

The National Association for the Teaching of English  
*Post-16 Committee*

# text : message

The future of A Level English

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**NATE**

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# *Preface*

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*John Hodgson*

The Tomlinson Committee's deliberations on the future of the 14-19 curriculum (Tomlinson, 2004) provide a timely opportunity to reflect on the trajectory of A level English studies. The NATE Post-16 committee have brought diverse experience to this task, and our work is informed by a detailed survey of practitioners working in schools and colleges in England and Wales. We have tried to think outside the box of traditional UK practice, and to adopt an international and historical perspective.

Inevitably, not all of us would agree with every detail of what follows. In recognition of this, we have attributed each section to its individual writer. We are agreed, however, that the present provision of an (often abstract) choice between *Language* and *Literature* syllabuses denies many students linguistic and cultural understandings that should be part of educational entitlement for life in the twenty-first century.

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# 1. *Introduction: Why do we need to rethink A Level English?*

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*John Hodgson*

The introduction of new specifications for A Level English\* in 2000 had a clear symbolic significance. As part of the overall *Curriculum 2000* for schools and colleges in England and Wales, it demonstrated a commitment to provide courses in English studies appropriate for post-secondary students growing into the new century. In the case of A Level, the changes were even more significant than those at earlier stages such as GCSE; Curriculum 2000 marked the first wholesale and systematic rewriting of A Level curricula since the introduction of the examination in 1951 (Edexcel 2004).

The changes affected both the structure of assessment (across all subjects) and the nature and content of individual subject curricula. Each of the three subjects – *English Language*, *English Literature*, and *English Language and Literature* – contained significantly new features that marked a break with the past. *English Literature*, for example, specified the study of the socio-cultural contexts of a literary text, and of the plurality of interpretations contingent on the cultural position of the reader. *English Language* consolidated much of the experimental work in this relatively new A Level, while *English Language and Literature* was a genuinely new subject, integrating linguistic and literary approaches to textual study for the first time in a widely available syllabus.

As expected, the new curricula attracted criticism (as well as support) from the start. Some of this was to do with questionable assumptions about cultural value: “I did not become an English teacher,” opined one teacher, “in order to study newspapers.” As the new specifications bedded in, however, two broad strains of discontent became apparent. One was to do with the practicalities of the teaching and assessment structure. The modular pattern was new for English, and imposed teaching methods that seemed to commodify the subject into teachable packets. The reduction in coursework allowed by the new specifications restricted imaginative classroom practice that had been developed by teachers over many years. Moreover, concerns about the reliability of terminal examination assessment proved justified by the debacle of the 2002 summer examination, which led to the setting up of the Tomlinson *Inquiry into A Level Standards* (Tomlinson, 2002).

The other strain of concern is what particularly concerns us here. It is that the new specifications do not in fact provide an appropriate English studies curriculum for the beginning of the twenty-first century. They represent (rather like the AS/A2 curricular structure itself) a yoking together of “old” and “new” elements – a curricular patchwork that fails to provide a coherent vision of the subject English.

Although the *Literature and Language and Literature* specifications include assessment objectives requiring some awareness of the historical context of literature, and of possible plural readings, there is little sense of the radical changes in the theory of English studies that have transformed the subject in higher education. The specifications seem ignorant of the striking advances in subject theory and pedagogy that characterise English studies in Australia and elsewhere. And they do not provide a ready means by which students can become creative and critical workers in language, citizens in a world of globalised digital communication.

We make this argument in detailed and specific ways in the pages that follow. We are concerned, though, not to propose a utopian scheme that would be found unacceptable or unworkable by the profession. In fact, much of what we say has come out of the responses by classroom teachers and lecturers to a detailed questionnaire sent out to NATE members teaching post-16 students in schools and colleges. We asked these colleagues to specify, by a detailed response to 22 suggested aims of English teaching, elements of their philosophy as teachers of English. We then asked them a further 24 detailed questions in order to discover how far the new specifications are helping practitioners achieve these aims.

The first section of this short book details the possibilities and exigencies of the current situation as described by our respondents. We go on to give a critical account, informed by these responses, of the content of English studies at A Level. Assessment issues are addressed next. A survey of alternative patterns follows. Finally, we outline a redefinition of A Level English as an integrated course. We hope that this critique and these proposals will seem cogent and coherent, and that they will inform the changes in the post-16 curriculum that will follow the publication of the Tomlinson report.

\*Note: Where the sense requires, we use the term “A Level” to include “AS level”, the first year qualification of the two year A Level course.

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## 2. Teachers' and Lecturers' Views of A Level English

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*John Hodgson*

In April 2002, we sent questionnaires to NATE members working in Post-16 education. The survey was also advertised on the NATE website and the Internet *English Language List*. We received 45 responses. The painstaking way in which most of the respondents answered our detailed questions indicated the seriousness and concern with which these colleagues take their work of teaching A Level English.

The results are summarised in the following sections. The detailed tabulated data are available on the NATE website, at [www.nate.org.uk](http://www.nate.org.uk).

### 2.1 The pattern and range of AS/A Level specifications currently taught in schools and colleges

Our first question attempted to discover the patterns of specification choice in schools and colleges. The post-2000 curricular overhaul presents three main English subjects for centres' choice. The pattern of choice over the 45 centres was as follows:

Teaching <i>Literature</i> alone	Teaching <i>Language</i> alone	Teaching <i>Language</i> and <i>Literature</i> alone (1 subject)	Teaching <i>Language</i> and <i>Literature</i> (2 subjects)	Teaching <i>Literature</i> and <i>Language</i> and <i>Literature</i> (2 subjects)	Teaching <i>Language</i> and <i>Language</i> and <i>Literature</i> (2 subjects)	Teaching all three subjects	Total
16	1	8	13	0	1	6	45

Of these, choice of specification was given as follows:

	<i>Literature</i>	<i>Language</i>	<i>Lang &amp; Lit</i>
AQA Spec A	13	2	4
AQA Spec B	4	11	8
EdExcel	7	7	2
OCR	8	1	0
WJEC	0	0	1

On the basis of this small sample, then, *Literature* remains the most popular English subject for those centres (just under a third of those canvassed) who offer only one specification. However, many centres choose to teach *Language and Literature*,

either in the combined specification or as separate subjects, and the total of these (27) significantly exceeds those centres offering *Literature* alone. Moreover, six of the forty-five centres offer all three subjects to their students.

National statistics (AQA 2003) show that *Literature* is by far the most popular A level English subject, taken annually by about 50,000 candidates, although this number is slowly declining. Nationally, about 15,000 candidates take each of *Language* and *Language and Literature*, and so the total annual candidature for English subjects is approximately 80,000. National figures are not available to indicate the combinations of subjects taken by centres, but it is likely that our sample approximates to wider patterns: where only one subject is offered, it will usually be *Literature*, but many centres will offer a choice or combination.

## 2.2 Teachers' and Lecturers' views of A Level English Studies

Our second question asked respondents to judge the importance of 24 aspects of English studies, and then to rate their chosen specifications for their success in providing for these aspects. Taking the first part of this question first, respondents' answers were as below.

### 2.2.1 Ability to compose for various purposes and audiences

Twenty-three respondents, almost all teaching *Language* in one form or another, thought this important or very important. Colleagues teaching *Literature* were less concerned, and nine respondents thought it unimportant. This articulates the divide between those who take a traditional approach to literature as important for its meaning rather than as a model for students' own production, and those who wish to foster students' own writing in different contexts.

### 2.2.2 Ability to construct coherent literary essays

This gained a high valuation (26 respondents thought it important or very important, and only four thought it unimportant) even from those who did not teach a discrete *Literature* specification. Clearly the literary essay still holds a high status in work at this level.

### 2.2.3 Ability to read critically

This gained the highest "very important" (34) rating of any question (though three thought it unimportant). Critical reading is the aspect of A Level English studies that most respondents agreed to be crucial.

### 2.2.4 Awareness of literary form and genre

A majority (33 out of the total 45) thought this important (10) or very important (23). There is a similarly high level of support for "awareness of the relation between form/structure and meaning". Most colleagues now insist that literary response must focus on the formal and generic characteristics of the work. This is



in tune with the requirements of the specifications, and shows that genre approaches to textual study have gained much support amongst the profession.

#### 2.2.5 Awareness of how literature works within culture

The majority of correspondents (14) gave this a middle rating of importance, with 3 thinking it unimportant and 12 thinking it very important. This is in keeping with the rating given to “literary theory” and to “knowledge of literary/social/artistic movements” (see the comment below).

#### 2.2.6 Awareness of the relation between form/structure and meaning

Again a great majority thought this aspect important (8) or very important (25). This might not have been so much the case in an earlier generation, when “presentation” and “representation” were not key terms in linguistic and literary study. This supports the finding in 2.2.4 above.

#### 2.2.7 Commenting on one’s own work

Twenty-eight thought this important or very important, but a sizeable number (12) gave it a lower rating, four regarding it as unimportant. It appears that some colleagues are less than enthusiastic about students’ commenting on their own writing. It may be that, like D.H. Lawrence (1936), we should “trust the tale, not the teller”, and value more highly the inexplicit understanding expressed in language production.

#### 2.2.8 Comparison of literary works

This did not gain such a high rating as some of the other elements, though 22 thought it important (12) or very important (10). This practice of detailed literary comparison seems more enshrined in A Level practice than in practice at other levels, including HE.

#### 2.2.9 Conversation analysis

26 respondents gave this a middle to high level of importance, a larger number than one might have expected, given the number of centres represented that offer only *Literature*. Perhaps some of these respondents are thinking of fictional conversations? In either case this suggests a clear interest in language use in everyday life.

#### 2.2.10 Creative Writing

Interest in Creative Writing was more muted than might have been expected, considering the frequent calls over the years for such writing to be encouraged by both *Literature* and *Language* syllabuses.

#### 2.2.11 Discourse Analysis

This gained a mixed response, eight respondents regarding it as unimportant while 25 rated it important or very important. This seems to reflect the varied awareness at A Level of an aspect of language and literature study that has had a major impact on practice in HE.

#### 2.2.12 Integrating language and literary study

This gained a muted, moderate response, though 16 respondents thought it quite important. Apart, presumably, from the evidence of the eight centres that teach the combined *Language and Literature* specification, these results may indicate a lack of conviction about combined studies amongst practitioners.

#### 2.2.13 Knowledge of literary/social/artistic movements

The majority thought this quite important, though only 7 gave it the highest rating. This again points to a difference between practice at this level and at HE, where such knowledge is a *sine qua non*. It is hard to see how one can approach the synoptic paper without a strong grasp of period, genre and the *zeitgeist*, and some of the difficulties colleagues report with this paper (see below) may derive from this. In this respect, the responses to the next question are illuminating.

#### 2.2.14 Knowledge of literature from different periods

28 respondents thought this important or very important. The apparent contradiction with the results of the previous question suggests that English teachers tend still to see literature as discrete works rather than as existing within a cultural history. That is, they feel that students should have a wide literary knowledge, but not necessarily a strong sense of history and cultural context. The form of traditional syllabuses is partly responsible for this, and it should be questioned how far the new specifications encourage a different approach.

#### 2.2.15 Literary theory

The previous view is supported by the low importance given to literary theory, 14 respondents seeing this as of low or no importance, and only five rating it as very important. Again, there is a dissonance here between practice at 16+ and in HE.

#### 2.2.16 Understanding the relation between text and context

#### 2.2.17 Understanding the variety of possible interpretations and the reasons for these

The high ratings given to these suggest, however, that even if literary theory *per se* is not considered important, two of its key concepts are. It seems that the gap between A Level and HE is partially bridged in practical classroom approaches, even where teachers look askance at literary theory.

