

English or literacy? – that is the question

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ABSTRACT: This paper sets out to document the process of state intervention into the curriculum content and pedagogical practices of the teaching of English in England. It contains an analysis of the key elements of the National Literacy Strategy, a national programme designed to raise standards of literacy for secondary school pupils in England and Wales. The key elements of the strategy are outlined; in particular, the oppositional stance of the Strategy to established practices in English education curriculum practice in the areas of Speaking and Listening, Reading and Writing are documented. The paper concludes with a consideration of the potential (and unintended?) consequences of centralized state control of curriculum and pedagogy for teachers' sense of professionalism and their ability to meet the demands that 21st century communicative practices will make on their students.

KEYWORDS: English curriculum, English teachers, pedagogy, practice, standards.

WHO “OWNS” ENGLISH? THE DRIVE FOR “STANDARDS”.

As the 1980s drew to their close...there were various indications that the situation was beginning to turn for English teaching...Intense pressure was exerted from outside the profession to shape English curriculum practice in certain ways appropriately described as consistent with “liberal-conservative” restoration, on the one hand, and with the emergence of a new corporate managerial and economic-rationalist agenda, on the other. Although there was much resistance from within the profession, nonetheless it is a reasonable observation that control over subject definition decisively shifted from the profession – by which I mean the full gamut of those concerned with English teaching, from teachers to researchers – to external agencies and “interested publics” (Reid, 1983). This occurred as the State moved to intervene in and rearticulate the discourse of English teaching, and to exercise accordingly a significant measure of overt control over educational agendas, to a degree unprecedented since the nineteenth century consolidation of mass compulsory schooling (Green, 1995, p. 2).

It is undoubtedly true, as Green argues, that during the past twenty years the locus of direction and control over the curriculum taught in state schools to pupils at primary and secondary level has decisively shifted from the teaching profession to the state. In England and Wales the state exerts its power over the content of the curriculum, its assessment, and now the pedagogy employed by teachers, through a range of governmental agencies charged with the central administration of different sectors of educational provision.

The drive behind this exertion of control can be located in the powerful term “standards”. Successive government administrations over the course of the past 20 years have taken the first of the following three “truths” to be self-evident:

1. Standards of achievement in state schools are not rising quickly enough in order to enable the country to compete in a global economy;
The present Labour (centre right) administration has, from this essential position, taken two further “truths” as central to its educational mission:
2. State schooling has not enabled students from socially disadvantaged groups to achieve educational success. This failure is a root cause of disaffection in adolescents and of social dysfunction in adulthood.
3. The profession cannot be trusted to address these problems. Central control and direction is needed to effect a “step change” in performance.

Central government control of educational practice has, in England and Wales, moved from the definition of the curriculum to be taught to all pupils from ages 5-16, (contained within the National Curriculum for England and Wales), to an increased emphasis on national tests to measure standards of attainment (school children in England and Wales currently take an average of over 130 tests during their school career up to the age of 16). During the past five years, in England and Wales, the teaching profession has been further directed by a new focus on pedagogy. Government agencies, in particular the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) and the National Numeracy Strategy (NNS), have defined what is “effective” teaching and learning strategies in the core subjects of English and Mathematics – and have, in primary schools, changed the name of those subjects. This change in nomenclature, and its relation to the liberal conservative/economic rationalist agenda identified by Green above, is something to which I will return later in this paper.

THE KEY STAGE 3 STRATEGY – THE ANSWER TO “DRIVING UP” STANDARDS?

The Key Stage 3 Strategy, another centrally driven pedagogical initiative, is directed at students aged 11-14 (the start of their secondary school careers in Great Britain) and is targeted to address another government concern – the purported “dip” in standards at the start of secondary school education. The Strategy covers the whole of the secondary curriculum and is divided into five strands (English, mathematics, science, ICT and TLF – teaching and learning in the foundation subjects) and four key principles (expectations, progression, engagement, transformation). In this paper I am going to focus on the Strategy's framework for the teaching of English (DfEE, 2001).

