullock Report, was published in England in 1975.[1] The product of two years' work by a government-appointed committee of inquiry, the report contains more than 600 pages of narrative, tables, and recommendations. Its very size overwhelmed many of the British educators to whom it was particularly directed. As one frustrated reviewer remarked, "In common with, I suspect, most of the country's 350,000 qualified teachers, I have not read the Bullock Report."[2]

Despite its size, teachers in England are at least aware of the report and familiar with some of its principal recommendations. Such is not the case in this country. When I returned to Minnesota in July, 1976, after a three-month stay in England, I was surprised to discover that the report was not available, even in our sizable university library. This struck me as strange and unfortunate, because the report has some important things to say, not only to the British people, but to American educators and parents as well. In this paper I would like to provide an overview of the report and discuss a few of the more important features that have implications for language arts teaching in this country. You might subtitle this paper, if you like, "What you always wanted to know about the Bullock Report, but didn't realize it."

The Bullock Committee was not the first education committee of its kind to be appointed. The British have a way of commissioning such groups, headed by titled persons, whose name becomes associated with the published report. An earlier education committee under Lady Plowden had issued the famous Plowden Report, which endorsed informal teaching methods in the schools.[3] And just a few years ago, another committee under Lord James issued a report which recommended a wholesale revision of teacher education and training in England and Wales.[4] Sir Alan Bullock was vice-chancellor (roughly, president) of Oxford University when he was asked by Mrs. Margaret Thatcher, then Secretary of State for Education and Science, to head the committee that came to have his name. This was in 1972.

Since the Committee was established shortly after the publication of a report on declining reading standards, many people assumed that the Committee's charge was limited to this area.[5] Actually, the charge was much broader. Specifically, the Committee was asked:

"To consider in relation to schools:

(a) all aspects of teaching the use of English, including reading, writing, and speech;
(b) how present practice might be improved and the role that initial in-service training might play;
(c) to what extent arrangements for monitoring the general level of attainment in these skills can be introduced or improved; and to make recommendations."(p.xxxi)

The Committee interpreted this charge to mean "language in education...from the growth of language and reading ability in young children to the teaching of English in the secondary school." (p.xxxi) Included was adult illiteracy--the product, presumably, of educational failure--but not children in special schools (e.g., those for the mentally retarded) and not programs for students beyond the school-leaving age of sixteen.

Membership on the Committee, besides Sir Alan, consisted of seven professors and lecturers from colleges and universities, six headmasters and headmistresses (or "heads," as they are called), three administrators from local education authorities, a publisher, an editor of a magazine, the chairman of the Schools Council (a somewhat prestigious national organization representing the schools), and a secretary and his assistant: a total of fifteen men and seven women. Except for the heads, who often have limited teaching responsibilities, there was not a single classroom teacher on the committee. Another case, it appears, where the insights of the classroom practitioner have been implicitly undervalued.

The Committee collected a mass of oral and written evidence from individuals and organizations, conducted a large-scale survey of language-arts teaching practices in English Schools, visited some colleges of education and reading/language centers

plus 100 schools, and even interviewed and made visitations in other English-speaking countries, including the United States.

The Committee wanted their report to be read and considered as a whole. "The design of the Report is intended to reflect the organic relationship between the various aspects of English, and to emphasize the need for continuity in their development throughout school life."[6] Despite the problems inherent in trying to deal with language arts as a whole and yet focus in on specific aspects of it--reading, writing, oral language, etc.--the Committee made some good compromises and succeeded in producing a coherent, useful document. The report is organized in ten parts and twenty-six chapters. It includes chapters on public attitudes towards English, the state of reading standards, and the national monitoring of reading and writing progress. There is a section on pre-school language development, followed by three chapters on the development of reading competence in children. There are chapters on literature, oral language and drama, writing, and language study including handwriting and spelling. The report deals with the organization of primary, middle and secondary schools as they affect language arts teaching, and continuity between schools. There are four chapters on reading and language difficulties, including a chapter on adult illiteracy and one on children from families of overseas origin. Following a section on resources--books, technological aids, etc.--there are chapters on pre-service and in-service education of teachers, the complete survey results, and 333 conclusions and recommendations!