- 2.2.18 Understanding language and gender
- 2.2.19 Understanding language acquisition
- 2.2.20 Understanding language and power
- 2.2.21 Understanding language change
- 2.2.22 Understanding language variety

The majority of respondents thought the various linguistic/social understandings important, although a minority thought them of low or no importance. The literature/language divide – or the divide between approaches to “English” implied in these two subject names – persists.

## 2.3 Effectiveness of the various specifications in providing for the various aspects of English studies

We next asked respondents to rate how well their specification provides for teaching these understandings. You will find on the NATE website ([www.nate.org.uk](http://www.nate.org.uk)) a specification-by-specification analysis of these ratings, with additional comments made by our respondents.

## 2.4 Teachers’/lecturers’ further comments on practical considerations

Our fourth question invited respondents to elaborate on their experience by writing a paragraph on each of three topics: classroom practice, assessment practice, and resource needs. We have summarised these comments in relation to each of the three subject areas.

### 2.4.1 English Literature

Literature teachers and lecturers expressed mixed responses to the modular structure. A majority felt modularisation created a lack of coherence in the course, but several felt it kept the pace up and gave students feedback on their progress. Some respondents commented that the assessment criteria helped students understand what they had to achieve, but one suggested: “The dominating list of AO’s can skew discussion in class.” Most felt the AS examination came too early in the summer term, and created problems of motivation and organisation for the remaining weeks of the academic year. Few concurred with the one centre that found the last weeks of year 12 useful for starting A2. Many complained that having examinations in January and summer lost several weeks of essential teaching time, a problem exacerbated by what one respondent called a “culture of retakes”. Several colleagues used the term “madness” to describe the reduction in the length of examinations and the practice of scheduling two shorter examinations back-to-back. The “closed book” paper was generally felt to be a retrograde step with no rationale. There was widespread dissatisfaction with the lack of opportunities for wide reading. It was felt that candidates read fewer texts than in the past. Some respondents noted the attempt to find new forms of coherence but felt that these had not sufficiently materialised. In particular, many respondents wished for more guidance and support on the synoptic module.

#### 2.4.2. English Language

Respondents teaching *English Language* felt that the modular structure gave coherence of a kind, but also encouraged a utilitarian approach to learning where, as one teacher put it: “Students expect to have defined chunks of learning for each module.” Several respondents thought that the structure made for too narrow a focus on discrete aspects of language, without adequate over-view. “Language is progressively understood,” one respondent said. “Development and integration are curtailed and hampered by modularisation, and cross-referencing between topics is hampered.” It was recognised that the synoptic unit attempted to overcome this, but that further support in teaching this would be welcome. The structure of the course over two years caused much concern. “The A2 year is focussed and manageable, but the AS year is highly problematic,” wrote one respondent. “There is little time to revise and revisit, and the mismatch between GCSE and AS Language specifications is cruelly exposed.” A colleague teaching the EdExcel specification felt that this offered a neat balance of skills (in AS) and knowledge (in A2). Several respondents felt that the 50/50 balance of marks was inappropriate, and that the nature of the subject meant that the majority of marks should be gained in year two of the course. The most common concerns were problems of assessment. Examinations and retakes took up a disproportionate amount of time. One centre avoided this issue by not entering candidates for any assessment until the end of the second year – unless they intended to leave at the end of year 12. Colleagues generally valued the element of original writing, but some felt it took too much time, and several regretted the practice of requiring a commentary. A few centres welcomed the support offered by the internet-based A Level Language List. There was some support for but more hostility to study guides.

#### 2.4.3 English Language and Literature

Teachers and lecturers who had embarked on combined *Language and Literature* courses expressed support for the idea of combination. However, they echoed many of the problems felt by those working with the discrete *Literature* and *Language* specifications. “We adopted this spec for a variety of reasons which are proving valid,” wrote one respondent, “but we are concerned that A/L English is now less about words and more about exams.” The modular structure and assessment objectives helped teachers and students to focus (one small FE centre wrote of the advantages of quick feedback for their mature students), but more assessment inevitably left less time for teaching. Again, problems with the summer term were identified: “Short exams bitty, too early in summer, teaching time wasted, students disappear!” wrote one respondent. Another wrote: “Shortening exams is a nonsense, as is putting two 1 ½ hour exams back to back.” A colleague working with the AQA B specification thought that the course was better organised than the previous version, but that shortage of time led to rushed teaching and prevented a broad approach. This specification was criticised for limiting its approach to Shakespeare to a focus on talk. A centre following AQA A wrote that the specification was too fragmented, and that, through lack of time, they did not feel they were giving students a solid grounding in language analysis. There was less time for enrichment activities. Again, a “retake mentality” was identified that increased pressure and lost any advantage derived from spread assessments. Some respondents felt that students were giving less time to extra-curricular activities. As regards resources, several respondents

expressed a need for what one centre described as a “ broad sweep guide to philosophical/cultural movements”. Others asked for a revision guide specifically related to the specification requirements for Language study. Again, it was broadly felt that centres needed support for the synoptic paper. Two centres said they would appreciate a visit from a moderator to appraise their teaching.

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### 3. *The Content of A Level English*

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#### 3.1 Survey Respondents' Views of the Curriculum

*John Hodgson*

A key point of our survey was the attempt to determine teachers' and lecturers' own sense of the nature and priorities of English studies, and how far the new specifications helped them to teach these. In other words, we have made a content analysis of the specifications from the practitioners' point of view. This throws into relief several key issues.

Teachers of *English Literature* generally wanted the specifications to put more emphasis on knowledge of literary, social and artistic movements. At the same time, they thought that knowledge of literature from different periods was more important than knowledge of literary movements. This encapsulates an aspect of English studies that is particularly in transition at the present time. The tradition of A Level teaching and examining is to focus on isolated texts rather than to position these texts within wider social and cultural processes. This is reflected in our respondents' emphasis on knowledge of literature from different periods. However, our respondents are aware of the limitations of this approach, and aware that practice in Higher Education is very different. They wish the specifications to put more emphasis on a coherent understanding of the relation between literature and culture.

Teachers of *English Language* generally regarded critical reading as being a skill of utmost importance. However, they were not persuaded that the English Language specifications placed sufficient emphasis on this. Views varied as to the importance of discourse analysis, and as to the efficacy of the specifications in providing for work in this. Again, this encapsulates a transitional aspect of English studies. Critical literacy is becoming universally acknowledged as a principal objective of our work. In Higher Education, this activity is identified with discourse analysis: the process of identifying patterns of linguistic and social practices. Some of our respondents make this link, and some do not.

Teachers of *English Language and Literature* were the most satisfied with their specifications' performance in relation to their ideals. They raised doubts about the specifications' provision for teaching literary movements and certain aspects of language study, but overall they were content with the way in which the specifications fulfilled their aspiration towards an 'English' that integrated the insights and disciplines of literary studies and of linguistics.

## 3.2 The Constitution and Coherence of A Level English

### 3.2.1 A Level English in Context

*Gary Snapper & John Hodgson*

The results of our survey highlight a number of issues about the constitution and coherence of the subject English at A Level which have been rehearsed at various points in the development of the English curriculum over the last thirty years or so, but which it is now timely to revisit. These issues stem from the fact that neither the English Language nor the English Literature specifications, nor teachers' approaches to them, are consistently and securely grounded in the nature of English studies as it has developed in HE. Furthermore, the two subjects are not consistent in the ways in which they diverge from HE, or in the ways in which they relate to the curriculum that precedes A Level. Clearly, such issues have considerable implications for teacher training and subject knowledge as well as curriculum development.

The reasons for this situation are not far to seek. English studies in HE have over the last thirty years been the subject of intense debate as to their nature and purpose. The change in the university study of English has been profound, as ideas from language studies, historical studies, gender studies and psychoanalysis have transformed the subject. No such process has taken place within English studies at preceding levels. English at A level has continued, until relatively recently, to mean English Literature, and an approach to literature that has changed little (save some expansion of the canon and of modes of assessment) since before the Second World War. Frustration at this limited scope led to the development in the 1980's of English Language syllabuses, which offer what is in many ways a different content and methodology to English Literature. Thus we have essentially two subjects, one relatively ancient and one relatively modern, configuring English as a dichotomy: Language and Literature.

### 3.2.2 A Level English Language

*Jane Bluett*

A Level *English Language* has existed for over twenty years. It is no longer regarded as a new subject: it is very popular with students (particularly so with adult learners) and A Level Language teachers are distinctly enthusiastic about its delivery, as a glance at the internet discussion forum *The A Level Language List* will show. In spite of this, well over twice as many students still enter for *English Literature* at Advanced level. It would be easy to assume that Literature is simply the more popular option, but a closer look at the picture reveals a more complex situation.

#### 3.2.2.1 The Institutional Context of A Level English Language

Most teachers of English are Literature specialists. Although the picture is changing as increasing numbers of English graduates take Language modules at university, Literature specialists predominate. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some teachers still have a fear of the unknown when approaching the content of Language courses.

The compartmentalisation of English studies thus has its effects in teachers' subject knowledge.

There is little time on PGCE courses to consider the nature of English Language at A Level. The need to give all students some post 16 experience is being addressed and all students must now show evidence that they have "delivered" A Level. However if a school or college does not offer *English Language* A Level, students cannot access it. It is a hit and miss matter as to whether a PGCE student gains any real experience of the subject.

Small A Level centres worry that to offer more than one English subject will split numbers. Teachers in such centres are concerned that Literature courses will be adversely affected. The experience of large sixth form centres, however, demonstrates that student aptitude and interest is a significant factor, and some claim that those who enrol for *English Language* differ in kind from those who enrol for *Literature*.

Another disincentive for the study of Language is the question of University admission policies. Even now, some universities (and students) are misinformed about the status of *English Language* as an A Level. Awareness of the value of Language courses is much greater than formerly, but advisers still need to clarify to students the possible routes of progression. Advice is also often lacking to GCSE students, who are often unclear about the different strands of English, sometimes assuming that English Language at A Level is simply a continuation of GCSE whereas Literature is something other. Again, teachers' preconceptions are crucial here.

If separate *Language* and *Literature* courses at A level are to continue, attention needs to be paid to:

- Progression: The relation between pre 16 English study and advanced study needs to be made coherent to students.
- Teacher training: English specialists need to be specialists across all three strands (*English Language*, *English Literature* and *English Language and Literature*).
- Choice: Centres must not be allowed to limit student choice post 16. Teacher specialism and preference cannot be allowed to restrict progression in English.

#### 3.2.2.2 Why English Language at A Level?

A strong claim can be made that *English Language* is the most practical, empowering and vocationally relevant of the three strands. It takes student experience of their own language and places this within a range of social and historical frameworks. Students working at whatever level are enabled to place their own language experience within the wider social context. It also provides ample opportunity for them to access a wide range of language varieties and to explore these within an analytical framework. The course's overriding virtue is the breadth of the language experience provided.



### 3.2.2.3 The Vocational Context of A Level English Language

An A level course in *English Language* is highly relevant to a potential teacher. Early literacy and language use within the teaching context are integral components. The research strand (for example, the Data Investigation project in AQA Specification B) allows students to explore language use in a chosen field, and they frequently use this opportunity to investigate a possible future profession. This is genuine research with complete student ownership - not simply coursework - and provides a model for the project work currently being considered by the Tomlinson Committee. It could well be argued that A Level *English Language* should be a prerequisite of initial teacher training, a move that would certainly solve the problem of student access to the whole of the post 16 English curriculum.