The Strategy was introduced as a two-year pilot in seventeen Local Education Authorities (LEAs) in 2000. In 2001, before any of the results of the pilot were available, it was announced by the then Secretary of State for Education that the Strategy was to be adopted nationwide as part of a whole curriculum initiative to raise standards – in the words of the then Secretary of State for Education, David Blunkett, to “transform” teaching in the early years of secondary education, a period identified by the government as a time when pupils become disaffected and when attainment purportedly dips dramatically (for a rebuttal of this position see Bousted, 2001). The Strategy was to be given extensive funding and a new “army” of consultants were appointed to monitor its implementation, giving advice and

training to English departments in secondary schools. Its effectiveness was to be investigated by the Office for Standards in Education (OfSTED).

The Key Stage 3 strategy is based on the framework of the National Literacy Strategy (now incorporated into the National Primary Strategy). It sets out a framework of teaching objectives, grouped under the headings Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening for the first three years of secondary education. Designed for pupils of secondary school age (11-14), the Key Stage 3 strategy nevertheless adopts the Primary Strategy's pedagogy – advocating a four-part lesson beginning with a starter activity, moving on to a whole class activity, then to individual or group work, and finishing with a plenary. The emphasis in the Key Stage 3 Strategy is on *pace*. Effective teaching is confidently described by the Strategy writers as that which is (amongst other attributes) direct and explicit, highly interactive, varied in style and distinguished by a fast pace and strong focus.

From the part to the whole?

The Strategy is founded upon a conception of language development which moves from the smallest unit of meaning (*word level* - beginning with *spelling* and moving on to *vocabulary*), to *sentence level* (beginning with the *construction of complex sentences* and moving on to *paragraphing and cohesion*), before considering *stylistic conventions of non-fiction*, then to text level where *research and study skills* are placed before *reading for meaning* and *understanding the author's craft*

This ordering of progression is, I think, significant. A model of language development which develops from the part (parts of words, to whole words, to sentences and then to paragraphs) is being strongly advocated through the presentation of the Strategy curriculum. At all points the implied progression is from the part to the whole, from parts of sentences to whole sentences, to cohesion between sentences in paragraphs, and then, finally, to whole texts.

However, even if the whole text objectives are reached, they focus on breaking down the text into discrete sections upon which are targeted highly focused and closely directed tasks. For example, the first teaching objective for *text level reading* in year 7 states that pupils should be taught to: know how to locate resources for a given task, and find relevant information in them e.g. *skimming, use of index, glossary, key words, hotlinks*. The feeling one gets from reading the objectives and their implied progression is one of control – language study is to be focused, directed, narrowed to specific objectives which have to be achieved and demonstrated through the explicit “naming of parts” before the student can be trusted to go on to freer, more self-directed and creative uses of language.

Bits of lit? What counts as reading in the literacy strategy.

The Strategy's approach to the *study of literary texts* (presented as the last section on reading in the Strategy folder) is, perhaps, most illustrative of the previous point. This section of the Strategy's teaching objectives is preceded by a section on *Understanding the author's craft*, the first teaching objective of which is that pupils should be taught to: *Comment, using appropriate terminology, on how writers convey setting, character and mood through word choice and sentence structure*. The focus of understanding is, again, directed to the discrete elements of a complex whole. The

emphasis is upon isolating, identifying and categorising *how* effects are achieved *before* one gets to the heady, higher planes of actually reading and responding to a text.

