

Lessons from the past?

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ABSTRACT: During the years following the Second World War, members of the English teaching community in London, often within the London Association for the Teaching of English, conducted work which led to a “new” English for the emerging comprehensive school system. Such work was rooted in the belief that English teaching should be responsive to the culture, class, language and experience of children. Contrasting this work with the current state of English teaching, this piece considers to what extent the progress made in that post-war period has survived two decades of government intervention in English curriculum and pedagogy.

KEYWORDS: Post-war English curriculum development, London Association for the Teaching of English, “London” English, English and social class, personal growth.

There are times when I feel almost as if I lead a double life within the English teaching community. Sadly, not the superhero/everyday alter ego kind of double life that might enable me to dash from my classroom, don some suitable costume (perhaps with a large exclamation mark on the chest) and single handedly destroy single-level tests or some other such aberration. This is more the sort of double life where I feel as though I am existing in two different worlds. During much of my working life, as a tutor on a Secondary English PGCE course, I see on a regular basis the reality of English teaching for those entering the profession. As Chair of the National Association for the Teaching of English's Secondary Committee, this “here and now” reality is augmented through consultations with examination boards on new GCSE specifications and by representing the Association at QCA curriculum review meetings and the like. I inhabit the second of my two lives when I immerse myself in what is an extended research project into the early history of the London Association for the Teaching of English (LATE). This history, revealing as it does the emergence of a “new” model of English in the decades following the Second World War inevitably leads to a comparison between the then and now. Such a comparison can highlight some difficult questions for our profession, not least of which might be what scope there currently is in the subject for the language, culture, experience and concerns of children to be central to what constitutes secondary English teaching.

THE LONDON CONTEXT

The London Association for the Teaching of English was formed in 1947 under the chairmanship of Perceval Gurrey, then of the London Institute of Education, supported by the likes of James Britton and Nancy Martin. Over its first two decades, the work of those connected with the Association and often carried out as part of LATE's work in study groups, research activities and conferences was critical in developing a model for English teaching now often referred to, for convenience sake, as “London English”, although others have preferred titles such as “English as

Language” or “personal growth”. Often the development of “London English” has been viewed as an alternative paradigm to “Cambridge English”, which has its roots in the work of F.R. Leavis and found voice in the secondary school through the work of people such as Denys Thompson and Frank Whitehead, and the influential *Use of English* journal.

Given the educational backgrounds and concerns of many early LATE members, it is simplistic to suggest, as some do (for example, Ball, Kenny & Gardiner, 1990), that there was some kind of bipolar split in the English teaching world between Cambridge and London positions. However, there are significant differences in the two schools, which reveal the critical underpinning idea of the emerging London model, that the language and experience of children needs to be at the centre of the teacher’s thinking. As has been suggested:

the critique of the Cambridge Leavis position was based on an alternative conception of experience and its relation to meaning, rooted in the immediacy of language rather than traditions of literature...fuelled by the theories and research of James Britton and his colleagues at the London Institute of Education, and by the school experience and classroom practice of members of LATE (Ball, Kenny & Gardiner, 1990, p. 58).

However, rather than “London English” emerging as a direct critique of an existing model of teaching in the subject, which hints at something of a premeditated academic exercise, it is perhaps more helpful to explore the particular context of London in the years following the Second World War. An exploration such as this can begin to reveal the very practical conditions driving those involved in LATE work and cast light on why it was that core ideas about children’s language and experience became central, and did indeed over time, result in a reconceptualising of subject English.

The original membership of LATE was almost exclusively made up of grammar school teachers – indeed, the list has been described by Britton himself as reading like a “select gazetteer of grammar Schools” (1982, p. 176). Given the year of its formation, such a constituency is unsurprising. However, the map of London schooling was to undergo increasingly rapid change in the wake of the 1944 Education Act – popularly called the Butler Act – and in the light of the education element of the London County Council’s London Plan that was published in 1947.

The effects of the Butler Act on the landscape of schooling in London were profound, certainly over the mid to longer term. The Act was the first in British history to make statutory the provision of secondary schooling for all, and this above all is probably its most important and enduring legacy. The Act recommended a tripartite system of secondary education, with modern, technical and grammar schools in the secondary phase. Importantly, however, there was freedom offered to local authorities to determine their own model of provision, and here the London context is particularly important in beginning to create an environment where existing English teaching methodologies began, very quickly, to prove to be less than satisfactory.