### 3.2.2.4 Writing and Editing

Ironically, A Level *English Literature* is the only course at this level that gives students no accreditation for their own writing. The process of imaginative writing is strangely absent from the course. Students gain good models through reading literary texts, but, paradoxically, do not have the opportunity within Literature courses to develop their own authorial voice(s).

One of the key strengths of both the *Language* and the *Language and Literature* specifications is their insistence that students engage in a range of complex writing tasks and develop a critical approach to their own work. By exploring each stage of the writing process - from inception through production, drafting and editing to publication - students are encouraged to become autonomous writers. Audience and purpose are embedded concepts in every module, to a far greater degree than they are in the Literature specifications.

### 3.2.2.5 World Englishes

Citizenship remains a key concept in the developing curriculum. A student studying *English Language* at A Level has to consider explicitly not only the implications of their own language use but also the development of English in both global and historical contexts. In a globalised world that demands more teachers of the English Language, this course provides students with both the means and the contextual sensitivity to engage with the wider debate.

### 3.2.2.6 Curriculum Structure

The current structure of delivery implemented by Curriculum 2000 is problematic for A Level English Language. Language learning is not a linear process; neither can the language be neatly divided into assessable chunks. The course is by nature holistic. The modular approach has been creatively addressed through the specifications but concerns about schemes of work and the assessment cycle can restrict the inherent creativity of delivery that the subject allows. Again the question of teacher training is crucial. English Language should be seen clearly as in many ways a continuation of English practice at Key Stage 1-4.

### 3.2.2.7 English Language in Curriculum 2000

Curriculum 2000 has had a dramatic impact on A Level *English Language*, and mostly for the better. Every student should have the opportunity to explore their own language at all stages of education and it is time that all students had access to this opportunity post 16. The question to be considered is how this can be achieved, given the problems identified in the above paragraphs and the continuing hegemony of *English Literature* in the A level structure.

### 3.2.3 A Level English Literature

*Gary Snapper*

The A Level course that raises most questions about its internal coherence is *English Literature*. As we have seen, a frequent concern of teachers of A Level *Literature* is that the specifications do not deal adequately with broad aspects of the subject such as the social and cultural contexts of literature. On the other hand, teachers are often paradoxically supportive of the almost exclusive emphasis of the specifications on the close reading of a small number of lengthy texts studied in isolation from each other – an emphasis which contributes largely to the course's lack of breadth.

The changes to the content of the *English Literature* course brought about by Curriculum 2000 are generally agreed to have constituted a minor improvement in this respect, the greater emphasis on context and interpretation in the course as a whole having been widely welcomed. However, the course structure considerably undermines this improvement. The assignment of the context and interpretation assessment objectives only to certain papers seems illogical, suggesting that a consideration of these issues is somehow seen as an added extra rather than an integral part of literary study. There has also been a considerable lack of clarity from examination boards about exactly what is required in the way of knowledge and understanding for these assessment objectives, and often a wide gulf between specifications and guidance notes and the ways in which exam questions and marking schemes are actually framed. Furthermore, the modular framework in itself seems to impose an illogical structure on the course, with little sense of meaningful progression from one module to the next, whilst – despite the synoptic unit and some concessions to the idea of comparative study by genre or topic – the traditional emphasis on the atomistic study of individual texts continues to dominate the course, with the texts themselves (rather than literary ideas illuminated and exemplified by texts) as the central focus.

Despite some broadening of its canonical base, then, and some concessions towards notions of context as a central aspect of literary study, *English Literature* A Level has still not made significant moves towards the linguistic, historical and cultural positions which now underlie English Studies, after over thirty years of change and development in the universities, and which pose vital questions regarding the nature of culture, language and texts in society. Its heavy emphasis on the atomistic study of a narrow range of substantial texts (albeit a range which is wider than it has been) allows only a narrow conception of what literature is and has been, and makes it hard for the subject to deal with wider questions concerning the relationships between reading, literature, the media and society, and key concepts such as genre, narrative and literary movements.

Perhaps the most serious consequence of this is that A Level *Literature* does not position itself explicitly in relation to the aesthetic, cultural and linguistic pluralism of a society in which students – and teachers – have to negotiate a cultural landscape more complex than that suggested by the course as it stands. The course, for instance, does not allow for the study of literature in translation; for creative responses to literary texts; for the study of popular fiction, or of “media” texts; for theatre in performance. Including these elements in some way would imply acknowledgement of broader, less nationalistic and less reverent conceptions of literary study. Nor does it provide even a basic grounding in essential modern literary notions such as linguistics, cultural studies and post-colonialism (though, interestingly, the *Advanced Extension Award* in English has made some progress here). Imaginative and progressive approaches to pedagogy can, of course, make a huge difference – but these are unlikely to happen widely without firm guidelines from exam boards and curriculum authorities in the shape of imaginative and progressive syllabuses and assessment.

A Level *English Language*, on the other hand, (although, as we have seen, it could also be more explicit in its relationship to the discourses of English in HE) continues to provide an accessible yet challenging introduction to the study of language in society within a framework which allows students to comprehend and relate issues concerning language, texts and society, to engage in close textual study, and to practise original writing in a variety of forms and styles; A Level *Media Studies* does something similar with an emphasis on media rather than language. Meanwhile, the newly conceived A Level *English Language and Literature* (the best thing to come out of Curriculum 2000) has demonstrated how a linguistic approach can nourish literary study (and vice versa), and is a great improvement on the previous version of the subject. Perhaps, then, if A Level English Literature is to move forward as a separate subject, we might envisage a course that provides a broad introductory framework to genre, narrative and form, language and culture, and creative writing, as well as the close textual study which presently dominates?

Meanwhile, it is not just higher education and other A Level subjects with which A Level *English Literature* is at variance. At Key Stage 3 (although the discredited tests continue to exert a baleful influence), the National Curriculum remains relatively integrated: teachers are freer to combine and relate the study of language, literature and media than they are at GCSE. It is at this level that “literature” is separated from “language” and “media” for assessment and, inevitably, for teaching. Despite the functionalism of the National Literacy Strategy and the Framework for English, the emphasis on literacy at KS2 and KS3 has placed literature in perspective with other forms of discourse in a way which interestingly prefigures the formulation of English in Higher Education, and perhaps suggests an approach to language, literature and discourse which might inform all manifestations of English from primary school to university.

Our analysis suggests that it is time for some brave and radical reformulation of the English subjects at A Level to take place. Do we, for instance, need entirely separate specialisms in literature, language, or even media, at this stage? An integrated English course with specialist options would provide an introduction to language, literature and culture for all, and allow for more than adequate coverage of a subject

specialism enhanced by a clear epistemological framework – a framework which could provide a valuable link between the experience of English at school, at university and in teacher training, as well as a socially and culturally appropriate preparation for employment and citizenship.

### 3.3 Writing

*Jane Bluett*

Students taking A Level courses in English may reasonably expect to gain skills in writing for various purposes and audiences. How adequate are the opportunities for student writing at A Level?

Essay writing is well covered by the current *Literature* specifications and is an integral skill therein. It stubbornly remains the only form of writing accredited under this strand. Other forms of writing are offered by the *Language* and *Language and Literature* specifications: they currently include various manifestations of Original or Own writing, Editorial Writing and Transformational Writing, although only two specifications (AQA and WJEC) offer opportunities for assessed writing beyond essay/analytical response.

Those wishing to become journalists are well served by Editorial papers. Recasting and rewriting text for different purposes is a recognised skill. Unfortunately the nature of the assessments in this area sometimes leads to dry delivery and functional performance – hardly encouraging and fostering journalistic enthusiasm. These papers do not provide an appropriate context for the student who wishes to embrace the world of the commercial writer. It is surely desirable to provide institutional support for professional student magazines and newspapers run on sound journalistic principles with the possibility of recognition for a student's portfolio.

A greater concern is the limitations often placed upon Original Writing. Students are encouraged at every turn to write for familiar audiences and avoid complex written forms, the leaflet being a frequent mode of choice. Undoubtedly there is some scope for creativity here, but little recognition that some of our students will be our future poets and novelists. Moreover, even *Literature* courses as presently constituted do not draw capable students' attention to the cultural and critical theory that informs much modern writing.

A *Language and Literature* combined specification seems at present the best A Level course to encourage and foster the talent of young literary writers. They experience challenging texts and are required to write within a literary context. A module such as Transforming Texts (AQA B) challenges students to recast literary text for different audiences and purposes, an essential skill and inevitable concern of the serious writer.

Combined courses are growing in popularity but are still the minority in terms of student take up. What options are there for students who study *Literature* and want to write? Their course provides literary reading and models of style (given the caveat above), but not the opportunity to practise what they study - the craft of writing. One useful feature of Curriculum 2000 was the stipulation for an Enrichment Entitlement.

With funding available, institutions can now officially offer courses in just about anything the student wishes to do, including setting up a student magazine. Within the curriculum framework, ‘extra’ activities can now be given status and, most importantly, time. Creative Writing can now be a recognised course running alongside core English provision. As many Universities now offer creative writing modules as part of English Studies degrees, many students clearly recognise the relevance of this for future study. No longer do we need to encourage budding poets at break by quickly reading their output and telling them to enter a competition. It is possible and desirable to design a structured creative writing course and deliver it effectively. All that is needed is one enthusiastic teacher and some appropriate materials. Competitions such as the Foyle Young Poets Competition and courses such as those run by the Arvon Foundation provide further opportunities to the talented.

Teachers who teach writing must themselves write. Nottingham University have recently introduced a compulsory activity for their PGCE students: they must write a short story and use it with their teaching groups. This brings home the reality of what we ask our students to do. We might step back from proposing that we should not teach novels unless we’ve tried to write one, but the argument is real.

These ideas are not new, and good practice in all strands of A Level English teaching has always included opportunities for students to write. Whether or not writers are *born*, they are *made* through encouragement and recognition and this can only happen if writing is central to all strands of the English Curriculum. A coherent English course at this level must make proper provision for student writing. Or perhaps we should all continue to keep our poetry under the bed.

### 3.4 Speaking and Listening

*John Hodgson*

Placing *Speaking and Listening* last in our survey of the content of A level English indicates its place in the present scheme of things rather than its true importance. None of the current specifications makes specific provision for this language mode, although its importance in everyday life has hardly been reduced by the advent of email and text messaging.

One reason for this omission is a residual belief that curricula are about content, and that it is the teacher’s responsibility to provide appropriate modes of learning. When the NATE Post-16 Committee wrote in 1993 to Sir Ron Dearing, then Chair of the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority, protesting the new requirement that A level English be assessed 80% by terminal examination, he replied in exactly those terms. The new assessment regime, we were told, did not affect the teacher’s pedagogic freedom (Hodgson, 1995). However, as John Dixon (1967) wrote, language is learned “in operation”, and it should not be a matter of teacher choice whether or not students engage in (the exact mode depending on the topic) pair and group discussion, role-play and presentations. The current specifications fail to incorporate specific opportunities for students to learn through talk, or for their

speaking and listening practice to be assessed. This is a major failure of Curriculum 2000 at this level.

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## 4. *The Assessment of A Level English*

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### 4.1 Survey Respondents' Views of Assessment

*John Hodgson & Gary Snapper*

The Tomlinson Committee is deliberating on the overall structure of assessment for the future, and we make some proposals in 4.3 below as contributions to the debate. English has specific concerns based both upon our experience of the last twenty years, and on the practice enshrined in Curriculum 2000. These have been raised by many of our survey respondents.

The modular structure of *Curriculum 2000* has some support from those respondents who value its focus on particular curricular elements and its motivational power for some students. However, many comment on the logistical difficulties and stress produced by having to prepare students and make arrangements for frequent examinations; the time lost to teaching and learning; and the development of a “retake culture” where students demand opportunities to resit papers. Overall, the effect of the modular structure is to construct education as an assessable commodity. Despite the intended role of the synoptic paper in drawing together the various elements of the course, the modules are also seen by some as exacerbating the assessment-driven nature of the course and the narrowing effect of the assessments, working further against students' grasp of wider contexts.