Moreover, the authors of the strategy are, it would appear, rather ambivalent about the practice of reading of a whole literary text. Such an activity could challenge the Strategy's emphasis on *pace*, and could militate against the coverage of its numerous other objectives. However, anxious teachers need not worry; the Strategy writers helpfully provide advice about the dangerously uncharted waters of reading whole texts in the classroom:

There is clearly a balance to be achieved between providing classroom time to support the reading of longer texts, and the imperative to secure progression. Having clear objectives lends pace and focus to the study of longer texts; there is less need to teach all possible angles on the text and more reason to focus on those aspects which cluster around the objectives. The aim is to provide enjoyable encounters, which serve the objectives well, but do not demand a disproportionate commitment of time. Teachers already use a repertoire of techniques (such as the use of priority passages, support tapes, abridgement, televised extracts and recapitulation) to move quickly through longer texts without denying attention to the details and quality of the text (DfEE, 2001, p. 15).

The message is clear – the reading of whole texts is a practice which is (dangerously?) uncontrolled, and such freedom might well militate against the route march through the rest of the teaching objectives which, alone, will secure the “imperative of progression”. The concept of “reading” in the strategy is one in which the text's meaning is fixed and determinate – flying in the face of powerful theoretical positions which question the determinacy of the text and support the construction of meaning through the act of reading as a creative act – played out between the reader whose experience of the world, and of reading other texts, including media texts provides a framework in terms of which the literary text is “viewed”. Such a position is powerfully articulated by Street:

...the new literacy demands of the new work order are the context in which we need to be talking about the nature of literacy, what kind of work we should be doing in schools and how it relates to the kind of society we have got, including the multi-lingual society which is, as we know, the dominant model for most of the world. Another feature of the communicative dimension of the new work order is that we cannot, if we ever could, separate out literacy from other communicative practices, such as oral and semiotic practices....One of the arguments about communicative practices in the new work order is that there will always be a mix of literacy, oral and semiotic modes. So any idea we might have that we can separate out the “literacy” and get on with that, or teach that, and then come back to the others in some other place is unfounded in any theoretical or practical sense. This has huge implications for pedagogy, for curriculum and for the Literacy Hour in schools (Street, 1999, p. 2).

If the Strategy's concept of the act of reading is deficient, so, Medway argues, is its pedagogy which, he argues, places undue emphasis on analysis – to the extent that the motive for reading and the nature of the reader's satisfaction from the act of reading is ignored.

Do we...believe that the outcome of the general curricular experience of literature by the whole population in the compulsory phase should be the ability to analyse texts in

terms of type, technique, constituent elements and comparison with other texts – and to display that ability in an essay? Is a good induction into literature one that enables the student to say how writer X builds suspense, develops character, achieves emphasis and uses metaphor? Or is there some other activity, rather distinct from these analytical practices, one closer, perhaps, to those of people who voluntarily buy or borrow books for themselves – one that we might call *reading*? Might literature teaching conceivably be about readers' *experience* of the text and the sort of dialogue they get with it? Is that experience made better (and, if so, how?) by analytical practices and knowledge of structure and technique? It seems, sometimes, yes, sometimes no. Our theory needs to sort this issue out. But first it must surely say why widely responsive reading should be the first priority (Medway, 2002, p. 7).

However, if the Strategy is to encourage such responsive reading – the only platform upon which confident analysis of literary techniques and genres can be built – it must give readers time to read. It is in this crucial area that the Strategy is most tellingly deficient. The Strategy's emphasis on *pace*, and the consequent danger of over-reliance on closed questions which demand literal responses (Riley & Elmer, 2001, Urquhart, 2002) is a critical issue – in particular, the “mining” of print text extracts for meanings which have been previously fixed and determined by the teacher. The answer that the Strategy writers give teachers who are struggling to resolve the tension between wanting to support their students' engagement with, and response to, the reading of whole texts and yet feel under huge pressure to get through the numerous, specific objectives dictated by the Strategy's writers is to let parts of a text represent the whole. Students will not read books but passages – and “reading” in this discourse is primarily purposed at identifying and naming the literary techniques employed by the author and the genre to which the text belongs. The question of divergent, unforeseen responses is not considered. Every effort must, instead, be directed towards approaches which will keep up the speedy pace of lessons, so beloved of the Strategy writers. It is, to say the least, unfortunate that this consideration appears to have overtaken all others – and in particular the notion of considered response, tested and articulated through informed debate and discussion, which is the hallmark of effective, *shared*, reading practices within the community of the classroom – a pedagogical practice that English teachers have always (and rightly) highly valued.

