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English: Diverse but Unified

Putting Texts At The Heart of the Discipline



Billy Clark, Marcello Giovanelli and Andrea Macrae argue that ‘language and literature’ points the way towards a coherent vision of English, both at school and at university, as a unified but diverse subject encompassing literature, language, drama, media and creative writing.

“The segregation of sub-disciplines is deeply embedded within the structure of English, and is in some ways unhealthy. We see English as a strong, varied and vibrant area of study which can be further enhanced through a commitment to more integrated work within the discipline.”

Current reforms of English at school, alongside changing messages about the value of English in education, have re-invigorated discussion about the identity and community of English as a school and university subject. A recent article in *Teaching English* (Eaglestone and Kövesi 2014) presented the current situation as both a crisis and an opportunity. In this article we outline a positive vision of English as a unified subject, encompassing the study of literature, language, drama, media and creative writing, with exploration of the production, interpretation and evaluation of texts (in a wide range of media and genres) at its centre. We see a fundamental interconnectedness across parts of the English curriculum as a useful focus for the discipline's future development and progress. We see English as a strong, varied and vibrant area of study which can be further enhanced through a commitment to more integrated work within the discipline. Many people are currently enhancing links, and building new ones, between school and university teaching and learning and we believe that these activities are helping to develop an exciting future for English. This article suggests that a more conscious and explicit interconnectedness will help English to grow stronger and thrive as a subject at the heart of all phases of education.

The Identity of 'English'

English is a diverse and fascinating subject. However, discussion of English often masks its diversity, sometimes by focusing on it as compartmentalised and sometimes by focusing on specific parts at the expense of others. It is often practical to split English into the areas of literature, language, drama, media and creative writing. But this compartmentalisation can foster a false sense of distinctness, and can conceal important kinds of interconnectedness. On the other hand, discussion about 'English' as a field of study is sometimes reduced to the study of either language or, more often, literature. This misrepresents a subject which is broad, creative and fundamentally multidisciplinary, both within itself and in that it often naturally engages with other fields, including cultural history, social anthropology, psychology and philosophy. It is a clear mark of both the interdisciplinary nature of the subject and of the problematic nature of its compartmentalisation that different Higher Education institutions map 'English' out in such varied ways. One thing which all areas of English have in common, though, is that they engage with texts as an object of study. We believe that recognition of this shared interest in text makes it possible to view English as both a diverse and a unified discipline.

The segregation of sub-disciplines is deeply embedded within the structure of English, and is in some ways unhealthy. It can promote a hierarchical evaluation of the different parts of English which appears to shift on no rational grounds over the course of stages of education. This can be seen in the recent reforms to the primary and secondary curricula across all key stages. For example, the emphasis on grammar at key stage 2 does not continue at key stages 3 and 4, and students opting to take A Level English Language will largely do so after having studied a curriculum that offers them little opportunity for explicit descriptive language work. The study of spoken language, a popular

and enabling area of previous GCSE specifications, has been removed from recently-launched specifications, meaning that, as Clayton (2013) argues, the new GCSE English Language takes 'the study of language away from what young people actually do – speak, text, message each other'. The shift to presenting literature (and only certain kinds of literature) as the main or only kinds of texts worth studying at GCSE, is, we believe, worrying and potentially damaging. There is a risk that work in English Language will be seen as mainly functional, important solely for endowing teenagers with communication skills for post-school employment. Studying literature at university, on the other hand, is being increasingly regarded as something of a bourgeois luxury with reduced focus on and appreciation of the contribution of this work to employment prospects.

A Diverse Yet Unified Subject

We are academics working in UK universities who have both studied and taught language and literature as well as 'lang-lit' work (often in the form of 'stylistics'). We also have experience of working with students in schools. We are currently engaged in teaching and research which is located within the area of 'lang-lit'. It is not surprising, then, that we would argue that it is a mistake to conceive of 'English' in a way which prioritises any one area over another. However, we would not suggest that students and researchers focusing on one area need always to consider topics from other areas at the same time. Instead, we are arguing that the diverse range of areas and activities can be seen as unified by a shared interest in texts.