Explicit in some comments, and implicit in many, is dissatisfaction with an assessment regime where there is no close relation between learning and assessment patterns, suggesting the need for what Tomlinson's 14-19 Working Group (Tomlinson 2004) refers to as ‘assessment fit for purpose’. Within *Literature* specifications, there is no apparent rationale as to why some texts are assessed by closed book and others by open book examinations - and yet others by coursework. Many object entirely to the practice of closed book examinations, for which it is, indeed, hard to see any sustainable justification. Further, the exclusion of any opportunities for creative writing or textual intervention approaches in the assessment scheme seems insupportable in the light of developments in both higher education and in mainstream secondary English teaching.

*Language and Literature* specifications, while offering a coherent and integrated course in many respects, have no equivalent assessment rationale: one specification sets a Shakespeare text as a means through which candidates demonstrate their understanding of the features of spoken English! Teachers of *Language* dislike the ways in which cross-referencing between topics is hampered by the modular structure,

and feel that the synoptic unit does not sufficiently allow students to demonstrate an integrated understanding of language.

Particularly problematic is the apportioning of particular assessment objectives to particular modules. Superficially plausible as a method of targeting assessment, this apportioning works against the holistic nature of English studies. Candidates taking AS paper 2 for AQA Literature A, for example, should avoid commenting on contextual features of Shakespeare, as they will gain no credit for so doing. They must, however, focus on context when reading pre-twentieth-century texts for Paper 3, and (in the same paper) shift their focus to readers' interpretations when writing on a twentieth century text. In the first A Level module (Paper 4), poetry texts must be studied in context, while drama texts must be studied with reference to a diversity of readings. It is abundantly clear in such examples that the assessment tail, in the well-known phrase, wags the curricular dog. It is also significant that the examination questions in the Literature exams, through their continuing focus on the atomistic assessment of the close and comprehensive reading of individual texts, as well as through their specific wording, generally represent a very narrow interpretation of the broader assessment objectives, thus negating much of the benefit that was meant to accrue from (for instance) the increased emphasis on context and interpretation. (Atherton [2004] offers a fuller discussion of this.)

Generally, the new specifications demonstrate an uneasy relation between teaching/learning and assessment, where the latter is arbitrarily imposed to provide for the assessment objectives. What is needed is a clear fitting together of pedagogic aim and assessment method. Curriculum 2000 was an opportunity lost here, and it is much to be desired that reform of the A Level English curriculum place this at the forefront of its concerns.

## 4.2 Assessment in A Level English

*John Hodgson & Ann Harris*

English teachers have been long aware of the impact of assessment on learning. Conceiving writing as drafting for purpose and audience, and reading as reflection and research, progressive English teachers argued thirty years ago to incorporate coursework into syllabuses and specifications both at GCSE (and previously O-Level) and at Advanced Level (Dixon, 1979; Barnes, 2000). As we show in the next section, A Level syllabuses such as AEB English Literature 0660 used coursework to widen students' range of reading and modes of response. Consequently, many English teachers became experienced in assessment and familiar with its integration within the curriculum and within teaching and learning processes.

During the decade preceding Curriculum 2000, government fiat truncated good practice in coursework that had developed over many years. Assumed to be an unreliable indulgence, coursework was reduced in 1993 to 20% of the total assessment, on the strange principle that one-fifth unreliability was tolerable. "External" assessment was assumed to be reliable and proper: an ideological position that failed to recognise the intrinsic unreliability of a mass system. The same teachers who were assumed incapable of assessing their own students' work during the day



became professional external markers in the evening. Nightly they worked to tight deadlines to mark several hundred scripts within two or three weeks, monitored only to the extent possible within a system that had elements both of the cottage industry and the gulag.

Despite some good intentions to make assessment practice more relevant to learning – such as internally assessed research essays in a few specifications - Curriculum 2000 increased markedly the external element of assessment. The new specifications offered two qualifications rather than one, obtained through a modular system where candidates could be externally assessed twice a year. The respondents to our survey demonstrate the effect this had on schools and colleges: a culture where assessment arrangements take up time and energy formerly devoted to teaching, and where students focus on the end-of-module test, or, worse, on retaking the test for their last module. The events of summer 2002 showed that teachers and examiners could no longer keep the juggernaut on the road, and reform became a matter of urgency.

### 4.3 A Community of Assessment Practice

*Ann Harris*

We turn now to the larger question of assessment structures for the future. Teachers working in post-compulsory education have always been closely involved in assessment processes: preparing students for public examinations is a primary function of their role. A Level students, especially those contemplating higher education or retaking examinations, are keenly aware of their level of achievement and often demand very specific guidance on their performance and predicted results. This means that teachers have a key role in both formative and summative assessment, in order to improve students' performance as well as to make judgments about their level of attainment.

Accommodation of and involvement in assessment should not, however, be at the expense of the curriculum. As we have argued above, assessment should not distort teaching and learning but be an integral part of the process. Teachers need to be confident in their joint role that they are selecting appropriate assignment tasks, and making accurate judgments about levels of attainment. The *Preliminary Investigation of Summer 2002 OCR A-Level Awards* identified 'real confusion' about standards especially in relation to coursework and recommended that teachers 'ensure that the (coursework) tasks allow candidates to meet all the relevant assessment objectives and to demonstrate their attainment against marking criteria specified by the awarding body' (QCA, 2002). The awarding body was not without blame, however, and, although Summer 2002 obviously had unique circumstances, it did highlight strain on the public examining system as a whole. Mike Tomlinson in his subsequent *Inquiry into A-Level Standards* acknowledged that 'the rising quantity of examination-related tasks stretches awarding bodies, schools, colleges and teachers'. He also reinforced the significance of the role of teachers within the system, highlighting the need to enhance 'the 'supply and status of examiners - those, mainly teachers, who mark examinations and coursework'. The report recommended institutional recognition of this role through 'marking centres, release of teachers from their regular school or

college duties, engaging the teacher associations and reviewing examiner pay' (Tomlinson, 2002).

The expertise that teachers acquire in assessment and assessment processes comes through training, through appropriate supporting documentation, through experience; but also through a community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991) in which teachers work together sharing expertise and knowledge. Tomlinson (2002) also noted that relatively inexperienced teachers can assess effectively if appropriately supported and guided: 'Contrary to received wisdom that examiners should have lengthy classroom experience, the PGCE and graduate examiners were found to mark consistently and effectively. . . Factors contributing to this success were the extra training and regular monitoring the PGCE graduates were subject to; their deployment to specific papers; and the support they received from the senior examiner team.' But assessment isn't just about marking. The community of practice can function just as effectively in setting appropriate assignments, and in ensuring validity, reliability, differentiation, sufficiency, and authenticity. In this way, assessment can reflect good pedagogic practice and allow students at every level to perform to the best of their ability.

How can this community of practice be realised? The way forward must be to recognise teachers' expertise and experience, and to place student assessment in the hands of those who teach. Logistically, if for no other reason, this is the only way forward, as the present system is unsustainable, even if it helps protect the Post Office from bankruptcy. Validity and reliability can be achieved through the provision of regional networks (perhaps along the lines of the consortium system already run by the AQA) and the accreditation of appropriate individuals and institutions.

If teachers are likely to be undertaking examining duties right from initial qualification, PGCE courses need to take account of this and ensure a comprehensive understanding of assessment and assessment processes. The advent of Curriculum 2000 has, in some respects, not assisted this learning. School and college teachers are understandably reluctant to hand over a class, weeks away from a key assessment, to a relatively inexperienced student teacher. It remains vital, however, that student teachers are accommodated within assessment processes - not least of all because schools want to employ qualified teachers able effectively to undertake assessment. Student teachers can explore theories and methods of assessment within their own classrooms, but they also need to participate actively (though not necessarily independently) in the school and college assessment processes. This might be through a supportive model of professional interaction similar to that for external examining that Tomlinson outlines.

Public credibility depends upon assessment that is both reliable and valid. It also depends upon its being worthwhile and providing a fair judgment on progress and achievement. It is the responsibility of wider institutional mechanisms to support teachers and to facilitate the achievement of these aims. To do this, the emphasis has to be on a community of practice; the sharing of expertise, experience and understanding; the generation of an assessment discourse that is integrated within teaching and learning. The public examining system can be transformed to support this discourse and practice. Rather than acting as an external arbiter, unwieldy and relatively unaccountable, the examination and assessment boards can acknowledge

the expertise of teachers in their role as assessors and examiners by providing regional networks and accrediting individuals and institutions.

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## 5. *Some Alternative Models*

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English has always been a site of contesting views on and challenges to the practice of the subject. We may think of the university debates of the 1920s that led to the institution of Literature as a discrete subject in schools and colleges; of the “theory wars” of the 1960’s and 70’s; of the wholesale revision of secondary English curricula with the states of Australia over the last fifteen years. In this section, we consider a number of alternative models of teaching and learning English at A and higher levels. Such models are to be found in different phases, countries, international curricula and indeed in other subjects. We begin, however, with a model that is already practised (by a large minority of schools and colleges) within the current provision.

### 5.1 Integration or combination - the current A Level *English Language and Literature* specifications

*Susan Cockcroft*

#### 5.1.1. An innovative development

It has been suggested that the most innovative aspect of Curriculum 2000 is the development of *English Language and Literature* as an A Level subject in its own right. This is not to devalue in any way the contribution made by the AEB 623 combined English Language and Literature syllabus, which over the years was extremely popular and successful with mature students, fitting well with their experience of 'O' level English teaching.

The A Level *English Language and Literature* specifications available since 2000 are innovative, and reflect important changes in the study of English at A Level and beyond. A major influence on English teaching at Advanced Level has been the development and popularity of A level *English Language* in schools and colleges since its inception by NEAB in 1985. More recently, the linguistic spin-off of the Literacy Hour is beginning to filter into secondary schools; even at tertiary level many departments of English Studies teach Modern English language courses, influenced by the important role of linguistics in critical theory, and also by the rise of A level English Language. Indeed, in some Schools of English the core modules are evenly balanced between English Language and English Literature. In this context, the provision of five A Level English Language and English Literature specifications as part of Curriculum 2000 seems entirely appropriate.

#### 5.1.2 Integration or combination?

Opportunities to study A Level *English Language* as well as A level *English Literature* as separate subjects are increasingly available in schools and colleges. How successful is A Level *English Language and Literature* as a third and separate

subject? Are language studies combined or integrated with literary studies - and if there is a difference, does it matter?

There are five different A English Language and English Literature specifications currently available (AQA A, AQA B, Edexcel, OCR and WJEC). All offer the subject at AS and A2, all have to fulfil the requirements of the QCA derived Assessment Objectives, and each interprets these objectives within the six module structure in different ways. 'Combination of literary and linguistic study'; 'literary and non-literary texts'; 'literary and linguistic concepts'; 'interlinking between language and literature'; 'linguistic and literary-critical concepts' - such phrases give a flavour of what is expected of candidates within individual specifications. At one end of the spectrum, the integrated approach requires the application of literary and linguistic approaches in all units; at the other end, the combined approach assesses literary and linguistic knowledge and understanding separately. Individual units can be literary or linguistic (combined) or requiring a dual approach (integrated).