It is also interesting that televised extracts are recommended as ways of “motoring through” the “less important” sections. This is, I would suggest, a wholly inadequate conception of the status of televised text, in relation to print text, at the beginning of the 21st century. I will return to this issue at the end of this paper.

Approaches to writing

Only in the Strategy's treatment of writing is there an acknowledgement of powerful pedagogic positions which have been developed within the profession. The first set of teaching objectives under the Writing column are grouped under the activities of *planning*, *drafting* and *presenting*. Webster (2001) notes that this positioning is, perhaps, an acknowledgement of the depth of feeling amongst English teachers in support of the process approach to writing. Once these processes have been identified and categorised, then the different purposes for writing (to inform, explain, describe, persuade, argue, advise; and to analyse, review and comment) are outlined.

However, it is interesting that warning bells were being rung early in the development of the Strategy in respect of its approach to raising standards of writing:

The threat to sustained writing comes, not from its exclusion from the Framework, but from the lack of time to write complete essays or stories, both vital in terms of developing pupils' ability to use language and communicate effectively across the curriculum (Webster, 2001, p. 8).

Speaking and listening

The last teaching objectives column in the Strategy Framework is Speaking and Listening. This may come as something of a surprise given the long research tradition concerned to promote Oracy in English education. However, as a Speaking and Listening strand was originally omitted from the National Literacy Strategy at primary level owing to a purported lack of space in the curriculum, one should, perhaps, be grateful that the Key Stage 3 Strategy authors (who are nameless) acknowledge that, in secondary schools, pupils might benefit from being able to shape their thoughts and ideas through conversation with their teachers and their peers – perhaps the work of Vygotsky (1978, 1986), the London School writers, Britton, Rosen and Barnes, and the work of the National Oracy Project (1987 –1991) has not been entirely in vain.

HOW TO RESPOND?

Some of the tone of this paper, in referring to the objectives in the Strategy, has been rather flippant and, having considered this, I conclude that this tone is adopted as a defence mechanism. Reasoned argument, rooted in research evidence, been expressed repeatedly and powerfully by critics of the Strategy. However the Strategy is supported by a power base, and by a funding base, which has meant that it has been able to operate, heretofore, with apparent impunity – hence its imposition upon the profession without consultation and, if this were not serious enough, without convincing research evidence, particularly in the area of the development of writing abilities. (In this respect the work of Hilton, 2001 is important, in particular Hilton's argument that the process approach to the development of writing abilities has been misrepresented by the advocates of the Strategy – in particular Beard....in order to support directly transmissive approaches to the construction of texts according to generic "rules". Bailey (2002) argues, also, that the theoretical base for the Strategy's approach to writing development is under theorized.)

Something is rotten in the state of literacy

However, we have now reached a point in time where even the zealous Strategy consultants cannot ignore the evidence that something is rotten in the state of literacy. It is undeniable, for example, that the rise in pupil performance in national tests of standards of achievement in literacy has, over the last two years, halted after a five-year period of apparently meteoric rises. Possible explanations for this hiatus have come out of a range of increasingly critical studies on the implementation and operation of the NLS at key stages 1 and 2 (primary level) on which the NLS at key stage 3 was modelled (Frater, 2000; Hilton, 2001, 2002; Urquhart, 2002; Wyse, 2000,

2001). In summary, these criticisms challenge the hypothesis that the NLS has raised standards of literacy. Hilton (2001) argues that the Key stage 2 reading tests have become easier each year because the questions set in the tests have increasingly demanded literal, information-retrieval responses, rather than responses which require pupils to exercise the higher order reading skill of inference (to read beyond the literal and to locate, and use, inferential information). Hilton concludes:

