The state we’re in: English Teaching in England in the 21st century

RICHARD ANDREWS
University of York

ABSTRACT: The article traces developments within English teaching in England from 2000 to mid-2002 in the light of curricular initiatives in the 1990s. It suggests that such curricular reform is still operating within a conservative, target-setting and assessment-driven model. There is partial recognition of the importance of information and communication technologies in English teaching, of “viewing” as the fifth aspect of language skills and of the contribution from work experience and “real-life” contexts for the development of language. Models of learning that underpin the present teaching of English are enlightened though somewhat prescriptive. On the positive side, there are signs that arguing and questioning in order to develop thinking are on the increase, with a particular link to the new subject Citizenship. On the other hand, the relationship between English and Media Studies still remains unresolved after a generation of attempts by media education teachers to make it more mainstream; and the “national” in the National Curriculum remains a misnomer.

KEYWORDS: Curriculum, English, England, literacy, ICT.

INTRODUCTION

In September 2000, a new version of the National Curriculum was implemented in England (sometimes referred to as “Curriculum 2000”). This is, in effect, the third version of the National Curriculum that was established by statute in 1988 and implemented from 1990 onwards. “National” is something of a misnomer, because the first version applied to England and Wales only and the third, current version applies only to England. Wales has its own version, overseen by the Welsh Assembly: a result of devolution in the late 1990s. The second version – the result of a “slimming down” of requirements in 1994 in the light of complaints from teachers of an overburdened curriculum – was always seen as a rather conservative distillation of the original. The third and current version was a chance for a more radical re-think of the curricular framework for English and other subjects, but it has turned out to be a modest revision.

Before going into the nature of the present curriculum for English in more detail, there are one or two further contextual points that need to be made. As in the case in the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand (at least), there is a problem with teacher recruitment and retention in England. The problem is at its worst with teachers of Modern Foreign Languages, Science and Mathematics, but the depth of the problem in English is disguised by the fact that it is still considered that “anyone can teach English”. Consequently, classroom assistants (managed by teachers) or non-specialists are likely to be teaching the subject in greater numbers than ten years ago, at both primary (5-11) and secondary (11-16) levels. The problem is particularly acute at the 11-14 stage, which is the current field of anxiety for the government. They see standards lapsing during the first three years of secondary school, whereas
heads of department and headteachers – understandably – are deploying their
specialist teachers in the public examination years (14-16) and (16-19). I discuss the
current “key stage 3 national strategy” in the course of the article.

THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM FOR ENGLISH

Surprisingly, “Curriculum 2000” is the first version of the National Curriculum to set
out its fundamental principles. The earlier versions were the product of a decade of
assessment-driven curricula, inspired (if that’s the right word) by the target-driven
management-speak of the 1990s. In short, the new curriculum is inclusive, has a
commitment to language across the curriculum and to the application of information
and communication technologies (ICT) in learning. It also aims to promote pupils’
spiritual, moral, social and cultural development; and to promote key skills such as
communication, ICT skills, working with others, problem-solving and learning to
learn. A significant addition to the compulsory core curriculum is the introduction of
the subject Citizenship from September 2002, growing mostly from personal, social
and health education practices but having clear connections and correspondences with
curriculum subjects – not least, English. Perhaps the most heartening passage in the
new philosophy comes under “promoting other aspects of the curriculum”:

English can play a part in promoting citizenship and thinking skills through, for
example:

• reading, viewing and discussing texts which present issues and relationships between
groups and between the individual and society in different historical periods and
cultures
• learning about the social, historical, political and cultural contexts which shape and
influence the texts people read and view
• developing pupils’ ability to put their point of view, question, argue and discuss,
adapting what they say to their audience and the effect they wish to achieve
• evaluating critically what they hear, read and view, with attention to explicit and
implied meanings, bias and objectivity, and fact and opinion
• becoming competent users of spoken and written standard English to enable pupils to
participate fully in the wider world beyond school, in public life, and in decision
making (DfEE/QCA 1999, p. 9).

I italicize the notions of viewing, arguing and participating in public life because of
all the elements set out above, these seem distinctively new in the English curriculum
in England. The Film Council, the BBC, and the British Film Institute (and others)
have been arguing for a generation that there should be mainstream recognition for
the role of still and moving images in English education, and yet the late 1980s and
1990s conception of English remained steadfastly literary and bookish, perhaps a
legacy of Leavis and the resistance to popular culture. In the late recognition of
viewing (following in the wake of the Australian and New Zealand English curricula
of the early 1990s), there is a definite sea-change in attitude. By the time of the next
revision of the curriculum, we might have a more truly kaleidoscopic and
appropriately visual dimension to the English curriculum.