### 5.1.3 What has been achieved by candidates studying the A English Language and English Literature specifications?

This is not an easy question to answer only four years into Curriculum 2000. One way to compare what candidates have achieved in these different specifications might be to look carefully at the QCA publication *A Level Exemplification and Performance Descriptions: English Language and Literature* (QCA 2003). Examples are provided of a range of AS and A2 responses on two border-lines (five at the A/B boundary and four at the E/U boundary). According to the introduction, the material is 'designed to assist examiners in exercising their professional judgement'. Unfortunately, because the individual specifications from which the exemplar questions have been taken are not identified, it is difficult to compare candidates' performance in the integrated and combined specifications at the chosen boundaries. Moreover, the picture is by definition incomplete, because in some specifications coursework can comprise up to 30% of the total assessment. In the QCA publication the reader is thus provided with an extremely limited overview of candidates' examination performance across the specifications. At best, there is encouraging evidence that candidates are aware of linguistic as well as literary features, and have securely internalised the vocabulary of language description as well as literary terminology in their responses. At worst there is a sense of inadequate knowledge and understanding, particularly of linguistic features and how they work. Certainly no significant comparison between candidates' performance on different specifications can be made on this basis. If directly comparable examination tasks can be selected, it may be possible to find out more about what candidates are learning in this innovative subject as the A Level *English Language and Literature* specifications bed down.

### 5.1.4 Choosing an A Level English Language and Literature specification

A centre's choice of A Level specifications depends on a variety of factors, ranging from staffing issues to suitability of candidates, likely popularity and accessibility of the course and potential for candidate achievement. Whether A Level *English Language and Literature* should be the only specification offered by an English department, whether it should be offered with either A level *English Language* or A

Level *English Literature*, or whether a suite of three English specifications can be offered needs careful thought.

It is certainly true that with the eyes of senior management firmly fixed on numbers, there may be concerns that the separate English A Levels (especially *English Literature*) might lose ground if there is substantial student take-up of A Level *Language and Literature*. Staff may feel the need for INSET training and extra time to catch up with current approaches to linguistics. In many ways the situation is similar to when A Level *English Language* was introduced nearly 20 years ago. There were similar concerns, which gradually resolved as colleagues and students alike found themselves excited and exhilarated by new ideas and approaches. In fact, the introduction of A Level *English Language* increased the numbers of students taking advanced English courses across the board. It seems likely that this can happen again with the increasing popularity of the A Level *English Language and Literature* specifications.

#### 5.1.5 Coursework or examination?

The old, old question has to be asked again - and again, every centre will have its own reasoned response and justification for whatever choice has been made. It's generally agreed that students benefit substantially from coursework, but many would argue that the proportionate time commitment required of hard-pressed staff is too much to ask. Nevertheless, the appeal of coursework opportunities, and particularly those modules involving creative writing, is substantial. It is worth noting that creative writing modules are now being offered by some of the most traditional university English departments, where such a course would have been unheard of not very long ago.

#### 5.1.6 Where are the A Level English Language and Literature specifications going?

With a fair wind, the current A Level English Language and Literature specifications – and perhaps especially those whose approach is *integrated* - may well fit the Tomlinson reforming plans. Students can only benefit from being able to use and assess English language and literature critically as well as being able to understand and enjoy it. The achievement of candidates studying these integrated /combined A level *English Language and Literature* specifications in Curriculum 2000 has been impressive - and is getting better and better as each examination series comes round.

### 5.2 English in Higher Education

*John Hodgson & Gary Snapper*

Developments in the theory of the subject English have affected higher education profoundly. At this level, students around the world are expected to grapple with theories of culture and of the reading subject. The nature of literature and of its relation with the reader and the “real world” is no longer an unproblematic given. It is striking that in the UK this development has generally failed to dislodge literature itself as a category: “English” in many institutions continues to mean literature. However, it is, for most UK students, a far more sophisticated approach to literature than that which they have previously encountered.

The approach is starkly different: the present writer has heard more than one HE lecturer tell their students to forget what they learned at school, as study at this level bears little resemblance to that to which they have become accustomed. Recent developments in higher education (such as a renewed interest in processes of teaching and learning, and a concern to widen the range of student participation) and at A Level (Curriculum 2000 and the anticipated reform of the 14-19 curriculum) have drawn attention to the gulf that exists between A Level English and university English. Robert Eaglestone's *Doing English* (Eaglestone 2000) has been particularly influential in outlining the nature of the gap, as has the work of Rob Pope (Pope 1998) in providing a coherent model of English Studies for first year undergraduates.

Where A Level Literature focuses on the study of discrete texts largely as if they existed *sui generis*, university study starts from a post-structural concept of literature as a form of discourse. This concept implies that language (in any form) is not an essential structure, a discrete system, but a mode of representation that must be understood within its contexts of use. The language we use is largely given to us, not only in its vocabulary and grammar, but also in its semantic patterning. Language is thus essentially ideological, and the study of literature is the study of verbal representations whose relation to the putative real world is always uncertain. This study thus foregrounds the historical and cultural context of literary texts, acknowledges that readers' interpretations are themselves ideologically and culturally dependent, and indeed problematises the very concepts "literature", "text" and "author".

The difficulties this creates for students with a naïve experience of literary study are exacerbated by the inevitable tensions between the research and teaching functions of higher education. As student numbers increase, pressure on staff rises, particularly as there is a clear need to address the difficulties many students face in writing academic essays. This concern about student writing has been addressed in several quarters, including the Speak-Write project at Anglia Polytechnic University (Bryan, 1998) and the work of the Assessment and the Expanded Text Consortium at the University of Northumbria (O'Neill and Johnson, 2000). It is clear that better continuity is required between pre and post University English studies, if only to reduce the culture shock currently experienced by many new students.

This continuity works in both directions. The extent of student interest in language, as both a theoretical and practical study, is clear at "A" level. Many universities have developed language-based English courses that regard imaginative writing as one aspect of "English", rather than its totality. Outside the UK, such courses are commonplace in higher education. And even in the UK, the success of *Media and Cultural Studies* attests to students' desire to pursue a broadly based communication and cultural study when they reach university.

### 5.3 The ‘Alternative Syllabuses’ 1976-1994

*Gary Snapper*

We do not have to go away from home to start exploring alternatives; we only have to look to the history of A Level itself. From 1976 until 1994, English departments around the country (over 10% of them by 1986 [Greenwell, 1988]) were engaged in teaching ‘alternative syllabuses’. Arising from the work of the Schools Council’s English 16-19 project, led by John Dixon (Dixon 1979), these syllabuses, accredited by the exam boards, gave schools the opportunity to experiment by moving away from the traditional model of A Level English (the study of the canon of English Literature entirely assessed by means of closed-book examination), with which, in the 1970s, there was increasing dissatisfaction, mainly for very similar reasons to those we offer in this publication.

The alternative nature of these syllabuses was often restricted to the introduction of a 33.3% coursework element and some open-book examinations (both innovations nevertheless revolutionary in their day). However, schools had considerable freedom within the coursework element and – though many schools took a rather conservative approach – a great deal of innovative work was done. This work had lasting effects on mainstream A Level syllabuses; for instance, it led to a broadening of the A Level literary canon to include contemporary literature, including non-fiction; helped to legitimise the idea of open-book examinations; enabled imaginative coursework approaches including extended comparative and contextual study; and allowed schools to develop the kind of work on linguistic approaches, text transformation and original writing which now form important elements of *English Language* A Level and *English Language and Literature* A Level.

NATE’s Post-16 Committee then, as now, was a strong advocate of imaginative and progressive approaches, and thus of the alternative syllabuses. One of its publications at this time included Bill Greenwell’s *Alternatives at English A Level* (1982, 1988), which detailed the variety of approaches being taken. Newport Free Grammar School, for instance, offered an A Level course entitled ‘Natural Order, Social Convention, Individual Life: A Language Course’ which consisted of the study of literature relating to the institution of marriage from Chaucer to the present day, and which enabled the school to link together all coursework and examination texts through an extended thematic approach. Elsewhere, thematic study, leading to coursework, involved themes such as ‘Colonialism or Identity’, ‘History into Literature’ and ‘New Commonwealth Writing’, or detailed genre or period studies. Many schools built their courses around extensive wide reading; one, for instance, listed Larkin’s poetry as a core text, supported by readings of Hardy, Auden, Dylan Thomas, John Cooper Clarke, Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen, Joni Mitchell and John Lennon. Daw (1986) writes in detail about the benefits of such approaches, using his school’s study of Irish literature from 1900 to 1930 as an example.

The most popular and influential of the alternatives was the AEB 660 syllabus, still sorely missed by many today, which eventually allowed 50% coursework. Goddard



(1985), Peim (1986) and Hodgson (1995) testify to the critical and creative energy which was unleashed by this syllabus, giving examples of the range of reading and styles of writing represented in coursework. Hodgson, for instance, gives a representative list of coursework essays, individually chosen and researched by students, including a comparison of the autobiography of Malcolm X, *Beloved* and the poems of Grace Nichols; an essay on Stephen King's portrayal of small-town America in three novels; a study of Edith Wharton as a feminist writer; a comparison of five works (including non-fiction) portraying life in a totalitarian society; a study of children's readings of A.A. Milne and Lewis Carroll; and a study of banned and censored literature, focusing on *Satanic Verses*, *A Clockwork Orange* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Meanwhile, creative writing approaches include 'An Environmental Proposal by Nirex', based on Swift's 'Modest Proposal'; the use of a minor character in one play as a major one in another, after *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*; an Ode, after reading Keats; and additional dialogue, in the style of Harold Pinter, occurring offstage in *The Caretaker* (Hodgson, 1995).

Through the liberalisation of assessment practice, text choice and syllabus structure, alternative syllabuses, then, could open up a wider range of approaches to creativity, criticism, interpretation and context than were possible with the traditional model (and, indeed, than are possible now). Even within the alternative syllabus scheme, though, genuinely progressive approaches were relatively rare, and many teachers pointed to the need for wider reform of the study of literature at A Level. Brown and Gifford (1989), in their still influential guide to teaching literature at A Level, point out that 'we seem to have come full circle, with a group of teachers demanding the reform of A Level syllabuses,' and suggest that, in future, the question 'what other ways are there of designing syllabuses so that some of the fundamental questions about literature can be placed in the centre?' would need to be asked.

Such questions - questions about the canon and cultural value, language and genre, interpretation and representation, criticism and creativity, and so on - were by now fully established as central to literary study in higher education, and were being confronted in schools in the realms of media and language study, but remained marginal in literary study at A Level, even in the alternative syllabuses. Patrick Scott, in his study of A Level English (1989), includes a chapter called 'Alternatives to Alternatives' in which he outlines a number of recent proposals for reform, including one emanating from the NAAE conference of 1988. This modular English course had three compulsory modules, 'Publishing', 'Story-Telling' and 'Conversations' and a number of subsidiary modules to be chosen from four categories: 'Investigating Language', 'Writing and Writers', 'Reading and Readers' and 'Production'. Within this structure, one could specialise to a greater or lesser degree in literary or non-literary texts.

A NATE working group offered a similar proposal (Spicer and Bennison, 1988). Arguing that 'to insist that students see literature as the central and superior form of cultural production is simply to delude them and to stifle the interaction between their study of literature, their own cultural formation, and their understanding of contemporary society', their proposal sees 'the whole area of cultural production as a unified field' and its study focused on five core concepts - form, representation, production, reproduction and reception. Within this framework, students would choose modules on literature, media, language, theatre, and other cultural forms.

Such radical proposals, though controversial even for many dissatisfied with the traditional A Level, came about as a result of the atmosphere of optimism created by the alternative syllabuses. This was, however, to end abruptly. Shortly after NATE's Post-16 Committee published a proposal by Sue Hackman for a (more conventionally literary) 100% coursework A Level (Hackman 1990), the Conservative government announced plans for a crackdown on coursework. The new arrangements, introduced in 1993, restricted coursework to 20%, restricted open book examinations, imposed a prescriptive and retrograde 'subject core', and outlawed alternative syllabuses. The rest, as they say, is history.