By reducing the inference questions and lowering overall the number of marks requiring higher-order reading comprehension, then calling the predictably better results a “rise in standards” the assessment process is masking real and useful national data. In fact many Year 6 children accredited with Level 4 could be failing to engage with texts at anything other than a simple literal level of comprehension. There could well be a current **fall** in standards as the National Literacy Strategy approach to the teaching of literacy in schools is bolstered by such dubious test reliability (Hilton, 2001, p. 10).

Frater (2000), in a study of the implementation of the NLS in primary schools warned against what he terms an “anxious literalism” in teachers who were concerned to cover all the Framework's objectives and, in so doing, were neglecting the reading of whole texts (and the development, in young readers, of personal response). Frater noted, moreover, that the writing standards in schools in which there was the closest adherence to the Framework were the poorest – with many pieces of writing left unfinished because time was not being made available for extended writing (nor were the connections between speaking and listening, reading and writing being recognised or exploited by those teachers whose practice adhered most closely to that advocated by the Strategy).

Indeed, there is now evidence that the problems identified with the Strategy at key stages 1 and 2 are being replicated at key stage 3. The OfSTED report (February 2002) into the implementation of the first year of the pilot KS3 strategy, notes: “Pupils in a significant proportion of pilot schools, particularly in Year 7, lacked opportunities to read, write and talk in a sustained and/or extended way.” (p.12). Consequently, one key recommendation to the Strategy consultants, and to teachers, is that “the overall key stage 3 teaching programme is planned so as to provide regular opportunities for guided, sustained and extended reading and writing” (OfSTED, 2002, p. 5).

If we know our history, we will know where we're coming from...

At this point the wheel returns full circle and levels of exasperation reach fever pitch! After all, English has, traditionally, been the main subject within the secondary curriculum (along with history) where opportunities for guided, sustained and extended reading and writing opportunities have been made available to students. A holistic approach to the development of language abilities, enshrined in the Bullock report (DES, 1975) and further acknowledged in the Cox report (DES, 1989) has been underpinned by a long tradition, stretching back to Sampson (1921) and Newbolt (1921), underpinned by extensive research into the way children learn and acquire concepts through language. Such a tradition has been promoted through the work of the London School, in particular through the work of Barnes, (1976), Britton (1970, 1982) and Rosen, (1971), which was itself underpinned by the rediscovery of Vygotsky's writing (1978, 1986). Previous research (Goodwyn, 1992; Bousted, 2000,

2002; Marshall, 2000) has shown how pervasive the London School's work has been in defining English teachers' conceptions of their practice, in particular, their adherence to pedagogies which privilege:

- The promotion of talk as the essential means by which students are enabled to connect “home” knowledge with “school” knowledge; through which they are enabled to learn, and to shape their learning, for their own purposes, and to develop critical and moral awareness
- The adoption by the teacher of an interpretative rather than a transmissive role which enables students' ideas and voices to be heard in the classroom and to be used as a basis for the content of the lesson
- The promotion, and valuing of, a personal response to a literary text – such a response providing the foundation upon which a critical response can be founded
- The rejection of transmissive teaching of grammar in favour of the expression of a personal voice, developed through the provision of opportunities for extended writing, honed and focused through the process approach to writing (stimulus, draft, revise, present) (Bousted, 2001).

Teachers' Voices

So, how do English teachers in England respond to the demand that they shape the literacy strategy to their wider purpose of providing, for their pupils, an education in English? Here I turn to the work of the Association for Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) which has conducted two surveys into English teachers' reactions to the implementation of the pilot Key Stage 3 strategy in England and Wales. Here are some of the voices of the English teachers whose practice has been so profoundly changed by the Strategy:

There's not enough thinking in English now. That's one of the things that have gone out with the lack of a text. It's all the sort of English which reaches an end. It's not open ended. It's almost as if you taught English in a foreign country, as though you are teaching linguistic skills only.