Some chapters of the report relate exclusively to English conditions or practices--e.g., discussion on shortages of qualified teachers, the examination system, l.e.a. advisors, etc.--and these need not concern us here. Of the rest, let me focus in on some features that I think are particularly noteworthy for us Americans.

Like the English, we are preoccupied these days with standards in reading and writing. We are convinced that there has been a sizeable decline in abilities over the past twenty years, and so we have created and nourished a powerful, unruly

back-to-the-basics movement. The Bullock Report examines a similar phenomenon in England, notes that public outcries about declining standards have been voiced for decades, and concludes: "It is extremely difficult to say whether or not standards of written and spoken English have fallen. There is no convincing evidence available, and most opinions depend very largely upon subjective impressions."[7] The Committee goes on to say, nevertheless, in a statement that I regard as both reasonable and politically sagacious, that the standards of school leavers--roughly, our high school graduates--are not satisfying present-day requirements; that the changing pattern of employment, as well as demands in higher education, are "making more widespread demands on reading and writing skills and therefore exposing deficiencies that have escaped attention in the past."[8] However successful or unsuccessful we have been in the past, the Bullock Report notes, we must continue to improve literacy standards if we expect adult men and women to assume satisfactorily the responsibilities that a modern democracy demands of them.

In the chapter on monitoring reading and writing standards, the report shows how existing methods are inadequate to the task, providing data that are neither accurate nor comparable across years. It proposes a new method of preparing tests (using a large item pool) and administering them (using sampling techniques). The method would not only be more efficient, in that it would disturb a minimum number of schools, but would also provide an accurate picture of how the nation's children were performing from year to year. I was particularly pleased with the Committee's recommendations on the assessment of writing: "We believe that there is not substitute for specimens of children's actual writing as material for assessing standards...the assessment should involve the generation of continuous language, not merely a response to it."[9] Writing samples would be assessed holistically as well as by particle methods, and unidentified examples from previous years would be included to insure consistency and accurate detection of change from

year to year.

The two chapters on early language development provide an excellent starting point for considering how school language programs should be structured. The chapters are the work of James Britton, a member of the Committee and one of the most influential present-day theorists on language development and education. I won't review much of this section here since you can find a more comprehensive exposition of Britton's ideas in his book, Language and Learning.[10] The two chapters set the scene for much that follows, not only because they deal with initial language acquisition but because the process through which this phenomenon takes place serves, for the Committee, as a model of sorts for later language development programs. Let me explain this further. The child initially learns to speak in a context of familial support. Its inchoate gurglings are encouraged and its later attempts at language--often faulty, with words missing; agreement wrong, etc.--are corrected and expanded in the parent's response. Thus the child uses language to fulfill some purpose--request something, understand something, even validate its status as a loved individual--and the parent not only acknowledges and continues the communication but also intervenes to improve the child's language use. Natural development; appropriate intervention. These two characteristics comprise the twin supports around which the Bullock Report's language program is built. They are put forward in the chapters on oral language, literature, reading, writing, as well as those on school organization.

Let me show how they operate in the chapter on writing. This chapter places a great stress on the importance of a classroom environment which, like the home, provides a climate of trust and a shared context in which to use language. The chapter goes on to identify intention and audience as inherent conditions of a writing situation which affect, even determine, the quality and form of a student's writing. If students feel comfortable in the classroom and willing to share their

writing with others, if they have a variety of audiences besides their teacher, and if they have the opportunity and motivation to write for a number of purposes, then they have a rich environment in which to develop their writing abilities. The teacher's responsibilities are first of all to build such an environment, and then to intervene directly in a number of ways: to point out patterns of errors or weaknesses, to prescribe appropriate exercises, to provide technical advice for correcting or revising papers, to chart new directions in which students should be developing and select assignments accordingly, to assess general progress and give students this information, etc. In short, the report calls for a sensitive balance between laissez faire methods and directive teaching approaches.