## 5.4 The Advanced Extension Award in English (OCR 9910)

*Jane Bluett*

We are now into the third year of accredited AEAs. Last year 1418 students sat the AEA in English; OCR report that AEA English is in good shape and growing in popularity' (Smith 2004). A recent article in *Guardian Education* (Tarleton 2004) questioned the AEA's validity 'when very few institutions students are hoping to impress give much weight to the qualification' and 'are moving towards their own additional methods of distinguishing between the thousands of candidates with top A Level grades'. This is surely a valid point: the failure of Key Skills emphasises the need for university recognition to motivate students to participate. However, the incorporation of AEA into the UCAS tariff is now 'under active consideration and a move in that direction is likely to be announced soon' (Smith 2004).

The paper requires students to respond to a wide range of unseen texts collected under a theme. Students are given a reading booklet containing around 15 texts, literary and non literary, spoken and written, and are asked to respond to two questions that allow them to respond 'critically and creatively' to the material. The texts are undoubtedly challenging (a recent paper included material by Pope, Emerson, Greer, and Ruskin). Importantly they are chosen to be accessible to students from all three strands of A Level English, thus suggesting that a coherent study of 'English' is possible and assessable.

The most welcome aspect of this paper is undoubtedly its accessibility to all three strands. However, the OCR report on the 2003 examination (OCR 2003) highlights 'the relative scarcity of responses from the perspectives of Language or Language and Literature studies'. This clearly highlights the current barriers to a cohesive approach to the study of English at this level. Literature retains its traditional status: the perception is that challenging English study is to be found within the Literature domain. Also, the literary content of this paper is perhaps perceived as outside the remit of Language focused study and not as another variety of English within the grasp of all English students. The current take up of the AEA would therefore seem symptomatic of the divisions within current post 16 English study and of a divided thinking on the part of practitioners.

Although the take up of AEA in English is predominantly from the independent sector (397) and Sixth Form Colleges (363), there is a relatively healthy entry from

secondary comprehensive schools (279); OCR are pleased to note that the paper is 'drawing interest from a very broad base of centres...much broader than the legacy special papers which were largely the preserve of independents and selectives' (Smith 2004). It would seem therefore that the paper is establishing itself as an accessible option for all. We can therefore consider its strengths as a possible model of A Level English study.

Firstly, the anthologised nature of the assessment provides breadth, a quality currently associated with Language study rather than with Literature. The challenging nature of the texts also necessitates depth, however, in that successful students will have encountered and digested similar forms through wider reading. Secondly, this is a paper that demands wider cultural awareness from students. If it were to be taught to all, rather than to a relatively aware elite, it would require teachers to address cultural movements and critical contexts. These would be not merely literary contexts: knowledge of language development would be as requisite as a canonical overview. This would seem to suggest a course that fills the gaps identified in current practice elsewhere in this paper. Thirdly it provides a way of independently approaching text that prepares students for the challenges of English study in Higher Education.

As an alternative approach to English study at this level the AEA raises many inviting possibilities. Teachers of English would do well to take a look at the current papers and consider a programme of study that would allow all students to explore the framework of English study it exemplifies. The Tomlinson Report (Tomlinson 2002) identifies the AEA as a way of distinguishing the brightest and the best. It potentially does far more than this.

## 5.5 Literature in the International Baccalaureate

*Gary Snapper*

The International Baccalaureate Literature syllabus (IBO 1999) provides a very interesting alternative model for sixth form literary study, demonstrating possible solutions to many of the problems which have been identified at A Level. The following is an example programme recently taught to students in a sixth form in a comprehensive school in England (Snapper [2004] provides a fuller account).

Part One: World Literature (Chosen Region/Theme: Post-colonial Africa)

Ngugi wa Thiong'o: *I Will Marry When I Want* (Kenyan play, written in Kikuyu)  
Naguib Mahfouz: *Miramar* (Egyptian novel, written in Arabic)  
Tayeb Salih: *Season of Migration to the North* (Sudanese novel, written in Arabic)  
(Assessed by written coursework (20%) - one comparative essay; one other piece)

Part Two: Detailed Study

Drama - Shakespeare: *Hamlet*

Prose Fiction - Austen: *Pride and Prejudice*

Poetry - Hughes and Plath: Poems

Prose Non-fiction - Orwell: *Homage to Catalonia*

(Assessed by oral examination (15%) – commentary on a passage from one text)

#### Part Three: Genre Study (Chosen Genre: Drama)

Jonson: *Volpone*

Wilde: *The Importance of Being Earnest*

Stoppard: *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*

World Literature: Ibsen: *Hedda Gabler*

(Assessed by terminal written exam (25%) – one comparative essay in 2 hours)

#### Part Four: School's Choice (Chosen Theme: Place, Nation & Writing)

Graham Swift: *Waterland*

Tony Harrison and Seamus Heaney: *Poems*

Contemporary Scottish Writers (Gray, Kelman, Morgan, Welsh, Lochhead)

World Literature: Marquez: *One Hundred Years of Solitude*

(Assessed by oral coursework (15%) – comparative assignment)

#### Part Five: Unseen Commentary

An extensive selection of short prose (fiction and non-fiction) and poetry texts and extracts from Old English to the present day.

(Assessed by terminal written exam (25%) – 2 hour commentary on one unseen text)

Some of the features which differentiate the I.B. from the A Level syllabus, and which might be considered improvements on the latter, can be seen immediately. The programme covers a wider range of texts than A Level; there is literature in translation, and non-fiction; comparative and contextual study are emphasised throughout because texts are organised by genre, theme, place and period in a highly structured syllabus; there is a variety of assessment methods, including 50% coursework, of which half is conducted orally (which leads to a greater variety of types of textual study and response); there is a compulsory unseen close reading exercise; and the examinations allow more adequate time for response.

There are further advantages. For instance, there are no set texts – only wide-ranging lists of set authors within the structural limits of the syllabus; and in the 'School's Choice' element, there is complete freedom of choice in constructing a coherent unit of study (within a conventional definition of the literary.) Assessment opportunities are enticing: for instance, in the World Literature section students are encouraged to offer a piece of 're-creative' writing based on one of the texts studied; and oral coursework provides the opportunity for students to give a presentation to the class. In addition, all students have the chance (and many take it) to write their I.B. dissertation (the 'Extended Essay') on a topic of their choice in English Literature; and the cross-curricular 'Theory of Knowledge' course, which is compulsory for all I.B. students, provides many opportunities for students and teachers to make connections with English in its consideration of issues such as aesthetics, linguistics and cognition.

Some may have reservations about the number of texts to be covered, but it should be remembered that not all texts need be studied in the minute depth necessitated by A Level. This programme acknowledges that breadth is an important factor in learning about literature, as well as depth. The relatively short period of time to study each text in comparison with A Level is in fact one of the most liberating aspects of the course. It banishes the A Level ‘ploughing through the text’ syndrome (which many teachers and students find unsatisfactory, but into which they feel they are forced by the nature of the assessment) and encourages a faster pace and a more flexible relationship between close reading, on the one hand, and holistic textual and contextual understanding on the other. This might not be possible were the assessment scheme not so flexible: crucially, not every text is formally assessed, and the variety of assessment types is such that not all texts require comprehensive close reading. (The independent reading load can also be reduced by ensuring that poetry, drama and short stories – much of which can be read and taught simultaneously in class – form a substantial proportion of the syllabus, so that there are not too many long novels for students to cover independently.)

The emphasis on breadth reinforces the importance of generic and contextual understanding, rather than a comprehensive but atomistic knowledge of each text studied. The standard assessment tasks reflect this, often taking the form of generic questions which ask students to bring together their knowledge of two, three or more texts in order to support a broad argument about a genre or a culture; or students may write commentaries on (sometimes previously unprepared) single passages from texts they have studied to show their knowledge of the whole (and remember – there hasn’t been time to study every bit of the text!)

There is a strong emphasis on close reading in the syllabus too; the unseen commentary, for instance, which is compulsory, works well when placed in a context where students have a broad experience of texts within a syllabus which gives them an effective framework to support their developing literary knowledge. In I.B. English, close reading is put to work more effectively than at A Level, with students consistently expected to show that they have extrapolated from one text to another of the same (or a different) genre or culture, and from one passage of a text to another of the same text.

The programme requires that students cover a range of periods, genres and places, but these are built in to the programme in a rather more coherent way than such requirements at A Level. The example book list given above is fairly heavily weighted towards the twentieth century, but it would be entirely possible to construct a manageable course, within the limitations of the syllabus, which was more weighted to pre-twentieth century texts. Indeed, the combination of flexibility and structure offered by the I.B. syllabus is one of its great attractions, and it is possible to envisage many very different-looking courses within the same structure. Most of the sections of the syllabus can, for instance, be adapted to form a genre, period, cultural or thematic study.

Despite its relative flexibility, the I.B. English syllabus is in some ways still very traditional, and certainly does not represent the kind of theoretically ‘grounded’ course which some would advocate at this level. However, in encouraging breadth of

textual experience, an international outlook, and a structured, comparative and generic approach to literary study, it provides the groundwork for a broad understanding of literature as a social, cultural and linguistic phenomenon – useful for everyone. It also provides for later possible encounters with literary and cultural theory – useful for those going to read English at university.

## 5.6 Literature in the Australian Post-16 Certificates of Education

*Gary Snapper*

In most states of Australia, radical reform of post-16 literary study took place during the 1990s. Australia now has probably the most progressive approach to literature in school in the world, informed by notions of critical literacy which have been very influential throughout the school system there. The Literature programme in the state of Victoria is taken here as an example (Victoria Board of Studies, 1999). (In the Victorian Certificate of Education, the subject English is compulsory for all students, as a general study of language and texts; Literature or Language may be taken as additional specialist subjects. For an account of the experience of the reform of the literature curriculum in Victoria, see Beavis [2001].)

In the outline of the course which follows, the advantages of this programme over A Level Literature should be clear. They include a coherent and progressive rationale which clearly reflects the nature of contemporary literary study; a well structured programme in which the study of texts (often comparative) is placed firmly in the context of the study of language, genre, narrative, representation, culture and interpretation; a wide range of texts and variety of text types (including literary media texts, world literature and popular texts), assessment types (including oral and creative), and pedagogic approaches; a clear and detailed description of the literary knowledge and skills to be developed; considerable opportunity for teacher and student freedom of choice; and a substantial portion of the course which is not formally assessed but allows for developmental work to happen and groundwork to be laid.

### Course outline

The ‘Study Design’ for the course defines literature as ‘texts that are valued for their use of language to recreate and interpret experience imaginatively’ and outlines a strong philosophy for the course, as follows:

The study is based on the premise that meaning is derived from the interaction between the text, the context in which it was produced and the experience of life and literature that the reader brings to the text. Thus the study provides an opportunity for students to examine the ways in which literature represents experience and to consider these in the light of their own understanding and experience.

What is considered literature is subject to shifting attitudes, tastes and social conditions. Accordingly, the study encompasses works that vary in cultural

origin, genre, medium and world view, and includes classical and popular, traditional and modern literature.

Throughout the Study Design, detailed guidance is given on the types of literary knowledge and skills which students are expected to gain from each element of the course, and an ‘Advice for Teachers’ section gives examples of varied learning activities, recommending that teachers take a number of approaches in the course, including:

- Examination of a genre, which enable students to consider how it is treated in different forms such as prose and film and to examine the literary elements of genre
- A thematic approach which would allow students to explore how texts of different forms, experiences and ideas represent the thematic concerns
- A single-study discrete approach to a given text which encourages close-reading skills
- An author-centred study, where students compare and contrast the work of a particular author and consider various interpretations of his/her work
- A contextual approach in which students compare, for example, traditional and modern representations of an experience, group or gender.

