

# Defending English

**Peter Thomas decries the ‘Trumpism’ of current education policy and argues that we must defend our subject vigorously.**

NATE has always been for me the heart, mind and voice of English as a values-rich humane discipline. Its development and promotion of good practice has been securely rooted in historical overview, testable theory and practicability. The long view, the need for coherent theory and the care for what happens in real classrooms are a check on educational quick-fix fads or gimmicks. That's not to say NATE has avoided creativity or inspiration, but that creativity and inspiration have emerged from a fusion of evidence and principle.

The typical English values which stimulate creative and inspirational teaching are easily identified: reading as a source of understanding and pleasure; writing as best developed by having something to say; and literature as a window to a wider human experience – who we are, how we may be and how others are interestingly different. And, in addition to obvious social functions, purposes and applications, a valuing of English as *motivation for youngsters to find life interesting*. English offers youngsters of *all* abilities a doorway to understanding, fulfillment and communication.

What alarms me is that the values of our humane discipline – values which have survived superstition, ignorance, dogma and dictatorship since the Renaissance – are being subverted by the ugly phenomenon of Trumpism. Among too many examples to bear listing is his response when asked if he regretted anything about his campaign: ‘No. I won’. His is a world-view and rationale which trashes historical overview, testable theory and practicability and which despises the fusion of evidence with principle.

The Trumpist contempt for these values has been enthusiastically imported to the UK. Its abusive methods of substituting assertion for argument, slogans for thinking, and vacuous promises and platitudes for reason infect our lives today. UK Trumpists are better educated, speak with approved accents and wrap themselves in faux-democratic livery, but they admire the effectiveness of Trump methods. Since Michael Gove dismissed education academics and professionals as The Blob, and the Daily Mail described UK judges as Enemies of the People, public discourse has been contaminated by a brutish trashing

of dissenters and opponents, of evidence and principles. It has strengthened the evolution of belief into dogma, dogma into policy and policy into forced practice. There will be claims for research, necessity and successful outcomes, but these will be cynically deployed tokens in the service of slogans or soundbites. And this brutishness is infecting education.

As a secondary specialist, I'm not best suited to judge the best way to teach reading in the early years, but I want youngsters to be taught to read in a way that makes them *want* to read, to read *more*, to read *independently*, for *pleasure* and for *purpose*. Whatever does this, I'll back. If synthetic phonics does the trick, I'm for synthetic phonics. If other methods work, I'm for them too. In secondary English, I've found that what works for one student doesn't necessarily work for another – so I don't look for one simple solution to something as complex as learning to read.

Which is why I get uneasy when I read Nick Gibb, the Schools Minister's claims that teaching synthetic phonics as the ‘*first, fast and only*’ method has raised reading standards in England as shown by the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). He says this is ‘a vindication of the government's boldness in pursuing the evidence in the face of ideological criticism,’ despite ‘opponents of phonics whose alternative proposals would do so much to damage reading instruction.’ Mr Gibb previously claimed that ‘fallacious’ beliefs about reading had ‘blighted’ the education outcomes of ‘generations of children’.

After 30+ years in GCSE assessment, I can't have much faith in a list of 40 words, half of them normal, the other half made-up ‘pseudo-words’, used to test whether a child can ‘decode’ phonic segments as a measure of *reading*. But what worries me is the way Mr Gibb's confident and polished Trumpism flouts the norms of academic discourse:

- 1 **The false binary** – making a complex issue a matter of right or wrong.
- 2 **The flawed comparison** – assuming that PISA testing (in Shanghai, Singapore, UK) eliminates social, cultural and motivational influences on children and performance.

3 **Critics as the enemy** – sceptics as ‘ideological’ and the cause of ‘damage’.

4 **Making UK reading great again** – the new solution as the answer to “generations” of failure.

5 **Selective evidence** – Ireland, Northern Ireland, Finland and Poland scored higher, despite a policy of mixing phonics with other methods.

6 **Ignoring alternative interpretations** – Professor Stephen Krashen, has argued that tests across the world aimed at proving that EISSP works all test ‘decoding’ of artificial collections of phonically regular words, when real reading requires grasp of the phonic irregularities of a mongrel language like English.

7 **Simple solutions to complex problems** – synthetic phonics as the ‘only’ method claimed to have brought about success.

8 **Measuring the conveniently measurable** – selecting decontextualized phonic *decoding* as representative of the multiple skills of making *meaning* from visual, etymological, semantic, syntactic and context cues.

9 **Untested theory** – no comparison of control group against target group to measure the success of synthetic phonics in reading words in real whole texts.

10 **Practicability** – the effects of forced policy on teachers, classrooms and children. (OFSTED's Bold Beginnings makes clear it expects synthetic phonics to rule in early years ‘reading’).

This insidious subversion of academic and humane values is evident elsewhere in education – notably in justifying KS2 SATS assessment of ‘Grammar’ and justifying school organization in Multi-Academy Chains under CEOs paying themselves £150–£250k. We need to defend our subject and our values, and vigorously. And give thanks for NATE as the heart, mind and voice of English, our defence and our inspiration.

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