

A Manifesto for English

12 Ways of...

Re-affirming English in Principle and Practice

A NATE Position Paper

In this NATE Position Paper,
Peter Thomas sets out a series of
underpinning principles for English
teaching today, and suggests what
they might look like in practice.

The last few years have seen a remarkable development in the culture of English – the growth of informal communities in the social media. Originally most evident in the TES Forum, the seeking of advice and sharing of resources has extended to YouTube, Facebook and, especially Twitter. For many young teachers, Twitter is the first port of call for help with subject knowledge, classroom strategy and the management of learning. Reading the calls for help, it is hard to avoid the feeling that many of these young teachers have not, in their training, been well equipped in these three areas.

Either that or independent resourcefulness has yielded to a consumer culture of wanting off-the-shelf, classroom-ready materials. For tomorrow.

The sense of common enterprise and of sharing in the Twittersphere can only be welcomed. At a time when university-based PGCEs have been replaced by school-based apprenticeship models of training, and the local authority advisers, traditional sources of subject and pedagogical expertise, have disappeared, any teacher support that goes beyond the values and priorities of a training school's SMT is a bonus.

The new parochialism of Initial Teacher Training has subverted the notion of teachers as members of a wider community of scholarship and professional identity.

A brief trawl through the daily profusion of requests and offers in the main Twitter community, *TeamEnglish*, reveals a spirit of generous support and mutual care. It also reveals some lack of confident professional autonomy in thinking and resourcing. Further scrutiny reveals a model of English organised by the expedient categories of GCSE specifications and question papers. There are requests for SoWs on P1 section A, or P2 Section B, and advice on making students aware of their requirements. So far, so good: astute and responsible teachers have always used examiner reports, Mark Schemes and Awarding Body assessment support so show students how they will be assessed.

But the current trend is towards the exam apparatus dominating English. The fragmentation of the English curriculum results in students being focused on (e.g.) *Paper 1 Q4 English* and *Paper 2 Question 2 English*. This is a case of the assessment tail wagging the curriculum dog. This has happened in KS2 where high-status tokens of writing attainment (e.g., fronted adverbials and exclamatory sentences) have taken priority over the expression of personally authentic thought and feeling. GCSE has so far kept healthily free of the KS2 reduction to formulae and Lego linguistics but there are signs of some replication of that formulaic model.

All ABs offer courses and on-line advice on how to interpret new tweaks and emphases in curriculum focus and assessment methodology – e.g. ‘structure’, ‘context’ and ‘specialist terminology’. There is consistent and sensible advice on all these, emphasising that ‘appropriate

and effective’ usage is more important than mere insertability and device-spotting. Nevertheless, teachers seeking silver bullet solutions are promoting a form of reading and writing that is mechanically descriptor-driven, and usually wrapped in a catchy acronym such as PEAL, PETAL, DAFOREST and the like. In Language, asyndetic lists and anaphora are gaining the same unhelpfully inflated status as oxymoron and enjambment in Literature. The result is more gargling with jargon than enhanced appreciation of human communication in language and fiction.

I think it’s time to reaffirm English as bigger than the mechanisms that certificate a sample of competence. It’s time to restore coherence and values to the most important subject in school.

What follows is based on two general principles: a) that English is a subject committed to individuals’ intellectual and emotional growth and to communication as an essential part of social being; and b) that English exam certification can assess only parts of the totality of the humane discipline that we call English.

Any manifesto is bound to be personal, but this re-affirmation of principle and practice has emerged from a lifetime of teaching, examining, training teachers and writing about English. It is, I think, a continuation of the kind of humane and disciplined approach to English that has characterised NATE for the last 55 years – an approach which values the subtleties, strengths and complexities of learners, of learning, of teaching and of language.

Teachers will find some parts they can agree with, and others they disagree with: what matters is that they are prompted to articulate their own rationale for their subject’s scope and values.

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1 Teaching

1a) Principles

- i) Some teaching is *instructional*, usually related to knowledge-based facts or information, or procedural guidance.
- ii) Some teaching is *skills-based*, demonstrating how knowledge may be classified, analysed, interpreted, interrogated, applied or adapted.
- iii) Some teaching is *developmental*, drawing on learners’ personal experience and prior learning.
- iv) Some teaching is whole class, some is *differentiated* according to where the learner is.

