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Alas, a Lack, or Why English Slept

Almost anyone can think up ways to improve high school teaching of English. We can do without memorizing *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. It stoppeth one, if not two, of three students. And instead of retracing the trials of Silas Marner at the pace at which they were lived, one could read more rapidly a few contemporary novels. Use of paperback books, in their variety and availability, should permit students and teachers to satisfy individual tastes. And for students going to college, more demanding instruction in composition should eliminate the need for that perennial hodgepodge, Freshman English.

What is really needed to improve English instruction, however, is not random thoughts but a systematic study of the curriculum, from elementary school through the first year or two of college. Such an effort is now under way in the U.S. Office of Education's Project English. Plans call for setting up curriculum study centers at three universities this spring. The curricula, borrowed or invented, will be designed to teach students to read with comprehension and to write with clarity. Literature will be included as it bears on these goals. The most promising feature of the project is the effort to draw upon the talents of university people outside, as well as inside, the schools of education.

Use of persons who are not professors of education does not, of course, make this English program unique. The program bears some similarity to the now familiar efforts at reform in teaching science and foreign languages, which are supported by the National Science Foundation and, under the National Defense Education Act, by the Office of Education. The main idea is also to put a little more emphasis on rigor and a little less emphasis on "life-adjustment." Actually, most students are not fortunate enough to have suffered even the abuses of rigor illustrated in the examples in the first paragraph above.

Project English is starting on a makeshift basis, and it includes other efforts about which it is harder to be enthusiastic. It includes, for example, educational research of the kind that, if it succeeds at all, can only demonstrate the obvious — such as the bearing of vocabulary size on reading comprehension. The key idea of the project, however, is the establishment of the curriculum centers. As the project grows, the hope is to establish more centers. And as blocs of sensible yet imaginative curricula start coming from the centers, the hope is to set up institutes for retraining teachers. These institutes would be similar to those already established for science teachers and foreign language teachers. To move to this final stage, however, will require not only a great deal more money from Congress but also special legislation.

The director of the project is J. N. Hook, who recently came to Washington on leave from the department of English of the University of Illinois. Being in the Office of Education, Hook will work more closely, of course, with the personnel of that office than did his counterparts in some of the earlier work on science teaching. But with reform in education gaining respectability, this could operate to the advantage of the program. The Office of Education had been growing famous for taking the education out of education. Perhaps it will now grow famous for putting it back.—J.T.