Argument, similarly, seems to be coming of age. Throughout the specifications for
the curriculum in English, there is increased diversity and an increased reference to
argumentation, not only in speaking and in the default genre, the essay; but also in reading and other forms of writing, as well as in listening. The connection between argumentative capability and thinking development has been established in the minds of the policy makers, perhaps also linked to the gradual weening of the English curriculum from literature – the staple diet since it replaced Latin as the central humanizing presence in the curriculum in the 1920s. What appeared as a gesture to a wider range of genres and text-types in 1990 has now developed into a more diverse and balanced range of text in 2000 and beyond.

Thirdly, the impulse to encourage participation in the world beyond school, in public life, has grown from successful experiments in the 1980s, largely through the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI), in which English teachers sought new audiences and contexts outside the classroom. Such an impulse (as with the creation of Citizenship as a school subject) derives also from a concern that young people are disenfranchised, or at least uninterested, in political life at local, regional or national levels. The renewal of democratic values is not unconnected to the second of these developments in the English curriculum: the interest in argumentation.

I mentioned earlier that the latest version of the National Curriculum for English in England has moved to a model that celebrates a wider range of texts than the literary. While that is true, research that shows English teachers still adhere to a model of English that is based on “personal growth” (the Dartmouth 1966 ideology) and “teaching language through literature” (Goodwyn and Findlay, 1999). The literary canon, as enshrined in the National Curriculum, is still remarkably insular. In 1994, I wrote about the recommended texts that seemed central to the National Curriculum for English at the time (Andrews 1994) and which seemed naval in the extreme: the work of Masefield, [et al]. The 2000 list is somewhat less insular, confirming the desire among policymakers to create a sensibility that is distinctively English – or, at least, English in the sense that “English Literature” has embraced and appropriated writers like Wilde, Soyinka and Narayan. It is still, then, a colonialist or post-colonialist sensibility that is informing the canon. Major writers before 1914 – and students must study two Shakespeare plays and two works of fiction and four poets from that period – are almost exclusively white; and while those in the post-1914 category are more diverse, including Fugard, Angelou, Thiongo and Tagore as well as Ballard, Lessing, Lowell and Stevie Smith, they are Anglocentric in the sense that they almost exclusively write in English and are, as suggested, colonised in some sense. Lest my point of view seem unduly carping, consider why there is only one writer who does not write originally in English and why European, Eastern European, Russian, Arabic or South American literature, in translation, is absent. This isn’t a curriculum in literature, but in English literature – or literature written in English.

Finally, on a more positive note, there is a list of suggested writers on non-fiction and non-literary (though note the negative definitions, in relation to the literary!) texts, including James Baldwin, John Berger, Samuel Johnson and Beatrice Webb. The categories are “personal record and viewpoints on society”, “travel writing”, “reportage” and “the natural world”.
ENGLISH 11-14

The aim of the Key Stage 3 National Strategy (for 11-14 year olds) is to raise standards by strengthening teaching and learning across the entire curriculum. It began with target-setting in September 2002, after a two-year pilot which ended in March 2002. The core of the strategy builds on the national literacy and numeracy strategies that have been in place at key stage 2 (7-11 year olds) since 1998. One of the key ingredients of the national literacy strategy for primary/elementary schools – most noted for its daily “literacy hour”, in which pupils experience input from the teacher, followed by group work, followed by a plenary to recite what they have learnt – is the imposition of how to teach as well as what to teach. Despite the original National Curriculum stating categorically that it did not wish to prescribe how teachers taught the various subjects, it is interesting to note how methodological prescription has crept up on everyone.

Another element of the literacy strategy is its emphasis on word- and sentence-level work, as well as on the grapho-phonemic level in learning to read. It is no surprise to read in the evaluation of the pilot (www.standards.dfes.gov.uk; also Ofsted 2002, p. 4) that “improvements in text-level work [are] less distinct”. The emphasis is clearly on the sentence-level and below – the levels at which a formal, mechanistic approach are most feasible and most assessable. To the strategy’s credit, however, there is more attention to text-level work in the key stage three plan. Behind the strategy is clearly the notion of a bottom-up approach: learn the micro-elements of language first, and build up toward the understanding and use of whole texts in their contexts.

The Office for Standards in Inspection (2002, p. 11) noted that in the pilot strategy for key stage three, the weakest parts of literacy teaching were in the plenaries at the end of lessons when teachers were supposed to rehearse with pupils what had been learnt, and also in the transfer of literacy learning across the curriculum. Furthermore, the primary/secondary school transition was often not well managed for the benefit of pupils’ literacy development. All three of these problems have been around for a long time, despite the National Curriculum’s attempts to deal with them. Interestingly, too, “the potential for ICT to enhance learning in mainstream English classes was not being realised” (ibid. p. 13).