Let me turn now to the survey that the Bullock Committee conducted on school organization and teaching practices in English Schools. Based on a questionnaire sent out to 1415 primary and 392 secondary schools in England, the survey provides some interesting data for American educators interested in making comparisons. The survey questionnaire had two parts, the first designed to obtain data on the organization and resources of the schools for teaching language arts, the second to obtain information on the English-related activities of 6-, 9-, 12- and 14-year-old students during a typical week. Teachers of such students in designated schools were asked to complete the questionnaire on the activities of the boy or girl whose name appeared first alphabetically on the class roster and who was present during the entire week of January 22, 1973. A check on the questionnaires returned, over 85% of the schools surveyed, showed that they represented an unbiased sample of English schools in terms of organization and geographic distribution. There was a statistically higher percentage of boys in the secondary sample than in the country as a whole, but this bias was deemed not to have a significant effect on the results. Over half of the secondary schools surveyed were modern or grammar

schools, reflecting a split between college-bound and non-college-bound students. This situation no longer prevails today in England, which is moving rapidly towards comprehensive secondary education.

A few quick statistics from the survey:

Class size in England seems to be slightly higher than here for primary youngsters: over 60% of them are in classes of more than 30 pupils.[11] Twelve and 14 year olds, on the other hand, had average English class sizes of 28 and 26 respectively, which seems similar to ours.[12]

Most secondary students had four to six English classes a week of approximately 40 minutes, though 12-year-old remedial students spent almost an hour more per week in English classes.[13]

As far as homework is concerned, 62% of 12 year olds and 52% of 14 year olds had less than an hour per week, and only about half of the college-bound 14 year olds had more than an hour.[14] This may be surprising to many Americans, who believe that English secondary schools are far more demanding academically than ours.

There is an interesting table on the qualifications of teachers and the kinds of secondary students, grouped according to reading ability, that they are teaching. The table shows clearly that teachers with higher qualifications, meaning degrees or honors degrees in English, are more likely to teach 14 year olds than 12 year olds, and students of above-average ability than those below. Thus, only 8% of 12 year old and no 14-year-old remedial students were taught by teachers with degrees in English; in fact, approximately 44% of both remedial groups were taught by teachers with no English qualifications whatsoever.[15] There appears to be a systematic assigning of the brighest students to teachers with the highest academic qualifications. Some elements of status would seem to be involved here:

Turning for a moment to statistics on six and nine year olds, we find that there is more deliberate attention to so-called basic skills than we might infer from publicity about English open or informal schools. 60% of six year olds and 87% of nine year olds spent some class time each week on spelling; 85% and 76% spent class time on handwriting; and 49% and 83% spent time on language usage (grammar, punctuation, and the like).[16] In the reading area, 96% of the six year olds and 71% of the nine year olds spent some time with readers and phonics practice, and 78% and 88% of the two groups spent class time on comprehension and vocabulary exercises.[17] These activities were distinct from individual reading, personal and creative writing, and poetry and verse, which activities occured in a very high percentage of classrooms. Even in informal or open classrooms--and I should point out that a majority of English primary schools are not of this kind--students often worked on language exercises from special assignment cards.

Let us now look at how secondary students spent a typical week in English classes. The questionnaire sought information about a variety of activities under the categories of oral English, writing, language study, and reading. As the enclosed table shows (p.12), 12 year olds spent approximately 38.6 minutes a week on oral language activities (including drama and discussion of various kinds), 61.2 minutes on writing, 52.4 minutes on language study (including spelling, vocabulary, and comprehension work), and 53.5 minutes on reading and literature. Fourteen year olds, with slightly less class time, spent 43.6 minutes on oral English, 57.3 minutes on writing, 42.5 minutes on language, and 50.1 minutes on reading and literature. There are not great differences between the two groups, though differences become considerable when figures are separated out for remedial groups and for 14-year-old college-bound (or exam) groups. In general, remedial groups spent far more time on language study, much of it devoted to vocabulary, punctuation, and comprehension exercises.