As McCulloch (2002) has noted, the London County Council was one of the few authorities that championed an alternative approach, favouring in its school plan a multilateral system, paving the way, ultimately it was envisioned, for genuine comprehensivisation. In their account of the development of the comprehensive

system, Rubinstein and Simon recognise that other counties similarly took the decision to plan for multilateral, or comprehensive, schooling; but what was perhaps different about the London Plan was that it was the educational element of the greater County of London Plan, and that it very powerfully promoted the development of the comprehensive as part of a project for social unity (Rubinstein & Simon, 1973). Indeed, elsewhere, Simon reinforces the idea that the London response to the Butler Act was exceptional in comparison to the remainder of the country (Simon, 1991). Limond suggests that the consultations leading to the London County Council plan for comprehensivisation were inspired by a hope for the enthusiasm and optimism that would be generated for those children who would have been previously hopeless in establishments other than grammar schools (Limond, 2007). In his book which offers a critical overview of post-war educational developments, Jones, too, suggests that London was perhaps the “most innovative of local authorities” (Jones, 2003). London’s response to the Butler Act certainly would appear to have created particular contexts within which the need for speedy curriculum reform would have struck teachers as necessary.

This need for change might perhaps account for the formation of LATE and is heard powerfully in the voices of some of the Association’s earliest members, as they have recounted in interviews what they feel were the driving forces behind their work. John Dixon, who worked at Holloway School and then Walworth School, one of the first so-called experimental comprehensives, recalls:

The immediate problem was what should you do in a comprehensive school about curriculum, and particularly with an English curriculum, how would you reshape it?

And this was a time, too – difficult to conceive of today – when, relatively free from external forces on the curriculum, English teachers had the space genuinely to be “curriculum makers” or “curriculum innovators” – as today’s rhetoric would have it. Simon Clements, a colleague of John Dixon at Walworth, suggests:

It might be that the historians say you were just lucky to be at that point in England’s history because no one was saying you have to teach this or you have to teach that, although there were A level and GCE examinations. I think we were free to invent a new curriculum and there were people saying the comprehensive school needs a new curriculum. It needs a new curriculum that fits it, it’s no good it taking another curriculum. So the invitation was there to create

As comprehensives began to emerge, then, and as the raising of the school leaving age kept new populations within the school system, members of LATE saw a need for a new approach, and felt that they had the “licence” to create this. For some involved in shaping the “new” English, the immediate and pressing concerns of the classroom and an unsatisfactory existing curriculum were viewed in the light of work emerging from other fields, work showing a growing awareness and interest in sections of the community that had perhaps previously fallen beneath the radar. John Dixon remembers:

Part of the context of this is that the Institute of Community Studies were publishing this absolutely fascinating stuff on family and community in East London. Therefore, you got a kind of social life that contained not just the generalisations and tables, but also the quotes and the short extracts of that kind. So the notion of trying to find out

about the sociology of life like that wasn't foreign to us, we'd been learning from the Institute of Community Studies. And the University Left Review Group, with Stuart Hall as a principal pioneer here, and some of his friends, introduced this notion that culture issues were interesting. This chimed in very much with Harold Rosen who thought about working class and oral culture.

And though not all members of LATE would have declared their political leanings as overtly, for Dixon, political ideas and ideals were also critical in informing debate about what needed to be done in schools, tying in with the socialist vision of the London Plan:

Some of us were "Labour Teachers" which was a little pressure group in the Labour Party, and talked about this. In fact we ran a discussion group in North-West London which some of my communist friends joined in to talk about curriculum and the development of the comprehensive.

The effects of the Butler Act, the London Plan and the emerging work on working class culture and experience were, then, creating a backdrop for the development of a "new" English, an English that would respond to the needs of the real school population in London secondary schools. Through the work of LATE in the 1950s and early 1960s we can see this new English begin to evolve and emerge. If, ultimately, one can point to something called London English as a coherent pedagogy, its emergence was through individual projects and campaigns, each designed to tackle head on this need to have an English that would be what might now be called "inclusive".