One welcome addition in the training material for teachers for this phase of education is a section on questioning, which aims to make teachers reflect on and extend their use of questions, their encouragement of young people to ask questions – and to try alternatives to the question as a pedagogical tool in the classroom (DfES 2002a, p. 89ff). The teaching model is a well-tried and tested one, with emphasis on engagement, development (not “transformation” which I would rather see), consolidation and reflection.

However, it might be worth adding that the strategy operates very much within the management model of “target-setting” (by government) and “target-getting” (by advisory teachers and teachers), so beloved of early 1990s management practitioners and theorists. Other management and teaching approaches, like the creation of a community of enquiry or the emphasis on the quality and sustaining of learning, are secondary.
ENGLISH 16-19

There have been two or three major developments in English teaching in the last decade – two of them since 2000 – that have had, are having, and will have an impact on the subject 16-19 and its position in relation to the world of work and further study at university. The first of these, which has been in place for some time, was the introduction of an Advanced level (A level) in English Language. This subject, which draws on linguistics and includes research work in applied language study, is a welcome complement to the more longstanding A level in English Literature. It means that applicants to university with the subject bring with them an interest and capability in language that, for example, will stand them in good stead if they wish to become English teachers.

The second development, instituted in the academic year 2000/01, has been the introduction of Advanced Supplementary examinations. In 1988 the Higginson Report recommended that the A level system in England was too specialised and narrow and that the curriculum for 16-19 year olds should be broadened. The aim was to make the curriculum in England more like that of the Baccalaureate (principally used in continental Europe) or the “Higher” system (used in Scotland). However, the report's recommendations were rejected by Thatcher as threatening the “gold standard” represented by A level. Although the gold standard still holds sway – and is the principal admissions route to university – the introduction of AS (Advanced Supplementary) examinations in 2001 has, in effect, broadened the curriculum for 16-19 year olds. As exams are taken after one year in the “sixth form” and are, roughly speaking, equivalent to half an A level, students tend to start a two-year sixth form with four of five AS subjects, then boil down to three A levels for the second year. The point as far as English is concerned is that the broadening of the curriculum allows more students to take English Literature, English Language, Media Studies, Drama and/or Theatre Arts; and the AS examinations use theory which “shows understanding of different interpretations of literary texts by different readers [and which] shows understanding of the contexts in which literary texts are written and understood and evaluates the significance of cultural, historical and other contextual influences on literary texts and study”. Note the continuity with the 11-16 English curriculum mentioned above; but also note that university lecturers in English see the new AS level approach as providing a bridge between school and university approaches to English. Whereas A level remains firmly rooted in I. A. Richards’ practical criticism approach and notions of literary “appreciation”, the AS levels take a broader, constructivist perspective.

Thirdly, a recent government consultation document (DfES 2002b), 14-19: Extending Opportunities, Raising Standards, has begun a process which is likely to change the landscape for young people in this age range, and which, in due course, will have implications for English teaching and learning at this level. English is assured of its place at the core of the 14-1 curriculum, but the emphasis on citizenship and work-related learning is going to provide new contexts for the use of language for the whole 14-19 phase. For example, students may spend more time in vocational, work-based situations than they do now in the 14-16 phase, in order to increase motivation; their English studies will be affected accordingly. Readers are referred to a seminal study from the Developing English for TVEI project (Brown et al 1990) – the Technical and
Vocational Education Initiative of the 1980s, which suggested that English could gain much from an expansion and differentiation of its audiences within and beyond the school. Essentially, the government is looking for parity of esteem between the traditional academic routes of study and the newer vocational routes: a parity that has long been absent from the context in England, though evident in Germany and other countries for some time.

THE E-DIMENSION

What about information and communication technology (ICT) and its relationship with English? While the 1980s saw wordprocessing established as the principal application by English teachers of the new technologies and the 1990s brought networked technologies (ICT, the Internet) into the classroom, it is fair to say, as Tweddle summarised in 1997 (Tweddle 1997), that developments in the subject had been fitful up to the late 1990s. Enthusiasts promoted the cause of electronic English while many primary and secondary teachers let it pass them by. The 1997 New Labour victory in parliament, however, marked a pivotal moment in curricular provision in the field – not so much because of Blair’s commitment to “Education, Education, Education” (education policy remains fixed on targets, standards and “diversity”), but more because of a relatively vast injection of money into the system to both provide hardware and wiring to schools via the National Grid for Learning (the metaphor derives from the electricity supply network) and the Lottery-funded scheme to train every teacher in the country in the application of ICT to his or her subject specialism by 2003. The range of capability of English teachers and subject specialists in primary schools, it is fair to say, has moved from the narrow base of wordprocessing to include incorporating the internet, using electronic whiteboards, planning lessons, using spreadsheets and accessing databases for research purposes.