When the larger categories are broken down, we find some interesting data that suggest that English classes are not operating in a way that the Bullock Committee would endorse. In oral English, for instance, about four times as much time was spent in whole-class discussion as in group discussion (the Committee would probably prefer the reverse ratio). And although 12 year olds averaged about 11 minutes a week in improvised drama (no grand amount!), 14 year olds averaged fewer than 4 minutes a week in this activity. Clearly the Committee's ideas about the importance of student talk were not being effected in the classroom. A similar pattern can be seen in the language area, where students spent fully half of the time on exercises isolated from the reading and writing they were doing. As mentioned above, conditions were even more extreme for remedial students, who had an extra hour each week devoted to language drill. The whole situation is in contrast to the integrated, natural approach to teaching skills which the Committee advocate. In the writing area, conditions were somewhat better, with students having the opportunity to write in variety of forms, including verse, letters, and pieces on personal experience as well as expository and argumentative forms. In the reading category, most students spent their time reading what the report refers to as "stimulating" material--i.e., material not written explicitly for skill development--however, remedial students spent nearly half their reading time on topic work or skill development. Overall, teachers in England are not much different from us--dare I say, no more enlightened than us--in their attempts to improve language skills through worksheet-type activities.

Finally, let me turn to an area in which I feel the Committee has made a major contribution to education, particularly secondary education. In a short but significant chapter entitled, "Language across the Curriculum," the Committee--most notably, once again, James Britton--emphasize the role that language plays in students' understanding of all subjects, not just the language arts.

While the primary teacher can and often does integrate language learning with other subjects, many secondary teachers do not; moreover, they do not even recognize the important bearing that language has on their subject. As the report notes:

> In general, a curriculum subject, philosophically speaking, is a distinctive mode of analysis. While many teachers recognize that their aim is to initiate a student in a particular mode of analysis, they rarely recognize the linguistic implications of doing so. They do not recognize, in short, that the mental processes they seek to foster are the outcomes of a development that originates in speech. (p.)

This failure is most apparent in schools' neglect of student talk as an important means of learning, but it can also be seen in the fact that most teachers do not use personal, expressive writing as a means for students to find their way into a subject. The chapter reemphasizes the importance of discussion, particularly discussion in which students come together in small groups to grapple with the subject matter. Instead of purely directive methods, the chapter calls for student-teacher collaboration or mutuality in their investigation of ideas and experiences. In their recommendations, the Committee call for every secondary school to develop a policy for language across the curriculum so that all subject teachers will come to understand "the linguistic processes by which their pupils acquire information and understanding, and the implications for the teacher's own use of language . . . the reading demands of their own subjects, and ways pupils can be helped to meet them."[18] These recommendations are described in greater detail in Writing and Learning across the Curriculum, a Schools Council Project based on some theories of James Britton developed during an earlier project. By virtue of their training and experience, English teachers in this country as well as in Britain are in a good position to help their schools design and implement sensible programs of language across the curriculum.

Let me close by saying that the Bullock Report provides some thoughtful ideas on how English language programs should be organized and conducted and some excellent suggestions on the directions our English teaching profession

should move in over the next few years. It is up to us to examine these carefully and to begin to implement the ones we find are sound, and not wait for ten years for another Bullock Report to be produced.

ENGLISH ACTIVITIES OF 12 AND 14 YEAR OLDS

(minutes per week)

ACTIVITY	All 12 year olds	All 14 year olds	Remedial 12 year olds	Remedial 14 year olds	Non-exam 14 year olds	Exam 14 year olds
Oral English						
Debates, lecturettes, mock interviews	3.0	3.7	1.1	2.0	2.4	3.9
Class discussion (teacher chosen topics)	11.1	15.1	7.7	13.3	17.7	14.9
Class discussion (pupil chosen topics)	2.6	2.4	6.2	4.8	3.8	2.1
Group discussion (teacher chosen topics)	2.2	2.9	2.4	2.3	4.8	2.7
Group discussion (pupil chosen topics)	1.1	1.5	1.4	1.7	2.0	1.4
Improvised drama	11.2	3.4	9.5	4.2	4.8	3.3
Drama from printed text	4.1	8.9	0.8	2.3	3.9	9.9
Listening to broadcast, tape, record	3.3	5.7	9.2	13.6	8.4	4.9
Total Oral English	38.6	43.6	38.3	44.2	47.8	43.1
Writing						
Stories and plays	13.8	9.8	14.0	7.6	10.4	9.8
Personal experience	9.3	8.6	9.6	5.4	12.1	8.3
Verse	4.8	2.6	2.2	1.7	1.7	2.8
Argument and exposition	5.0	7.4	4.6	4.5	6.3	7.7
Description	6.0	6.5	6.0	5.1	6.6	6.5
Letters	2.2	3.1	2.4	7.1	3.6	2.8
Reproductive	11.6	13.1	20.2	15.6	15.6	12.6
Copying printed material	3.7	2.9	8.4	8.2	7.3	2.1
Written corrections	4.8	3.3	8.1	4.0	4.9	3.1
Total Writing	61.2	57.3	75.5	59.2	68.5	55.7

Taken from pp. 442-43 of A Language for Life, H.M.S.O., London (1975)

ENGLISH ACTIVITIES OF 12 AND 14 YEAR OLDS (cont.)