THE WORK OF THE LONDON ASSOCIATION FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

Nowhere is the desire to create an English sensitive to the culture and experience of what we might call "ordinary children" more evident than in the work of LATE to introduce an alternative English Language "O" Level syllabus and examination (for a full account of this work see Gibbons, 2009). The records of meetings during the time of this development show the frustration of LATE members with an existing London examination clearly not responsive to the children they were facing on a daily basis. Significantly, Harold Rosen, an increasingly influential figure within LATE, led the critique of the existing examination. On topics offered for compositions within the London paper, Rosen remarked:

The sort of children the examiners had in mind were children who visited pen friends abroad, who were chairmen of school dramatic clubs, and who arranged private dances. Was this symptomatic of the examiners' "sympathy" with children? (LATE, 1952).

One answer to this rhetorical question would be yes, of course, but only in relation to a particularly narrow strand of children, certainly not the working-class children with whom Rosen's work became increasingly closely associated.

On the précis passage, included as a central component of the London examination, Rosen further questioned whether the passages were “appropriate to the age and interests of the candidates” (LATE, 1952).

In a recent interview recalling the events, Rosen said:

The précis paper was reduced to a third of its length. What is magic about a third? And I had found out by then it is because the Civil Service do it and if somebody has to go through papers and present them to their boss, they reduce them by a third. And a lot of kids in grammar schools went on to be civil servants. So I went on doing the demolition job. And I was furious actually (from an interview with Dr John Hardcastle and Dr Peter Medway).

Clearly, the model of English supported by the examination system was viewed by Rosen and LATE members as woefully inadequate in terms of the opportunities it offered for the vast majority of children to show their achievement in English. The alternative “O” level finally accepted by the London Board for examination in 1955, proposed, through choice of composition task and reading material, to offer children in the comprehensive schools the opportunity to draw on their own experiences and interests in showing their abilities.

If the work on the alternative “O” Level examination is a clear early indication in terms of assessment of how “London English” was emerging as an English that would be responsive to the needs of real children, other work by the Association shows how other areas of curriculum were developing, fired by similar concerns. Two anthologies were produced through the Association following work in study groups. *Twentieth century short stories* (Barnes & Egford, 1959) came about as a direct result of the LATE group working on the alternative literature “O” level syllabus, who “could find no book of short stories by various writers that fulfilled their requirements” (Barnes & Egford, 1959). The very practical concerns of teachers seeking to change assessment and curriculum can be seen to be at work within LATE, leading to this kind of publication and subsequent dissemination. *Short stories of our time* (1963), edited for LATE by Douglas Barnes, sets out to provide stories for youngsters that are “set firmly in a twentieth-century urban milieu” and makes clear that stories appealing to aspects of life confronting young readers are vital for student engagement (Barnes, 1963). This clearly links in with broader concerns of LATE about the young person’s growth and development. Within this growth and development, literature has an important place, but its role is much more to reflect the concerns of the children and their world. Here it is possible to see the diverging ideas about the importance of literature in the students’ school experience between the Cambridge and London ways of thinking.

Through the 1950s and into the 1960s, LATE’s work considered increasingly diverse areas of English and schooling more generally, as what might be seen as the model of London English emerged. Weekend conferences such as that held in 1962 and grandly titled *Changing concepts of the curriculum: The school, society and the English teacher*, indicate what might be seen as an increasing self-awareness amongst the key members of the Association that a theory of English was emerging from the various strands of work on pedagogy, curriculum and assessment. *Reflections* (Clements, Dixon & Stratta, 1963), the textbook and teachers’ book written directly from Walworth School and, by its authors’ own admission, heavily influenced and

supported by the work of LATE, could certainly be viewed in many ways as the practical embodiment of this new English. Dixon's *Growth through English* (Dixon, 1967), written after the Dartmouth Conference, when English educators from both sides of the Atlantic met together, could be viewed as outlining the theory driving this model of English. However, in an unpublished document written by Harold Rosen in response to a Secondary Schools Examination Consultation, London English is perhaps given its most direct and persuasive definition:

Room must be found in English lessons for pupils to express sincerely their experience, to consider the problems which arise from it....We would expect English work to be rooted in the concerns, hopes and fears, and daily lives of the pupils....The work is not easy for us. Our academic education often does not fit us for the kind of awareness and sympathy demanded (Rosen, 1962).