There is still a widespread assumption that ICT has impacted on literacy and English, rather than the relationship being symbiotic. A recent review of research on the topic (Andrews et al 2002) which accessed nearly 200 studies published since 1990 on the impact of ICT on 5-16 year olds’ literacy learning, discovered that there isn’t much good research to prove that networked ICT has improved young people’s literacy. Most of the studies assume there is a positive impact and then go on to describe how that effect takes place. Furthermore, most of the studies work from a paradigm that a) assumes the impact is one-way, that is from ICT to literacy and b) assumes a pre-ICT notion of literacy, that is one that is print-based.

Over the next year, the project – part of the Department for Education and Skills” Evidence-Informed Policy and Practice Initiative (EPPI) – will look at other aspects of the ICT/literacy relationship to see if there are any more interesting results.

Other work on ICT and the English curriculum has been associated with BECTa, the British Educational Communications and Technology Agency, a government-funded institution that promotes ICT in the classroom, the build-up of the national infrastructure for ICT, and research and evaluation into the impact of ICT on practice and policy.
BECTa’s recent report, *Connecting Schools, Networking People: ICT Practice, Planning and Procurement for the National Grid for Learning* (BECTa, 2002) notes that there will be 600,000 projected documents on the National Grid for Learning (NGfL) by 2002. Suggestions from interim evaluations carried out or commissioned by BECTa are that ICT helps schools attain better results in English (and other core subjects) at 11 and at 14, as long as the management of the school and specifically of ICT within the school is good.

Another important report, on the ImpaCT2 project, was due from BECTa in October 2002. This report is the result of a project which has looked at the impact of ICT on core subjects (English, Maths, Science) on the attainment of pupils aged 7-14 in the English system, that is at the end of key stage 2 (7-11) and key stage 3 (11-14) of their school education.

**CURRENT ISSUES AND FUTURE PROSPECTS**

Developing from, and in addition to those mentioned above, what are the current issues facing English in England?

Perhaps first amongst these is the issue of the relationship between English and Media Studies. Political constellations are moving into an alignment which suggests that now might be the time to push forward the case for Media Studies to be at the centre of the curriculum, rather than on its edges. The English and Media Centre held a recent conference with the British Film Institute where it was argued that two pieces of legislation currently out for consultation – the Green Paper on 14-19 Education (www.dfes.gov.uk) and the Draft Communications Bill (www.communicationsbill.gov.uk) – offered an opportunity for a radical refashioning of the curriculum in the light of a political desire to break down the academic/vocational divide. Readers are recommended to look at the English and Media Centre’s website (www.englishandmedia.co.uk) for Cary Bazalgette’s analysis of the position, and to keep abreast of further developments in the area.

It’s good that such radical ideas are being considered, because the state we’re in at present seems like a rather cosy neo-conservative one, despite (or perhaps because of) a New Labour government. There haven’t been many changes to the General Certificate of Secondary Education in English Language and English Literature; classrooms of today still look much like those of the late nineteenth century, despite the computer revolution; the various government strategies to raise literacy standards are based on sound, comprehensive literacy models with traditional pedagogic approaches. It’s a fin-de-siècle scenario, without the decadence.

Most revolutions don’t take place at the turn of the century, however: they come a few years later. What are the prospects for the next few years?

Consider what we do in a week’s work and leisure (if you have any) in terms of communication; and then consider what the English curriculum looks like and how it prepares young people for this world. On the one hand, you probably divide your time between some of the following: writing emails; texting; making phone calls (from land-based or mobile phones); writing reports of various kinds to “get the world’s work done”; watching films, television; manipulating text (and possible sound and
image) on screen; talking to people face-to-face or via video conferencing; reading all the above in different ways and integrating the whole range of experience into the complex mosaic of your lives – possibly with the aid of a Pocket PC which acts as a telephone, wordprocessor, Internet provider and personal diary rolled into one.

On the other hand, consider the curriculum for English in England. Although it attempts to reflect some of the patterns and demands of communication in the world, it remains boxed, selective, formalised, bound by institutional, assessment and pedagogic constraints. That, of course, is its function. It lags behind development in the real world. But periodically, the curriculum has to change to accommodate changes in the world and prepare young people for entering that world. We seem to be entering such a period now. What is needed for a radical revision of the curriculum is probably the disestablishment of schooling as the principal means for delivering learning. I can imagine a situation in the not-very-distant future when 3-19 year olds (the obligation for compulsory education is extending to those edges) attend formal schooling as we know it in the mornings only; in the afternoons they are engaged in individual or group projects; and in the evening the school buildings are devoted to lifelong learning for people of all ages. Fuelled by ICT developments and by a shortage of teachers – plus increasing disaffection with the current models – such developments are already taking place.

REFERENCES