1b) Practice

- Teachers can support learning by exploiting a varied communicative repertoire, within lessons and between lessons, to demonstrate teaching is more than one-way instruction.
- Lesson activities can be sequenced to include prompts to a wide response repertoire – e.g., recall, explain, explore, illustrate, demonstrate, apply and question.
- Lesson planning can be explicit about starting from where individuals are on a learning trajectory, and then to where they are intended to be. (See Vygotsky’s concept of a zone of proximal development.)
- Teachers can engage different kinds of learner – and re-prompt all learners – by a repertoire of anecdote, demonstration, humour, modelling, questioning and motivating through different parts of a lesson.

2 Learning

2a) Principles

- i) Some learning is randomly *experiential*, physical and emotional, or derived from parents and community before and during time in school.
- ii) Some learning is motivated by *intellectual curiosity*, problem solving or conceptual challenge.
- iii) Some learning is motivated by *non-cerebral* aspects of self-interest, conformity, duty, need or competition.
- iv) Most learning comes through *doing* rather than through hearing, and imperfect outcomes in complex learning are worth more than perfect outcomes in simple learning.

2b) Practice

- Teachers can draw upon students’ known or likely previous experiences and learning to link with books and ideas. (Again, see Vygotsky’s concept of a zone of proximal development.)
- The question ‘How clever is this student?’ is less important than the question ‘How is this student clever?’, which can be demonstrated on classroom walls with display of individuals’ strengths and attainments.
- Learning can be motivated and supported by collaborative group-work as well as whole-class and individualised activity.
- Some learning can be presented as content-based as in information acquisition; other learning can be presented as skill-based, as in applying, developing or interrogating information.

3 Learners

3a) Principles

- i) Learners can be helped to skills and understanding through enjoyment – they do not always need to know that they are in learning mode.
- ii) Teachers should deploy a variety of motivations other than academic success, including enhanced self-worth, social status, competition and collaboration.
- iii) Teachers should provide non-linguistic – e.g., visual, aural & sensory support for those who do not learn through language, even learning about language.
- iv) Learners can learn from and for themselves, and from other learners.

3b) Practice

- Lessons can be segmented to include tasks and stimulus appealing to different kinds of learning preference or learning strength.
- Teachers can use competition that rewards talents and performance other than those specifically related to curriculum content.
- Learners can be encouraged to seek support from other learners in pairs or small groups.
- Learning can be supported by inviting learners to bring in and discuss objects (including books) which they learned from in earlier years.

4 Language

4a) Principles

- i) Language is acquired from an early age and is strongly influenced by family and community before the start of formal education. (See Bernstein (UK) & Labov (US)).
- ii) Language is acquired aurally and practised orally long before it is directed towards writing, with language components such as vocabulary and grammatical constructions acquired unconsciously and from social contexts.
- iii) Language is the medium of communicating experience and feelings, mainly empirically, before it is the medium of communicating abstract ideas or negotiating with others. (See Piaget on concrete operational and formal operational modes).
- iv) Language and intelligence are closely linked – complexity and diversity of vocabulary and grammatical structures a function of complexity and diversity of cognitive and affective development. Whilst language development can aid cognitive development, the main feature is that the cognitive and the affective drive the linguistic.

4b) Practice

- Teachers can reassure students that specialist terminology for language study is less important than being able to comment on the purpose and effects of selected language details. (See various AB teacher guidance docs).
- Teachers can adopt a questioning repertoire that stimulates learners' thoughts, feelings and attitudes, as well as knowledge, cognitive, descriptive and definitional skills. (See de Bono's 'Hats' as a far better horizontal English response model than the vertical and cognitive model of Bloom's taxonomy).
- Learners can be encouraged to distinguish between the concrete language of events and the abstract language of ideas by working from starters such as 'I went...'/ 'I saw...' and 'I thought...'/ 'It seemed to me that...'.
- Tasks can include writing very short stories in which two characters speak in different registers and the narrative linking the dialogue is in a third register.