The gulf between the lives and experiences of teachers and taught is inescapably bound up with ideas of class and culture. Such concerns were dominant in Rosen's subsequent work on working-class language, which challenged Basil Bernstein's ideas of the restricted code. Whether or not, as some claim (for example, Sawyer, 2004), London English became the dominant orthodoxy within England and further afield from the 1960s into the 1970s and beyond is of course debatable. LATE itself went on through this period to consider the increasingly relevant issues in London surrounding multicultural and multiethnic education, and, one could suggest, lost on the way a sense of the development of an overarching theory for English. Even if that is the case, what is clear is that through the work of those within LATE and those connected with the Association, the face of English teaching changed in the two decades following the Second World War so that it became a subject within which those "concerns, hopes and fears" of working-class children became defining components of a pedagogy and curriculum. It wouldn't be stretching the case too far to say that these English teachers believed it to be the responsibility of the subject to empower these children through the validation of their own experience and the harnessing and development of their linguistic capabilities. In such a sense, it was a social as well as an educational project.

THE PAST AS LENSE TO THE PRESENT

The world of English teaching is a very different one today, in so many ways. Since the introduction of the first National Curriculum, there have been two decades of almost continuous change and conflict, within English as within no other subject. The marketisation of education, the advent of league tables, the ever more dominant focus on data generated by high-stakes assessment and testing within a framework of accountability, have brought intense, at times almost unbearable, pressure to the workings of pedagogy and curriculum. In such a context, how far has English been able to preserve the progressive work here described? Is the subject any longer one that can genuinely be seen to be rooted in the "concerns, hopes and fears" of the children that experience it?

Interestingly enough, a number of studies (including Goodwyn & Findlay, 1999; Marshall, 2000) suggest that a model of English as "personal growth" is still one with which very many English teachers most closely align themselves. Elsewhere, though,

it has been suggested that such an allegiance may not necessarily translate into practice. In her account of lesson observations, Bousted has suggested that there is a gulf between the rhetoric of teachers in terms of their professed underpinning ideas and what happens in the classroom. Describing an oral activity which seems superficially to offer students the chance to reflect on personal experience, Bousted suggests:

It was clear, however, that the whole class question and answer introduction, whilst appearing to enable the pupils to relate their own experience to the topic of the lesson, was, in fact, highly controlling (Bousted, 2002).

Observing the teaching of literature, Bousted further observes that students are very carefully led towards what would be a traditional “lit crit” type response, which she associates with the Cambridge School. She suggests that there are tensions within teachers’ definitions of personal growth, and indeed, that the term itself may have inherent contradictions.

Discussing Bousted’s work with my own masters’ students, the vast majority of whom are current secondary English teachers, has suggested that these apparent contradictions are an inevitable result of the current and recent education climate. A number of recent reports, such as *Assessment and testing: Making space for teaching and learning* (Institute for Public Policy Research, 2006) and the Department for Children, Schools and Families’ own Select Committee report *Assessment and Testing* (DCFS, 2008), have underlined what has been evident for many years: the dominance of “high-stakes” testing within a system monitored by an inspection regime increasingly focused on the use of data has led to the inevitable phenomenon of “teaching to the test”. And when such tests focus on a narrow range of skills in reading and writing, as has certainly been the case with Key Stage 3 National Tests, the curriculum narrows in response and the scope for students is lessened. In my own observations of lessons, I’m frequently struck by the preponderance of a narrow range non-fiction “writing types” within lessons or the annotation of poetry anthologies with “official” readings of the text to be used to secure examination success.

We are, however, being told that we are at a critical moment of change. The removal of statutory national testing at Key Stage 3 and rejection of single-level texts as replacement, the introduction of revised GCSE specifications and the implementation of a new National Curriculum with its rhetorical encouragement to be flexible and creative in the design of curriculum might combine to offer the potential for English teachers to promote again a curriculum and pedagogy that is genuinely responsive to the cultures of the children. It is tempting to question the extent to which this might happen, given what can only be described as the damage done to English teaching by successive government’s policies over the past twenty years.

