Language Arts in the Curriculum

A look at organization and approach

THE English language arts are concerned with communication, or the receiving and expression of ideas. They are concerned also with composition, which is thinking—the organization and composing of thought for speech and writing. Therefore, the language arts include both content and skills. Although the content may range as wide as the interests and purposes of students engaged in communication, the special content areas of the English language arts are: (a) the nature and development of language and (b) literature. The skills of language arts are: (a) observing and listening, (b) reading, (c) speaking, (d) writing, and (e) the related language skills.

An Effective Program

The place of the English language arts in the curriculum is fundamental, because these are the content and skills upon which most learning is based. A good language arts program does not just happen; it is planned, implemented and supported.

The English language arts program, in any school district, can be just as good as the school personnel and the citizens of the community wish it to be. For effective teaching and learning, the program must be so developed and implemented that it can be described as providing for: (a) adequate coverage of the important content, (b) arrangement of content to meet the needs of all students, (c) use of appropriate teaching methods, (d) conditions which foster superior teaching and maximum learning, and (e) recognition of the importance of the work.

An effective program centers on a basic course of study. A good program ensures that high school graduates will have, in common, a certain background knowledge of English. They will not all have learned any aspect of the subject to the same extent or to the same depth. Yet each will have had the opportunity to learn, to the best of his abilities, those aspects of English which, in the twentieth century, a young person needs in order to succeed in useful work, to go to the college of his choice, and to take his place as a thinking individual and a worthy citizen.

What is to be taught must be allocated to the various grade levels, kindergarten through grade 12, in such ways that certain content and skills are introduced and emphasized at each grade level. For instance, the reading program begins with the prereading activities of kindergarten and continues through grade 12. An adequate reading program is four-faceted; it provides for basic reading skills instruction, functional reading, development of

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literary appreciation and development of independent-reading habits. To have adequate coverage of the subject, the course of study must include materials or information concerning sources of materials: language texts, spellers, readers, literary anthologies, literary works, records, film strips, films, magazines, newspapers.

Good literature, appropriate to the maturity of the pupils, should be taught at all grade levels, from the primary grades through grade 12.

An effective course of study is sufficiently specific and yet sufficiently flexible to meet the needs of all students. Since every teacher of each grade level has the complete course, he is able to use it to suit any particular classroom situation. For inadequately prepared pupils, he utilizes material from previous grades. With slow learners, he selects only the most fundamental parts of the course so that there will be time for thorough learning of these. With accelerated students, the teacher may move ahead to the work of the next grade or of succeeding grades. The only limitation is that materials—textbooks, readers, literary works—allocated for all-class or group work at a certain grade, should not be used in previous grades. A good program provides for enough sufficiently varied materials that selection for individual classroom situations is possible.

A good English language arts program makes additional provision for individual interests and abilities by offering numerous electives and special programs. Electives may include speech arts, journalism, writing laboratory, drama, senior writing, and advanced literature. Special programs are important at all grade levels. For instance, special classes in reading improvement should be offered for students whose potential reading ability is demonstrably greater than their current reading level.

An effective course of study frees the teacher by providing for diversity within unity. Diversity is encouraged through teaching procedures which utilize the creativity of the teacher and allow adaptation to the individual classroom situation. Unity is assured when each teacher covers what is to be taught at each grade level. Thus, the teacher following the basic course knows that he will cover content and skills to be taught and feels free to apply his energy and creativity to finding ways of inducing maximum learning in young persons. A section of the course of study might present numerous ways of teaching various phases of the work at different grade levels. Teachers manuals for approved textbooks and readers should be made available. Bulletinns may be issued from time to time describing teaching procedures used successfully in the school system or in other school systems. The well-trained teacher studies these suggestions and adapts them to the needs of the individuals in his classroom.

An effective course of study is characterized by teaching conditions which foster superior teaching and maximum learning. However clear the course of study, however available the materials, however superior and well-trained the teacher, teaching and learning tend to be influenced by the conditions of the teaching.

The teacher's load must be reasonable. Ideally, a teacher in the elementary school should have 25 or fewer pupils. A teacher of English in the secondary school should have not more than five classes of 20 or fewer students. Where financial considerations make such class size impossible, other means should be used to reduce the load to one where
adequate discussion of literature and handling of written work are possible. Such means include readers to help with paper correction, clerical assistance, and rearrangements of classes to vary the size of groups in accordance with specific content or skill being taught. For instance, several hundred high school students might be grouped together to see a Shakespeare film or to hear a lecture on theme writing.

An effective language arts program is characterized by general recognition of the importance of the content and skills being taught. The first responsibility is the English teacher's. Too many students move through school without ever being made aware of what the language arts program is all about. The teacher's first responsibility is to explain the goals to the students, to show them how the content and skills are related, to make clear, each step of the way, what the work is about, why it is important, and how they can gain satisfaction from their specific, individual accomplishment. Clearly stated listings of expected attainments in the course of study help the teacher to stimulate growth and achievement.

Developing the Program

Development of the program described involves considerable organization. Curricula are likely to be most successful when the participation in their development is extensive. Such participation is notably simpler in a small school system where all teachers concerned might gather in one room. In a large school system, participation must be gained through a system of representation, delegation and reporting. To develop a basic course of study in a large city system, for instance, the language arts director and staff must first achieve a climate favorable to the revision and reorganization of an established program. They must talk with teachers and department heads, counselors and principals, with individuals and with groups. They ask questions and listen to comments and gradually gain a fairly clear picture of desirable changes. Perhaps a questionnaire is used, with the findings tabulated and reported back to the teachers.