The course is arranged in four main units, each of which accounts for 50 hours of classroom time. Units 1 and 2 are taken in the first year of the course, and Units 3 and 4 in the second year. Units 1 and 2 are assessed entirely internally and the results do not count towards the final course grade, whilst Units 3 and 4 are assessed by coursework (50%) and final examination (50%). Thus, the first year of study is intended as the laying of groundwork for the formal assessment in the second year.

#### Unit One (1950 onwards) and Unit Two (pre-1950)

In these two units, students develop ‘informed responses to literature’ and explore ‘the relationship between the reader’s response and the way literary texts represent human experience’; they also look at ‘the central themes and ideas expressed through texts’ and ‘the ways in which [texts] interpret personal, social and cultural contexts’.

The nine texts studied are freely chosen by teachers and students and must cover ‘a range of literature from early to contemporary works, dealing with a diversity of cultural experiences and a range of points of view,’ including drama, poetry, prose and one film, television or multimedia text. Students are assessed by means of reading journals, discussions, oral presentations, written essays and reviews, re-creative writing and text transformations, and multimedia presentations.

#### Units Three and Four

In these units, students build further on work already done on ‘analysing a range of texts, developing skills in reading closely and critically, and discussing and debating various ways of interpreting and evaluating texts.’ They focus on ‘the relationship between the ways in which various kinds of literature are constructed and the nature of interpretations and judgements made about them’ and ‘the ways in which texts represent and comment on human experience and ideas, the views and values

expressed through texts, and the relationship between texts and the social, historical and cultural contexts in which they were produced and in which they were read’.

The seven texts studied are chosen from a set list of approximately seventy (of which at least two must be chosen from a core list of thirty which will be set in the final examination), and again must include a range of text types. The text list is wide-ranging and includes classic and modern British and American literature, classic and modern world literature, modern Australian literature, literary non-fiction, literary media texts, and genre novels.

In coursework, students are assessed by means of six assignments:

- A written reflection on how meaning is enacted or re-created when a text is performed or adapted for performance.
- A sustained interpretive or comparative essay which shows that the student can analyse and interpret the views and values of a text in terms of the ideas, conventions and beliefs that the text appears to explore, endorse, challenge or leave unquestioned
- A review of a text of the student’s choice for an audience unfamiliar with it.
- A creative or re-creative piece of writing, written in a manner consistent with the style and/or context of the text, accompanied by a brief reflective commentary.
- A written analysis of an oral or written review or commentary on a literary text; or a discussion paper presenting the merits of various readings
- A written analysis of aspects of a text, relating those aspects to an interpretation of the text as a whole.

In the final examination, three (previously undisclosed) passages are set for each text and students are asked – for two of their set texts – to ‘use one or more of the passages selected as the basis for a discussion of’ the text.

## 5.7 Media, Film and Theatre Studies

*John Hodgson*

Teaching English and Media Studies within British secondary education involves a kind of role reversal for an English teacher. Media Studies has always focussed on the medium of communication, be this print, audio, or the film or television image. Students have had to understand the signifying system of the medium, dealing with textual macro-structure (genre, narrative) and micro-structure (the rhetoric of the word and the image). Teaching such structures has been eschewed in English, where the received wisdom for many years has been that both reading and writing are learned in practice, and that students should be encouraged to get on with reading and with constructing their own written texts.

This approach to English studies has its strengths, and is not untheorised. It recognises and builds on the insight that explicit grammatical knowledge does not itself promote good speech or writing. However, it runs the danger of deflecting students from becoming critically aware of the language of the cultural and media spheres within which they live.



Media Studies has always assumed that language is not a transparent means of communication, but is culturally and ideologically patterned. It sees the production and reception of media texts as a social process. A media course will typically be structured on a tripartite basis. There will be a focus on the production process of a text (including the institutions within which it is created); on the text itself (its formal and structural features); and on the process of reception (its audiences and their responses).

A further aspect of Media Studies is its emphasis on theorised production. Students at all levels are expected to make their own print, audio and/or video productions, drawing on the knowledge of form and convention they have gained in their textual studies. Lindahl-Elliott (2000) has drawn attention to the pedagogic difficulties this practice raises, especially in HE, but it remains fundamental to most Media courses.

Film Studies includes all the aspects so far described, but focuses on one medium. It is thus a clear parallel to Literature studies, and throws into relief the current limited nature of Literature study at A Level. Despite the advances made in the specifications developed as part of Curriculum 2000, Literature study does not specify a thoroughgoing understanding of the social production of literature; it is inexplicit as to the nature and depth of the formal, textual understanding required of students; and it does not require students to create their own literature. It is thus an etiolated thing in comparison with Film Studies.

Theatre Studies at A level has some commonality with Literature Studies, of course, but its distinctive focus on drama points up some interesting contrasts with its older cousin. One of these is a clear concept of dramatic form. This is regarded as of fundamental importance, and a conscientious A Level student is likely to gain an understanding of such characteristic forms as tragedy, Restoration Comedy, epic theatre, absurd drama, and so on – depending on the course and on the student's choice. This understanding is gained not only by desk study, but also by practical experience of working with the text in live theatre.

By contrast, the study of literature, even under the new specifications, does not ensure students' understanding of literary form and tradition, nor does it give them opportunities to embody their understanding in their own production. The specifications are oddly coy about even such prominent literary movements as Romanticism and Modernism, helpful as such framing concepts would be in making sense of the synoptic paper. In this respect, Theatre Studies is instructive, in that it deals with performance history and thus with the relation between culture, text and audience.

Theatre Studies' emphasis on production literally embodies the study, as students interpret their texts in supervised practical work. It gives the subject a "vocational" as well as an "academic" purpose, as there is a clear focus on practical skills that have relevance beyond the world of theatre. Students learn about the theatre as industry, and to write critical reviews not merely to record their appreciation and evaluation (as is the case with the literary essay) but also in a form appropriate to the media circuit.

Film, Media and Theatre Studies focus on the production process of texts; on their form and structure, in relation to cultural influences; and on their performance and reception. They also recognise the role of students' own production in developing awareness of communicative practice. They offer useful models for a reformed approach to English.

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## 6. *An Integrated Course?*

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John Hodgson

### 6.1 Reasons for Integrating A Level English

English Studies in England and Wales form a patchwork of provision. In secondary schools and in higher education, the study of literature remains dominant; yet the form of this study differs vastly between the two sectors. By contrast, the National Literacy Strategy and the Framework for English have focussed schools' attention on language study, and A level courses in English Language offer a popular alternative to Literature to increasing numbers of students. Looking to the future, the Tomlinson Report (Tomlinson, 2004) does not mention Language or Literature explicitly but proposes a two year Communication course for all students aged 14-16, to run alongside a General English course. It will be up to the profession to define what such courses contain, and to decide what changes, if any, should be made in post-16 courses.

Sailing on this curricular sea, A level English is a ship buffeted by tides and gales blowing and running in different directions, and whose officers and crew have contradictory ideas about where they are going, and the best way to get there. Some officers want to keep to the long-established course of traditional A level literary study, despite mutinous mumblings amongst those of the crew who wish to transfer to the MS *Language* or *Media*. They are growing aware, however, that the natives on the continent of HE Literature speak a largely foreign tongue. Other officers choose a completely different course, and are making good headway against the tide of Literature, recruiting new crew as they visit different shores. Yet others steer a combined course, many believing that the most successful voyage runs on complementary currents of knowledge.

To put this in a positive light, it can be said that A level English courses offer a diversity of routes and study choices, and indeed Tomlinson has no view on the need for change in the content of courses in the post-16 sector. But, as we have shown in Section 3 above, the diversity of the present curriculum is a chimera for many students. A large minority find themselves at institutions where one course, *English Literature*, is offered – a course that, despite the new assessment objectives introduced in Curriculum 2000, offers only the traditional pattern of intensive study of a handful of unrelated set books. This study bears little relation to English Literature studies in higher education, nor to those parallel literature courses (such as the International Baccalaureate, or the Australian Post-16 Certificates of Education) that have assimilated recent cultural and literary theory. Those students who can choose an A level English course often have a stark choice between *Language* and *Literature*, courses with very little overlapping content or theoretical basis. Only those who can

follow a combined *English Language and Literature* course can develop a social understanding of language in which literary study forms a significant part.

Freedom of choice between A level English courses is then largely abstract for many students, and those students who can choose often have to specialise in “Language” or “Literature” in a way that is no longer appropriate at this level. The UK, as a late modern society, is at a stage where education until 18 is becoming the norm for the great majority of students, and where half the age group will be entering higher education by the end of the decade. We have then to think of entitlement rather than of choice. What should a course in English offer young people growing into the twenty-first century, many of whom will go on to further study and all of whom will have to negotiate a world that is changing at an exponential rate?

Answering this question takes us to the root of our understanding of what “English” is about. A functionalist view, such as that apparently taken by Tomlinson (2004) in proposing a course in Communication, sees language as a series of skills to be learned in order to cope with the exigencies of life. This is not necessarily a reductive position: there are higher as well as lower functions, such as the ability to negotiate relationship difficulties through talk, or the ability to analyse the ideological drift of a political utterance. The problem with the functionalist view is rather that it posits by implication its binary opposite: a non-functionalist view of language, an aesthetic or cultural realm in which language is used “for its own sake”. The Tomlinson framework thus risks returning us to the prison-house within which Language and Literature inhabit different compartments, and which reflects in another sphere the vocational/academic divide that besets British educational provision.

During the last decade, teachers and academics in Australia have reformed the secondary English curriculum from a different starting-point than that of “communication”, “skills” or “function”. They have started not from the word or the sentence nor even the text, but from a view of language as discourse. This view of language, which is indebted to the work of Foucault, Halliday, Kress, Fairclough and numerous others, underpins most work in English and Cultural/Media Studies at HE level. Language, in this view, is not just a tool but also a web within which citizens of modern societies live and have their being. In a very real way, it constructs the world within which we live: our understanding of local, national and international events and processes, our views of gender and race relations, our sense of meaning in life – all these depend on the cultural and media sphere within which we find ourselves, whose relation to the putative real world is always uncertain.

An integrated English course, then, would deal with language:

- As socially situated: reflecting and driving everyday life; expressing relationships of power, gender, class, race; revealing ideology; always connected to the lives and purposes of actual human beings. This view is basic to Media and Language study at A level, but Literature courses (unlike courses in Media) rarely or never deal with such cultural processes as publication.
- As intertextual: language is a web of meaning in which literature has a privileged and important part, but does not exist in a separate domain. Post-

modern culture has blurred the relation between “high” and “popular” forms, and adopted a pluralistic view of languages and literatures.

- As productive and creative: a mode of agency, in which humans beings can create their own meaning within the cultural and media sphere. It is crucial that citizens of the twenty-first century develop means not only of “reading” the world but also of affecting it.

## 6.2 Approaching Texts as Discourse

An integrated course in A level English would have to define carefully its subject field. “English” may now be too diffuse a term, although it could be re-focussed in time, as “English” in HE has a different denotative meaning to “English” in school. However, it signals the learning of a specific national (and global) language, rather than language as a human activity. “Language” is inadequate as it implies its binary opposite “Literature”, the terms together denoting the polarised view of the subject that integration wishes to transform. “Literacy” has functionalist associations, as has “communication”, both of these suggesting skills to be acquired rather than understandings to be gained. “Rhetoric” sounds promising, as it incorporates both speech and writing, but it signifies a conscious artistry and control of language that has been thrown into doubt by Barthes (1967), Derrida (1976) and others who have propounded the power of discourse in shaping our everyday, formal and literary language.