(minutes per week)

ACTIVITY	All 12 year olds	All 14 year olds	Remedial 12 year olds	Remedial 14 year olds	Non-exam. 14 year olds.	Exam. 14 year olds
Language Study						
Grammar exercises	5.9	2.4	7.0	2.0	1.7	2.5
Instruction on errors in own work	6.7	4.7	10.2	4.0	3.9	4.8
Punctuation exercises	3.1	2.0	3.4	2.5	2.4	1.9
Punctuation instructions from written errors	3.3	2.4	2.4	2.0	2.1	2.5
Vocabulary exercises	4.2	3.7	9.5	7.1	3.9	3.5
Vocabulary study from written work	3.0	2.3	4.8	2.3	2.2	2.4
Vocabulary study from literature	3.7	3.3	2.9	1.7	2.2	3.5
Comprehension exercises	9.0	9.7	16.3	11.0	8.3	9.8
Comprehension work from discussion	6.3	7.6	3.6	5.4	6.4	7.8
Spelling practice from lists	1.4	.5	4.1	1.7	1.3	.4
Spelling practice by dictation	.5	.6	1.1	2.3	1.3	.3
Spelling practice from written work	2.3	1.4	4.8	3.4	1.4	1.3
Spelling tests	2.1	1.2	3.8	2.5	2.2	1.0
Linguistics-based language study	.9	.7	2.8	.3	.3	.8
Total Language Study	52.4	42.5	76.7	48.2	39.6	42.5
Reading						
Private Reading	14.2	14.2	15.8	12.2	12.3	14.6
Private Reading-Group discussion	.9	1.1	.6	.3	.5	1.2
Private Reading-class discussion	2.6	2.9	1.5	.5	2.0	3.6
Class Reading-Group discussion	4.0	4.0	4.5	2.5	3.5	4.1
Class Reading-Class discussion	13.8	13.9	9.9	6.3	11.3	14.8
Private Reading of Poetry	.7	.7	.8	-	.6	.7
Class Reading of Poetry	6.2	5.2	3.2	2.3	2.1	5.3
Reading for topic/ project	4.5	4.8	7.6	6.8	9.5	4.2
Reading for skills	6.6	3.3	24.9	15.6	7.0	2.2
Total Reading	53.5	50.1	68.8	46.5	48.8	50.7

FOOTNOTES

1. A Language for Life. Report of the Committee of Inquiry appointed by the Secretary of State for Education and Science under the Chairmanship of Sir Alan Bullock FBA. (London: H.M.S.O., 1975)

2. J. Rennie, "A Case of Overkill", Times Educational Supplement, February 13, 1976 p.22

3. Children and Their Primary Schools: a Report of the Central Advisory Council for Education (England). (The Plowden Report). (London: H.M.S.O., 1967).

4. Teacher Education and Training. Report by a Committee of Inquiry Appointed by the Secretary of State for Education and Science. (The James Report). (London: H.M.S.O., 1972)

5. K.B. Start, and B.K. Wells., The Trend of Reading Standards: 1970-71, National Foundation for Educational Research, London, 1972.

6. Language for Life, P.xxxv

7. Ibid, p. 6

8. Ibid, p. 4

9. Ibid, p. 40

10. (Harmondsworth, England:Penguin Books: 1970)

11. Ibid, p. 367

12. Ibid, p. 428

13. Ibid, p. 408

14. Ibid, p. 411

15. Ibid, p. 420

16. Ibid, pp. 397-99

17. Ibid, pp. 395-96

18. Ibid, p 529

19. Martin, Nancy et al. London: Ward Lock Educational, 1976. and Britton, James et al., The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18). Schools Council Research Studies. (London: Macmillan Education, 1975)