The first step is to form a steering committee to head the work of revision. Since the course of study is to outline what is to be taught in all areas of the language arts at all grade levels, there must be representatives of all grade levels on the steering committee. To insure that administration is actively involved in the program, principals of the three levels—elementary, junior high, and senior high—should be invited to serve.

The first work of the steering committee is to examine courses of study in cities of comparable size, to study available research, to assess what can be utilized from the previous course of study, and then to do some specific planning for a long-time job. Probably a year is required for this study and planning. During this time, too, through department heads in the secondary school and principals and teacher representatives in the elementary school, all teachers of language arts are led into discussions of what should be included in the new course.

The next step is making sequences and trying these out in the schools. The steering committee appoints a committee including a representative from each grade level and resource persons from the steering committee, for each of the six major divisions of language arts: reading, observing and listening, organizing thought, speaking, writing, and specific
language skills. At the end of the year, each committee has decided tentatively what should be taught in its area of the language arts, and at what level it should be taught. Also, the sequences have been sent out to teachers for discussions in the buildings and for written reactions to be referred to the steering committee.

The next year, the steering committee reorganizes so that there are 13 horizontal committees, one for each grade level. Each of these committees studies the six sequences and develops a course outline for a particular grade level. The steering committee then edits the work and prepares the course in four mimeographed sections: for the primary grades, for the intermediate grades, for the junior high school and for the senior high school years.

Clarifying Emphases

The course is tried out for one year—each teacher being asked to submit suggestions for improvement. During this year of trying out the course, consultation, discussions in buildings, area meetings, talks before parent-teacher and other community organizations are even more extensive, if possible, than during the year of initial planning. Librarians, counselors, staff members—all are brought into the evaluation; all are kept in tune with the progress of the work.

At the end of the year, the steering committee goes over all the suggestions, edits the material, and prepares to have it published as a single book.

A course of study is effective only to the extent that it is accepted and put into practice. If the discussion, consultation, interpretation, and involvement of the years during the development of the course have been effective, staff members and citizens are asking to see the completed book before it is off the press. If such is the case, one big step toward implementing the course has already been taken. Thus, as soon as the copies of the book have been distributed, the work can center on clarifying the emphases of the course of study.

It is important to stress the value of achieving focus in the English language arts. Each teacher uses the outline of what is to be taught as a checklist and makes his own plans for organizing the year’s work into practicable teaching units. The elementary teacher must arrange for the timing of language arts in the daily schedule. He must schedule a regular time for the basic reading program, for the other facets of the reading program, for oral work, for written composition, for spelling, for handwriting, and for the other language skills.

Strengthening the Program

The secondary school teacher must plan to relate the various language arts as closely as possible, using one aspect, such as literary appreciation, to strengthen other aspects, such as oral discussion and written composition. This focus can be made through utilizing a basic, five-step process of composition: (a) reading and thinking together; (b) planning for writing; (c) writing the first drafts; (d) sharing, evaluating, revising and rewriting; and (e) studying some related language skills.

This process is open to many variations. It may require a day or two or several weeks, depending upon the extent of the activity required for each step. The value is that such a process combines all aspects of the language arts, gives them focus, and makes accomplishment easy to evaluate.
A program is either becoming continuously strengthened or it is losing, little by little, its effectiveness. This truth is particularly applicable to the English language arts because of the constant changes in language, the new developments in the field of grammar and linguistics, the growing interest in research into methods of teaching reading and listening, the nation-wide attempt to raise the level of written composition. Maintaining and strengthening the English program calls for at least five kinds of active leadership.

An effective in-service training program is essential. All needed materials for teaching—courses of study, bulletins, teachers manuals—should be made easily available to the teacher. Demonstrations at all grade levels should be encouraged, with consequent emphasis upon exchange of classroom visits by interested teachers. Building meetings, area meetings, small-group conferences are important. Workshops and professional classes should be available to teachers each year. Most important, over-all planning and the development of teacher leaders are essential to maintaining a high level in all in-service training. The good teacher is a creative thinker, and the best program is the result of the creativity and the constructively critical thinking of all staff members.

The preparation of new teachers must be improved. One who will teach writing to young persons must have some training in written composition other than that gained through “Freshman Composition” or through writing term papers for other college subjects. One who is to teach grammar and syntax should not only be thoroughly grounded in traditional grammar but should also know something of the history and development of the English language and have taken at least one course in one or more of the emerging “new grammars,” such as structural linguistics. A secondary school English teacher can no longer afford to be ignorant of how to teach the basic reading skills, nor of the relation of phonics to reading and to spelling and to speech improvement. An elementary school teacher must have much more training in English than can be gained from a three-hour course in “Language Arts.”

A constant search for new materials and improved methods is a must. Television is still in the experimental stage. What can be done through television better than through the traditional pupil-teacher-classroom approach? This possible avenue to improved teaching and learning requires further exploration. Are teaching machines just expensive gadgets promoted by commercial interests? Can useful programmed learning be developed? Is the Carnegie unit the ultimate answer to school organization or can other and more effective scheduling be devised? If 30 pupils are too many for effective teaching of written composition, may so small a group be a waste of teacher time when a film is to be shown or programmed learning is to be used? Accompanying the search for new ways of teaching must be continuous evaluation of the current program in terms of pupil growth and achievement. There must also be evaluation of each new method in terms of its usefulness in furthering the basic program.

The English language arts program holds a position of priority in the curriculum since the skills and content of English are the foundations upon which other learning is based. The program described in this article is being developed and implemented in the Seattle Public Schools.