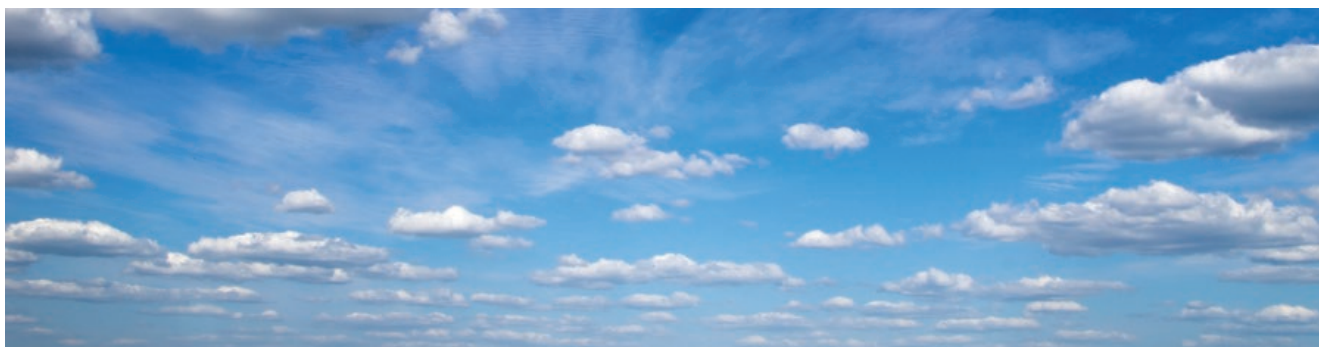
5 Reading

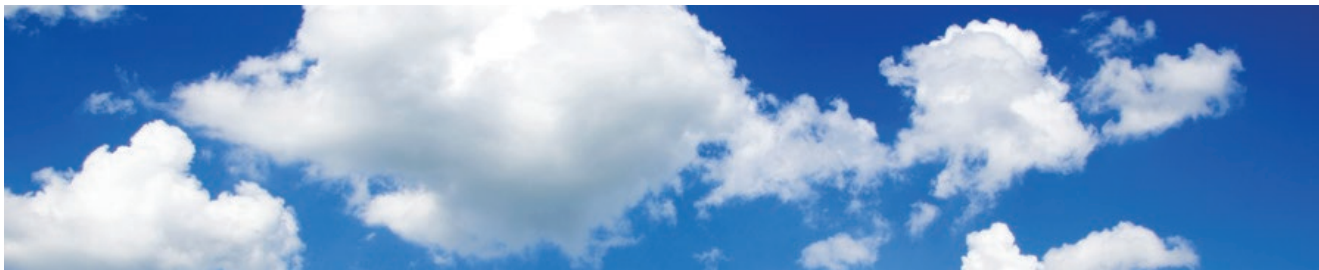
5a) Principles

- i) Some learners have not, or have not yet, found reading enjoyable or satisfying.
- ii) Learners who are more at ease with visual and moving image texts, can develop textual response skills by considering ways in which they reflect or impact on public values, ideas and attitudes, as well as ways they may use language.
- iii) Learners can understand by hearing what they are not yet capable of understanding by reading.
- iv) Reading for general educational development requires familiarity with a vocabulary for the concepts and formal discourse of academic study, and these are more likely to be found in non-literary writing.

5b) Practice

- Some reading in lessons can be promoted for pleasure, with teachers sharing their enthusiasm and reading to demonstrate tonal and attitudinal aspects of language, and sometimes with no following written analysis or response.
- Lessons can demonstrate the craft of expressive reading by the teacher modelling a toneless, poorly-paced reading, then playing a clip of an audio-book (or pulling out all the stops in his/her own re-reading).
- Reading can be promoted by the teacher reading aloud an extract, breaking off at a point of interest, and asking students to select the authentic continuation from a choice of three (two of them, obviously, written by the teacher).
- Reading can be promoted as more than decoding print – for example by 'reading the world' beyond the word or image in a variety of literary, non-literary and media texts.