We do, however, think that it would be (and sometimes is) a mistake to prioritise one kind of text and one kind of reading practice over another. This risks neglecting the key role of language in most 'literary' texts, the complex interaction of language and other 'modes' (visual, aural and in some cases tactile) in communication in general, and the problematic concept of the relative 'literariness' of different texts and discourses. There has, of course, been considerable debate about what might constitute literariness and there is no consensus on this. Some approaches see literariness as a property of texts, others as a property of interpretations, others as relating to notions of cultural value, and so on. These different approaches to literariness often in some ways correspond to different perceptions of the nature of what 'English' is and can be. Carter (2004, 1987) suggests that there is a 'cline of literariness' with some texts being more literary than others, pointing out that features which are often thought of as literary appear regularly in a wide range of everyday interactions. Exploring some of the questions around how to define literariness is an important activity in its own right and also helps students to develop their understanding of how language works and of the nature of texts, including their production and evaluation. If we consider the concept and questions of literariness of texts as a core aspect of the subject, we can develop a view of English as more internally coherent and unified than has previously been assumed.

Given the range of topics currently encompassed within English, it is quite natural and not problematic that as a subject it includes work on aspects of language and linguistics, on analyses of specific texts, on cultural concepts, on historical contexts, on writing including

creative writing, on reading, on everyday discourse as well as on various varieties of prose, poetry, drama and film, on other kinds of artworks, and so on. English is a very broad subject with something to say on how ideas develop, circulate and are communicated in a wide range of contexts and on how those contexts themselves develop and change over time. What unites this breadth of topics and interests is texts, and the cline of literariness they share.

Integrated Work On Language and Literature

There are several places where work within English organically combines aspects of what have usually been thought of as language or literary studies. An obvious example is stylistics, which explores how ideas from linguistics (and increasingly from other fields) can help to explain how texts are produced, interpreted and evaluated. We (the writers of this article) are all stylisticians and so it is perhaps natural that we see stylistics as an important area of teaching and research within English. Work within stylistics considers linguistic and literary topics together, whether from the 'bottom up', noticing linguistic features and exploring what their effects are, or from the 'top down', noticing effects and wondering how they are created by texts. Stylistics develops and sharpens reading and writing practices and can also help to develop practices in formal interpretation and evaluation. It leads to the consideration of theoretical and philosophical questions about such topics as the nature of 'literature', how particular phenomena contribute to the production and interpretation of texts (through metaphor, irony, 'voice', etc.), the nature of interpretation and evaluation, and so on. Connecting the linguistic and the literary is a natural and fundamental part of stylistics.

However, stylistics is not the only place within the domain of English where the linguistic and the literary can be unified. This can and often does occur when studying or producing any text or genre, in exploring particular 'moments' (literary or historical), and of course in work on creative writing, which can be seen, sometimes primarily, as a way of exploring ideas about the nature of texts, language, literariness, and so on.

Connections Between Schools and Higher Education

Eaglestone and Kövesi suggest that there has been 'a huge, rarely crossed divide between English at secondary school level and English in higher education' (Eaglestone and Kövesi, 2014). While this might be true as a broad, historic generalisation, at the same time, there are many productive and ongoing partnerships which involve fruitful interaction across the sectors. For example, within English language, Dick Hudson (University College London) and other colleagues have actively encouraged closer work across the sectors, and have had significant input into educational policy and practice, most recently in work on grammar in the Key Stage 2 curriculum. The Linguistics Association of Great Britain (LAGB) has facilitated dialogue between secondary and tertiary colleagues on a wide range of topics and issues. The English and Media Centre frequently draw on academics from higher education to speak at their hugely popular conferences for school teachers on both Language and Literature, and to support their resource publications. Conferences



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for secondary teachers, sometimes simultaneously for teachers in higher education, have been organised recently at the universities of Huddersfield, Lancaster, Middlesex, Reading and Sheffield. Most recently, the University of Nottingham hosted a very successful workshop for teachers on integrating language and literature in the classroom.