The damaging effect of the tail wagging the dog in terms of assessment and curriculum has become part of English for fifteen years. In comparison, the National Curriculum itself may not be seen to have had as malign affect on the subject. In fact, many now look back with fondness on the first version of the Curriculum, commonly known as the Cox Curriculum (Cox, 1989), acknowledging that it did try to offer some underpinning ideas about notions of English, including in its five models that of “personal growth”. Compared to subsequent rewrites that have tended to restrict

themselves to brief statements on the aims and importance of English, the Cox Curriculum comes across as an extended meditation on the debates surrounding the subject.

As it currently exists, the National Curriculum does of course constrain English teachers in some ways. The reluctance to remove the list of canonical authors, despite repeated calls to do so, has prescribed what is seen as “classic” literature for many. And certainly a model of writing that, until the newest version, still insisted on the curious existence of so-called “triplets” (the writing styles grouped in threes, for example “argue, persuade, advise”) contributed to often formulaic teaching of “writing types”. Significantly, though, the National Curriculum has never genuinely concerned itself with the “how” of English teaching, concentrating instead on the “what” in pursuit of some kind of national content equity for the student body. More recently, however, the introduction of the Secondary National Strategy has ventured into pedagogical territory, and as such this initiative may be seen to have had potentially far greater impact on the direction in which English teaching has gone in recent years.

The Framework for English, the English strand of the National Strategy, was introduced in 2001 as the secondary successor to the Primary National Literacy Strategy. The “what” of English was expressed in the Framework as a bewildering collection of objectives at word, sentence and text levels. The “how” was encompassed in a range of recommended teaching approaches, with a focus on “explicitness”; explicit lesson objectives, direct instruction of reading, the teaching of writing through identification of linguistic features of text-types, and a process of teacher modelling, guided, scaffolded and independent writing. Lessons were to be structured into four parts with starters and plenaries neatly bookending the main sections.

Implementation of the Framework was, unlike the National Curriculum, non-statutory, but a new meaning was given to the word “recommended”. Any English teacher or department wishing to ignore this “recommended” approach would need to show that its own method for English was demonstrably better, with better meaning, ultimately, higher examination results. Faced with a tidal wave of files, folders and videos and an army of consultants, few departments, to the outward gaze at least, felt they could ignore the “recommendations”.

The influence of the Framework on English teaching has been striking, perhaps most notably on what it has done to the teaching of writing, though its effects have spread to other areas. In the light of this, it is difficult to escape the observation that the place of student culture, voice, language and experience within English has been hugely sidelined.

It has been suggested (Hilton, 2001) that the model of writing proposed by the Framework is rooted in the work of George Hillocks (for example, his *Teaching writing as reflective practice*). Elsewhere, I have suggested (Gibbons, 2004) that it might be more profitable to link the roots of the model more directly back to the work of the Australian genre theorists. A reading of the New South Wales Disadvantaged Schools Project, led by Jim Martin and recounted in *The powers of literacy* (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993) demonstrates clearly the Framework’s probable roots. The New

South Wales project used the notion of school text-types, each having identifiable generic features. Making these features explicit through analysis of text would allow children, following modelling and demonstration by the teacher, to achieve mastery of the genre.

The approach was enthusiastically taken up in the first instance by the Primary Literacy Strategy, and subsequently by the Secondary Framework. It was a model of writing that would solve the problems associated with a “process” approach that had supposedly become the dominant methodology through the 1970s and 1980s and had led to the repeated underachievement of certain groups of children.

There is a certain irony here in that what might be seen as opposing pedagogies both espouse an underpinning motivation to bring about an improvement in English for a disenfranchised group of students. The “process” approach might well be aligned to the “growth” model of English and its notions of validating children’s existing language, culture and experience. It was suggested by promoters of the genre approach that this method played into the hands of children who understood the value of literacy, those perhaps starting school as readers and writers already. This approach allegedly failed those students from less literate backgrounds. The New South Wales Project set out to empower these children – for want of a better label the “working class” – by equipping them through explicit instruction in writing with what were seen to be the genres of power. At the time of the introduction of the Framework in England, similar arguments were made as we were prepared for what we were obliged to call the “roll out” of the Strategy. Class was of course not mentioned, but what was made clear was that there was a growing tail of underachievement in English, and that this would be rectified by an approach that moved away from ideas of personal writing and personal experience and towards an approach whose core aim was to ensure that children would quickly learn to write in a variety of predominantly non-fictional genres.