6 Writing

6a) Principles

- i) Writing is not for most people the principal way in which they express themselves or engage with others
- ii) Spelling, punctuation and grammar are *not* 'basics' of writing. They are complex and inconsistent systems of language presentation. *Spelling* requires familiarity with inconsistent morphological pattern derived from different languages, and with a 26-grapheme alphabet generating 44 distinct phonemes. (See George Bernard Shaw's example of phonetic possibility in the spelling of 'fish' as 'ghoti' (cough, women, station)).
Punctuation (apart from sentence boundary marking) requires grasp of meaning in the punctuated relationships between words, phrases and clauses.
Grammatical usage requires familiarity with patterns differing from spoken forms of English, and reflecting cognitive grasp of social and cultural variations.
- iii) Skills competence precedes the ability to analyse and define the competence. (See UKLA docs, & Richmond's 'A Better Plan'.)
- iv) Assessment should be for writing, not writing for assessment, but GCSE provides a model of proportional value in its mark weightings for Communication, Organisation and Accuracy.

6b) Practice

- Lessons can include opportunities for brief process-writing bursts to support speaking rather than for product-writing, and for brief response tasks to be limited to, e.g., five/ten/fifteen words.
- Teachers can model the difference between process writing to gather and structure ideas and product writing to present the result.
- Learners can be encouraged to see writing as a process by being given examples of poems and prose where a published writer has edited and adapted a draft.
- Comments on spelling can avoid the crude binary distinction of 'correct' and 'incorrect' spelling, referring instead to 'partly right' or 'mainly right' where the spelling shows phonetic plausibility; and comments on grammatical usage can refer to varieties of grammatical forms but a privileging of some in particular social or occupational contexts.

7 Speaking and Listening

7a) Principles

- i) Speech is for *most* learners (and adults) the main way in which thoughts, feelings and experiences are communicated.
- ii) Public speech is not for *all* learners (or adults) the main way in which thoughts, feelings and experiences are communicated.
- iii) Speaking in pairs or small groups allows for spontaneous, reflective and formative organisation and communication of thoughts, feelings and experiences.
- iv) Speaking existed, historically, before writing, and children learn to speak before they learn to write, so speaking is a foundation for writing.

7b) Practice

- Teachers can model the valid differences between speaking to think and speaking to present in their own communication with the class.
- Classroom activity can reinforce the status of speaking by including (e.g., as a starter) three 2 minute prepared speeches by students on a prepared topic, with 30 second unprepared spoken responses from selected students.
- The valid differences between process speech and product speech can be demonstrated by group-work activities where one student summarises for the rest of the class the discussion that took place in the group
- The way speech is indicative or suggestive of a person's mood, manner or motivation can be effectively demonstrated by use of excerpts from drama scripts.

8 Literature

8a) Principles

- i) Poetry is primarily a medium for communicating experience, insight, feeling and understanding, as well as – and more than – a compendium of literary devices.
- ii) Novels are fictional representations of people and events in which writers communicate insight, feeling and understanding, as well as a display their craft in fictional writing.
- iii) Literature is a portable and accessible means of vicariously expanding students' experience and encountering cultural diversity.
- iv) Literature is a potent source of stimulus to developing and rehearsing a repertoire of personal, moral and social response, as well as increasing cultural capital.

8b) Practice

- Authors and the literary heritage are not harmed by engaging students with selected passages from a long (e.g., 19th century) novel.
- Short stories allow scope for valid engagement with character, situation, theme, language, structure and contexts without additional demands upon for memory or focus-stamina.
- Screen adaptations of novels are helpful introductions and focused revisitings of texts.
- Lessons do not need to focus only on the literary canon – much teenage fiction is as rich in insight, themes and craft as 'heritage' titles – and some non-canonical fiction (e.g. formulaic commercial fiction such as Mills and Boon) can provide interesting comparison of ideas, values, attitudes and craft.

9 Shakespeare

9a) Principles

- i) Shakespeare wrote play scripts for performing, not books for reading.
- ii) Shakespeare was a successful popular entertainer of a very varied paying audience.
- iii) Shakespeare's plays need to be seen on stage or screen before they are read or studied.
- iv) Shakespeare's greatest merit is what he communicates – his insight into human moods, manners and motives. How he communicates these things is a narrower and subsequent interest, and best related to the script's performative potential. (See Thomas in NATE's publication *'The Complete Shakespeare'*).