At the same time, there is clearly a lot to be done. Our recent research (Clark, Giovanelli and Macrae 2014) found much room for the content of secondary curricula to reflect current developments in English scholarship more fully and to help ensure smoother transition from key stage 5 to undergraduate level. We argued that many of the teaching and learning approaches adopted in schools could be useful for those in higher education. We identified a lack of knowledge, among teachers in both sectors, of the pathway from primary to undergraduate English, which could usefully be addressed. Higher education institutions could be much more aware of what is (and is not) taught within each of the three strands of English at A level, and of how English is approached at key stages 2 to 4. Increased channels of communication between schools and HE could contribute to the health and coherence of the discipline, and to the educational experience of the continuing student.

Eaglestone and Kövesi aimed 'to keep to facts and data; to keep to the real effects of policy changes, and to try to assess all the data in the round'. Despite this, we think that they make one incorrect claim when they suggest that English at A Level is becoming relatively less popular. Looking at the three A levels which

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have ‘English’ in their title, over the last ten years, awarding bodies’ entry records show that the number of students taking English Language at AS and A level has increased radically, and that the numbers taking the English Language and Literature AS and A levels have also grown. English Literature has fallen a little, but can be seen as holding steady (Clark and Macrae 2014; Clark, Giovanelli and Macrae 2014). While future trends are hard to predict, English is still popular at AS and A Levels, and English can be seen as being in a good position to grow in the coming years. Communicating a clear understanding of the content of each of the three A Levels (enabling a more informed assessment of the relative intellectual demands and educational benefits of each), and clarification of their relationships to each other, and to the different arrays of English at HE, can further help to maintain student uptake. Perhaps it is only when English is appreciated as a united whole that the size, strength and potential future of the subject can be recognised, celebrated, and developed.

Some Things We Can Agree On

In 1980, responding to a perception that linguistics was a fragmented field with linguists in perpetual disagreement, Dick Hudson set out to find ‘Some issues on which linguists can agree’. In 1981, he published an article with this name in the *Journal of Linguistics*, listing 83 things on which he thought all linguists could agree. Here, we propose a much more modest list of five statements for English educators:

1. Working with English involves working with texts (understood broadly, to include texts which are spoken, written or in other modes).
2. The notion of ‘literariness’ is open to debate and usually understood as scalar, i.e. texts and other phenomena can be ‘more or less literary’ rather than ‘either literary or not’.
3. There is considerable and fruitful overlap across a range of work in Language, Literature, Media, Drama, Creative Writing, Stylistics, and other areas of English which share an interest in culture, communication and history, all related to an interest in texts (understood broadly, as above).
4. English teachers in all sectors should continue to collaborate and develop a secure understanding of what is being taught from primary education through to degree level courses.
5. Key aims of teachers of all areas of English (and other subjects) include helping students to understand previous work in the field, to develop their own interests, understanding and research, and to understand how their own work relates to the subject more broadly.

In addition, here are five things which we think would help to develop understanding of English as a unified subject from school through to university, and help students to develop both their own work and their sense of the discipline within which it is located:

1. ‘English’ is strongest (in disciplinary, institutional, ideological, political and economic senses) when considered as a whole encompassing English Literature, Language, Drama, Media and Creative Writing. This argues for a principled pedagogy that promotes teaching and learning around a vision of English as a unified discipline in all phases.

2. The introduction of an annual conference, at which teachers and lecturers share developments in curriculum innovation, and in teaching practices in English teaching from primary level through to HE, would make a very significant contribution.
3. HE institutions should contribute to the continued training and development of school teachers through English subject workshops, as previously offered by the universities of Nottingham, Huddersfield and Lancaster in English Language and in Language and Literature.
4. Summaries of content at Key stage 4 and 5 (for example Bleiman 2008) would be very helpful for HE admissions and teaching staff
5. The English Subject Centre was a very good portal for communication and enabled the sharing of knowledge, practices, and pedagogical developments. A similar organisation, with appropriate funding and a broad remit, could work very effectively in collaboration with University English, in its new form, NATE, the HEA and other stakeholders. This could help facilitate and support wide scale interaction and collaboration among FE and HE English teachers and academics.

There is a bright future for English. We just need to work together to create it.

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