It’s easier to see why a genre approach to writing is attractive to different interested bodies. To understand it at a surface level in the way it was presented by the Strategy creates a deceptively simple model for the teaching of the complex art of writing, and simply bypasses questions about engagement and motivation (never ask why, for example, Year 1 children were asked to engage in instructional writing on how to use a printer as part of the Literacy Strategy’s *Grammar for writing* material). Constructing a model where writing success is defined by successful use of features of a genre facilitates the construction of “objective” mark schemes, which suggest that the value of a piece of writing is identified via a dissection of its component parts. It allows errors to be identified and targets to be set, with associated nods to a superficial understanding of assessment for learning. But I don’t think we need to look too far to find the problems in the way this approach has been taken up by secondary English teachers.

The New South Wales Project was not in a genuine sense an attempt to articulate a theory of English teaching. It centred on children of primary-school age and the ideal was that children would quickly acquire those skills necessary to access writing across the curriculum. It did not really concern itself with narrative or other types of writing we might want to encourage children to do in English; its focus was non-fiction school genres. To learn about the genres would take a degree of immersion in that

text-type, not – as has often been the case in its Framework incarnation – superficial analysis of one, pre-chosen model text that magically, but probably fictitiously, manages to embody all the necessary features. Control of the genres would in the long term, in theory, allow them to go on to subvert and challenge the institutions of power and enable them to be fully fledged citizens.

My sense is very much that there has been an over-reliance and over-extension of the genre approach to writing, so much so that it has become a shaky organising principle for the English curriculum in secondary schools. All texts have become text-types, extracts are studied for the identification of features, reading has to, inevitably, lead to writing, and that writing must be framed within a defined style. Far from subverting and making genres their own, students right up to GCSE level are reproducing the ideal “persuasive letter” or “information leaflet”. These are, of course, over-generalisations, but not ones that I cannot support with substantial anecdotal evidence. Scope for children to reflect on their own experience and culture, make their concerns, hopes and fears central to their experience of English are not there in the way they were in the vision of LATE

It may well be that recent policy and curriculum documents are allowing English teachers more scope for teaching the subject in a less prescribed way. There is, however, a problem if two decades of imposition have led to such a state of deprofessionalisation that to build an English curriculum based on core principles is a step beyond the profession. The Framework for English never really invited English teachers to explore or debate its underpinning theory of English, if one really believes it has one. The recently renewed Framework, I have suggested (Gibbons, 2008b) has even less of a detectable theory. Without explicit theory, the practice of English does run the risk of becoming a sequence of perhaps related, perhaps unrelated, strategies – possibly, or more likely possibly not, working towards some overall aim. We currently have a slimmed down National Curriculum and Framework that are very difficult to read for founding principles. The risk is that what is “produced” as English for children, from these documents and their twenty-year legacy, is a confused hybrid, perhaps rooted in a subject philosophy that differs markedly from that of those who teach it. And in whose interest is such an English working? The fact remains that the lowest-achieving groups of children are Gypsy/Romany traveller and white, working-class boys – the very groups, one could argue, that were supposed to benefit from the explicit genre approach to teaching English.

In an interview focused on his involvement in LATE, Tony Burgess, who worked at the London Institute alongside Harold Rosen suggested:

Relatively few people think of trying to create an overall body of theory for English teaching. Or if they do, then that’s the job of government or public report. But it seemed to me to be the job of LATE to try and build a sort of framework, of ongoing knowledge and theory.

If the government is serious about giving the profession a greater voice in curriculum making, then this ought to be a stimulus to do exactly what Burgess suggests, to try to create an “overall body of theory” for English teaching. For many English teachers, this would include, as the London School proposed, a notion that the subject was a place for children from all backgrounds, in particular those whose culture might be

furthest from the culture of school, to tell their stories, relate their experience and use their language. If such things have, as I believe, been increasingly eroded over the past twenty years, then the very least we need to do is critically evaluate the course of that twenty years and begin to ask hard questions about the gains talked of in terms of “standards” by the powers that be. I would hope that a chance to reconceptualise English would mean a return to those principles that drove the work of those within LATE, for I find little or nothing in the work they did that lacks relevance for an English teacher today.

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