9b) Practice

- Teachers can reinforce the performance aspects of Shakespeare's plays by showing clips of the same scene from different productions – and clips can be digitally transferred for viewing as homework. (See, e.g., Finch, McKellen, Sher versions of *'Macbeth'* and *'Macbeth on the Estate'*, or BFI Education's ready-made *'Macbeth on Film'*).
- Students can be given a sense of ownership of small parts of Shakespeare's text by improvising the scene in their own words, then with their own edited version of the printed script.
- Lessons can be planned to include episodes of solo and choral recitation of brief excerpts to familiarise students with language and the possibilities of interpretative expression.
- Tasks can include small-group exercises of performed excerpts video-ed and compared.

10 Assessment

10a) Principles

- i) Students should be familiar enough with criteria to be able to make some self-assessment, rather than relying on a teacher's time spent in heavy marking.
- ii) Evidence of learning can sometimes be assessed on the basis on non-written student response prompted by dialogue between teacher and learner. (See Alexander on *dialogic teaching*).
- iii) Assessment of knowledge is always easier – but less discriminating and less useful – than assessment of skills required to develop, apply, interrogate or evaluate knowledge.
- iv) Formative assessment is more useful to learners than summative assessment. (See Dylan Wiliam on *formative assessment*).

10b) Practice

- Formative assessment of reading can validly focus on one or two, rather than all the criteria available.
- Formative assessment of writing can validly focus on part of a student's work, or can focus on one or two, rather than all the criteria available.
- Formative assessment of speaking and listening can focus on ways in which speaking may share features of writing, but may also productively differ from writing (e.g., in intonation, interaction and gesture).
- Formative assessment of literature can validly focus on characters, situations, ideas and readers' responses as well as on aspects of literary craft.

11 Continuity and development

11a) Principles

- i) There should be structural similarity in assessment frameworks across all key stages, with a common hierarchy of terms, skills and knowledge categories allowing for continuity and progression.
- ii) There should be recognition and reward of individuals' modes of successful learning as well as of what they have learned, so other teachers are aware of the learner's profile.
- iii) Previously learned skills can be reinforced by application to different texts and contexts.
- iv) Previously encountered texts can be approached with new or developed skills.

11b) Practice

- Transition KS2-3 can build on acquired grammatical knowledge by placing it in a context of wider and more active reading, requiring e.g. interpretation, evaluation and response to authorial ideas.
- Confident progression from KS3 and KS4 to A Level can be helped by selecting different texts by previously studied writers.
- Revisiting literature studied or encountered earlier in the school career can create opportunities for reflection and adaptation/extension of response.
- Revisiting students' previous work can create opportunities for reflection on personal change and development.

12 Professional development and partnerships

12a) Principles

- i) Teachers should have access to regular provision of subject-specific knowledge and professional skills derived from research, practice and principles. (See *Teachers' Standards DfE*).
- ii) There should be mutually productive relationships between all stakeholders – e.g., government, NGOs subject associations, Awarding Bodies and universities.
- iii) Teachers are most effectively motivated when they feel that their subject knowledge and professional expertise are a principal source of professional performance.
- iv) Teachers should be encouraged to be researchers, reflecting upon their practice by matching examples of students' responses before and after any teaching, and noting ways in which different practice enhanced or hindered learning in individuals.

12b) Practice

- ITT and induction can focus on subject specialist knowledge (e.g., linguistics or unfamiliar literature) as well as understanding of behaviour management and teaching and learning.
- CPD can be designed to support subject knowledge and promote reflective practice in the recording of evidence of the effects of teaching strategies.
- Departmental meetings can include focus on subject knowledge or curriculum content as well as necessary schedules and procedures.
- Whole school policy & practice can reinforce the importance of language in general and talk in particular as a medium of teaching and learning. (See Barton, *'Using Whole-School Literacy Strategies to Improve Teaching & Learning'*).

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