The term “discourse” implies a different view of the processes of language and communication, one that embraces all forms of language use within social life. Although it was suggestively explored by James Moffett (1968) in *Teaching the Universe of Discourse*, the term does not at present hold a central place within primary and secondary English studies. It is, however, central to English studies (and Cultural Studies) at higher levels. A discourse approach regards all language (and indeed the whole realm of signification) as text. It does not make distinctions of value between spoken, written, colloquial or literary language. It sees language as a patterned form of social practice, the expression in the communicative domain of social relations, values and definitions of truth and reality.

By illustration of what such an approach to text at A level might look like in practice, the following example examines columns from the Armistice Day 1918 edition of the *Daily Mirror* and the 19 August 1945 edition of *The Observer*. This end-of-war consonance makes for a fruitful comparison between the texts, highlighting their specificities. The *Mirror* text focuses on rejoicing in Whitehall:

### **LONDON'S REJOICINGS.**

When the glad news became known in London scenes of remarkable enthusiasm were witnessed.

Flags appeared on all sides with amazing rapidity. They floated proudly over all public buildings, they appeared like magic from private homes, they were

waved in the streets, worn (in miniature) in hats, pinned on coats, waved frantically on bus tops, lorries, charabancs, taxicabs, costers' carts and on every description of vehicle that could pass through the surging, joyous multitudes that thronged the main arteries of London's traffic.

And the cheering! Never, not even on Mafeking night, has London resounded with such shouts of exultation.

Right had triumphed over might, and the heart of the great City was filled to overflowing.

Exactly at eleven o'clock, Mr. Lloyd George opened the front door of No. 10, Downing-street.

His appearance was the signal for a great howl of delight from the huge mob which lined the narrow thoroughfare.

#### THE PREMIER'S SMILE.

With his face wreathed in smiles, and in clear tones, he shouted, at the same time uplifting his hand:

"I am glad to be able to tell you that the war will be over at eleven o'clock to-day."

A burst of wild cheering followed. In Whitehall it was taken-up, men leapt and danced in their excitement, hats were waved, and were even thrown over the garden wall of No. 10.

Once again silence was restored, and Mr. Lloyd George continued:—

"This British Empire has done a great share towards the winning of the war and we are now entitled to shout."

With a wave of his hand he withdrew into his official residence and the mob cried: "Why should we not shout?" remembering his former injunction, "Why shouldn't we sing?" and gave throat to burst after burst of cheering.

As a newspaper article, this might seem to require linguistic rather than literary analysis, but it is clear that the style derives from the Victorian novel, particularly Dickens (1843). A discourse approach recognises the dialogic nature of utterance: "Very frequently the expression of our utterance is determined not only – and sometimes not so much – by the referentially semantic context of this utterance, but also by others' utterances ..." (Bahktin 1986):

Such a bustle ensued that you might have thought a goose the rarest of all birds; a feathered phenomenon, to which a black swan was a matter of course; and in truth it was something very like it in that house. Mrs Cratchit made the gravy (ready beforehand in a little saucepan) hissing hot; Master Peter mashed

the potatoes with incredible vigour; Miss Belinda sweetened up the apple-sauce; Martha dusted the hot plates; Bob took Tiny Tim beside him in a tiny corner at the table; the two young Cratchits set chairs for everybody, not forgetting themselves, and mounting guard upon their posts, crammed spoons into their mouths, lest they should shriek for goose before their turn came to be helped ...

There never was such a goose. Bob said he didn't believe there ever was such a goose cooked. Its tenderness and flavour, size and cheapness, were the themes of universal admiration (Dickens 1843).

Such intertextuality (Kristeva 1974) throws into question the distinction between literary and linguistic analysis. Here a “factual” report is couched in novelistic discourse – a fact of which the original writer may have been unaware. As Barthes (1967) argued, a text is produced by “language” (what Foucault [1968] later called “discourse”), and its rhetorical fluency demonstrates not only the writer’s skill but also the power of convention. The differences between the two passages are, of course, as important as the similarities. Both authors declare that never had there been such cause for celebration. Both rely on the detailed accumulation of joyous activity. However, while Dickens specifies exactly who is doing what, such signifiers are absent in the earlier part of the *Daily Mirror* report. An introductory sentence containing two passive constructions precedes a paragraph in which flags appear metonymically as signs of triumph and celebration, or are themselves passively moved by unspecified agents. London itself, echoing the cheers of the crowd, becomes a person whose heart is filled to overflowing. The literary style conveys an unanimity of joy that arises without agency.

Page 7 (the inside back page) of the *Mirror* contains a women’s romance. By 1945, the *Observer*’s women’s page (still the inside back page) includes direct comment on “women’s issues”.

### *Alison Settle’s Home Front Survey*

## **The Housewife in Battle Mood**

**T**he soldier lays down his arms; his ordeal over, his victory won. But the housewife is in battle mood; for her ordeal shows no sign of ending, and she suspects she may have to switch from passive to active “resistance” before victory is hers. The censors and the conquerors depart; the piques and queues remain.

The housewife is depressed because peace offers her no relief from her problems. She knows that many people in Europe face starvation in the coming winter; that, though she produced Mulberry, Radar, Pluto, and Fido, such things as fats, eggs, beef, and clothes cannot be conjured from a Government magic hat.

She is convinced that much can be done to ease her lot. She demands speedy decisions, and it would help greatly if she knew that government departments were really intent on giving larger staffs to shopkeepers and

improving transport between shops and homes. She has not grumbled when good things have gone to the armed Services, for members of her family have been soldiers, sailors, and airmen. But she now feels that some reward should come her way (as an award for Distinguished sacrifice) if only because it will reduce the almost intolerable physical and mental strain imposed by present-day housekeeping.

A discourse analysis of the parallel phrases and clauses, repetition and other tropes recognises the social context of the writing. “The Housewife,” we are told, “is in battle mood,” because of “the almost intolerable physical and mental strain imposed by present-day housekeeping”. The discourse of the post-war journalist reconstructs the category “housewife” to represent those who, until a few weeks previously, had often been home-based participants in the war. The military metaphors (“she may have to switch from passive to active ‘resistance’ before victory is hers”) signify the author’s intention to support women in the immediate post-war period, but a longer historical view reveals the extent to which she was written by current discourse, and by the need to restore gender relations disrupted by the conflict.

Clearly this example deals specifically with only one mode of English study – critical reading – although such reading would naturally involve discussion, note-taking and analytic writing. It suggests that an integrated course in English might go beyond integrating “language” and literature” to approaching language as a discursive force that literally constructs the meaningful world within which we live. To understand that construction, and to be able to de- or re-construct it, is surely the entitlement of students of English in the media saturated world of the twenty-first century.



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## 7. *Where are we? How did we get here? And where should we be going?*

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*John Hodgson*

As discussion of the 14-19 phase of education proceeds, we need to ask what sort of English studies students should be engaging in as they reach the end of school and (in increasing numbers) move on to higher education. We need to consider the needs of those students at FE (and at HE) levels who have returned to education. And we need to place our ideas in the context of the wider world of the coming century.

There are many reasons – historical, academic, social, and pedagogical – why the division of English into separate strands (of “Language” and “Literature” studies, and indeed of Media Studies also) is no longer appropriate at this level. These can be addressed in turn.

The separation of mother tongue studies into rigid opposing categories is a historical feature of British culture that is not reflected in education systems that have not been based on the British model. *English Literature* as an academic subject was invented in the early twentieth century partly in opposition to an Oxford-based linguistics that did not speak to an Arnoldian view of culture as “the best that has been thought and said”. The Arnold-Richards-Leavis tradition provided a study, “English”, that provided, as Arnold had forecast, spiritual meaning in what its perpetrators regarded as an increasingly secular and alienated society. It also gained official recognition in the late colonial phase for promoting to the wider world the writers and values of the “English” literary tradition.

As Raymond Williams has written (Williams, 1983), separating *English Literature* out as the subject “English” meant an apparent gain in “relevance”, but a loss of an essential component: an understanding of the working of language within a historical and social context. The reform of English studies at HE in the latter part of the last century rectified this at university level, and the introduction of A Level *English Language* at A Level in the early eighties marked the beginning of a change post-16. Since then, the National Curriculum and the Literacy Strategy have ensured that language study be central to the curriculum from the earliest stage.

There are therefore good historical reasons why it is now time to reunite “Language” and “Literature” to form an integrated English study throughout the pre-university phases. These are complemented by academic reasons, in the sense of the academic patterns of higher education into which many students will be moving (50% of the year group are expected to experience higher education by the end of the decade).

Increasingly, students move on from comprehensive school to a comprehensive university. This is true not only in the increasingly mixed population of higher

education, where traditional entrants with A levels mix with “non traditional” entrants of various ages and backgrounds. It is true also in the Humanities curriculum at HE, which, despite apparent diversity, exhibits a striking coherence in its approach to English, media, cultural and historical studies.

Wherever one looks in university Humanities, one finds a study based upon critical reading, socially and historically contextualised. This is true of a Shakespeare module taking a New Historicist approach to *The Taming of the Shrew*; of a media course on film noir; of a historical study of the language of colonial administration. The study, in other words, is of discourse.

*Discourse* is the concept that can unite English studies post-16. Bakhtin (1986) has shown that there are speech genres as well as literary genres, and that literary language, like speech, is dialogic. Discourse analysis examines the patterning of all forms of language – literary, speech, or media – and relates it to the social practices within which it has its being. It thus makes for a productive approach to written language, speech, or media that situates text within social and historical contexts.

Students moving from school or FE to HE at present have effectively to learn a new form of literary and media study (although A Level Media Studies prepares them better for degree level work than does A Level *English Literature*). Paradoxically, they move from a highly differentiated range of English and media subjects with relatively little in common to a more unified and coherent approach to language, media and literature.

(In recognising this, we are far from suggesting that the practice of English Studies in HE is perfect, and that A level English should simply reproduce its pedagogies. One of the strongest features of the UK school system is teachers’ commitment to the whole child, a commitment that found its expression in the *Growth through English* (Dixon 1967) approach to English studies. The research imperative of HE puts pressures on staff different from those experienced by teachers in school, one of the consequences of which is the contraction of teaching to little more than two short terms (Sutherland 2004). Some students simply cannot cope, and others find strategies such as plagiarism to cover their disengagement. As student numbers rise, teaching in HE will find itself increasingly in crisis, and can learn from the secondary sector methods of teaching and assessment that provide a more fruitful experience for all concerned.)

We envisage, then, a post-16 course that takes *discourse* as an organising principle of study. It will seek to examine the function of language in society by focusing on specific discourse forms: certain kinds of speech, certain kinds of written language (including literature), and certain kinds of other media. It will examine these not as isolated texts (conversations, novels, films) but in relation to the social and historical world within which they are utterances in the continuing human conversation. It will also give students opportunities to be creative producers of meaning, working within established genres and experimenting with them. Such a course would do more than prepare students effectively for the higher education to which many of them will proceed. It will also answer the question asked by one of the children of the present writer, as he studied his A Level Literature set book: “What am I doing this *for*?”

Such a course would help achieve continuity of pedagogy and practice over the compulsory and post-compulsory years of education. This continuity would make possible an assessment culture in which accredited teachers and institutions work within regional networks to validate their colleagues' judgements. We envisage a future of English studies in which apparently disparate elements – language, literature, production, criticism, assessment - are integrated, in which a common understanding of discourse (including the discourses of assessment) unites the profession.

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## *Contributors*

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