When you're actually trying to teach them something like participles it's very difficult to do it in ten minutes and you don't get the time to revise, revisit it or embed it. That's the big weakness of the Framework. It doesn't do embedding. It does visiting, ticking it off and, if you can be seen to have done those things, it is assumed that children will become more literate.

You take from it what is good and the methodology, if properly used and not hysterically clung to, is good. Yes, our lessons have got “pace”. There's probably more variety, but as soon as you say you can't spend as much time as you like doing on a particular book you are cutting away what is fundamental to English teaching (ATL, 2002, p. 11).

We do eight modules in a Year 7, but no class readers. We do non-fiction, poetry, myths and legends, media, history of the language, short stories, Chaucer and Shakespeare. Four weeks on each module. Each lesson is truncated by the plenary so there's less time on what you're doing. It makes it very bitty. It's quite a big change. The Framework has transfigured everything (ATL, 2002, p. 13).

I think that it's all really impressive; the literacy is really buzzing. The thing that worries me is where's the English? I can see the literacy but where's English gone? (ATL, 2002, p. 14).

The last respondent asks an interesting question – where has the English gone? The speaker's elaboration of the difference between literacy and English is not reported. However there are, perhaps, clues in the earlier voices about what the final speaker might mean. What appears to be lost, according to these teachers, is a sense of openness – the ability to make a choice to “spend as much time as you like on a particular book” – the practice of reading a whole text (“we do no class readers”), the sense of a recursive curriculum where concepts and skills are “embedded” through a curriculum which allows revisiting through engagement with different stimuli (including literary texts). And, finally, the sense that the Strategy does not recognise that pupils come to school with a range of spontaneously acquired language skills – the fountain upon which the personal growth model in English was built – which do not need to be constantly, consciously, objectified: “It's almost as if you taught English in a foreign country.” Such a conception of “English” might chime with Green's (1995) notion of liberal conservatism – rooted in notions of creativity of expression and built upon personally felt responses to literary texts.

These liberal conservative forces have been diminished through the advent of economic rationalist agenda in which the learning of language is viewed as an essential commodity for economic success. Gone is the adherence to the development of a personal voice and the fostering of creativity; this has been replaced by “hard” content which, in English, has been renamed Literacy and has been reconstructed through the naming of parts, a series of definitions which are, essentially, the core of the Strategy. Within the Strategy, language becomes a “hard” commodity – the essential ingredient for the raising of standards:

Effective literacy is the key to raising standards across all subjects, and equipping pupils with the skills and knowledge they need for life beyond school” (DfEE, 2001, p.14).

And, as this commodity has been funded so generously, it is important that the government can see what it is paying for – hence the “anxious literalism” within the Framework on the “naming of parts”.

TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY LITERACIES

I would not want, however, to look forward to a rosy past. There are legitimate criticisms which can be made of the English curriculum prior to the advent of the Key Stage 3 strategy – in particular the over-emphasis on literary texts and the (consequent?) differential achievement of girls and boys. However, it is undeniable that English, prior to the Strategy, was a successful subject which, in comparison to other subjects in the secondary curriculum, enabled students to achieve higher grades in end-of-schooling formal exams (GCSE). It is also undeniable that the English profession was itself turning its attention to the achievement of girls and boys within the subject (Millard, 1997).

I do, however, want to argue that the current Key Stage 3 strategy does not lead us towards a rosy future. Indeed, in its emphasis on parts, on sections, and on pace, the Strategy leaves the subject of English in danger of neglecting those aspects at which it achieved success, most notably in the development of writing abilities through process approaches (Hilton, 2001) and the reading and response to literary texts. Any strategy which fails to acknowledge what English has achieved, and the strengths of English teachers will, sooner rather than later, simply fail.

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