The Decline in Student Choice of A Level English

A NATE Position Paper

In recent years, declining numbers of students have been taking up English at A Level. This paper, written by NATE's **Post-16 & HE Working Group**, investigates possible reasons, locating current approaches at GCSE as a significant cause for concern.

Introduction

Recent years have seen a significant and continued decline in the number of UK students choosing to study English subjects at A Level – a total of 35% decrease between 2012 and 2016, with English Language and English Language and Literature suffering particularly steep falls.

	2012	2016	2019
English Literature	49,070	48,973	37,475
English Language	24,416	21,933	13,815
English Lang and Lit	16,476	12,470	7,580

There is a number of possible reasons for this decline in the popularity of English. These include the following:

1. There has been increased governmental pressure on students and schools to increase the numbers choosing STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and mathematics).
2. Students no longer have the opportunity to study four AS Level (one year advanced subsidiary) courses: English Language and the integrated course English Language and Literature were popular choices here.
3. Students' choice of A Level subject may have been influenced by the Russell Group's (elite universities') list of 'facilitating' subjects deemed suitable to prepare students for university study. This excluded English Language, the A Level English subject that has suffered the most decline. (This list has now been withdrawn, but recruitment to English Language has not improved).

It is difficult to be sure how far dissatisfaction with the A Level English courses themselves is an issue. Although there is little in the way of hard data, anecdotal evidence suggests that students continue to enjoy A Level English subjects, and that, despite recent syllabus changes which have to some extent narrowed the experience, the courses are relatively successful.

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However, there is an argument to be made that the reduction in numbers derives from a growing student dissatisfaction and disengagement with English studies at earlier stages of education, especially in GCSE English, the course officially prescribed for students at KS4 (14-16).

A historical perspective

During the second half of the twentieth century, the popularity of English as a school and university subject remained high amongst students. Curriculum reform sponsored by government bodies such as the Schools Council and led by members of subject associations such as the National Association for the Teaching of English focused on the experience of students both outside and inside the classroom. Research into language learning demonstrated the interrelation in child development between the four language modes of listening, speaking, reading and writing. These language modes interrelate throughout life, and much of this learning is unconscious. Supporting this sensitive understanding of the way in which children's language develops, English teaching until the beginning of the present century at its best offered young people an education in English that built upon their dynamic growth and pleasure in various modes of talk, wide and analytic reading, and purposeful, often creative, writing.

Throughout these decades, opposition to 'progressive' methods and press concern about 'standards' resulted in a number of government reports on the teaching of English and eventually in the introduction in 1997 of the National Literacy Strategy. However, a balance was maintained between the ideals and ambitions of educators and the political forces that wished to direct and manage curriculum and assessment. This was achieved via consultative bodies such as the Schools Examination and Assessment Council (SEAC) and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), both of whom worked with teachers, researchers and examiners to maintain a curriculum and assessment pattern that engaged teachers and students and reassured officials that standards were being maintained.

The abolition of these consultative bodies in 2010 in favour of the control of the Department for Education (DfE) has resulted in a political control of curriculum and assessment that is at best ill-informed and at worst destructive of good practice. Its results in terms of classroom practice are inimical to student pleasure and growth in the study of English. Hence the current situation.

We argue below that the current decline in recruitment to English studies at A Level can be directly attributed to a negative response to aspects of the English curriculum during earlier years of school education. There have been (to our knowledge) no studies of student experience of school English comparable to those of undergraduate experience of university English (e.g. Hodgson 2010). Nevertheless, a good deal of anecdotal evidence reported in journals and teacher magazines, along with comment on social media, has complemented our own experience as teachers and examiners that certain aspects of curriculum and assessment have adversely affected the experience of both students and teachers.

In making the analysis below, however, we are aware that a great deal of good work continues to be done and that teachers are often resourceful (whatever the circumstances) in creating the best learning experience for their students.

The experience of English at KS3 (11–14) and KS4 (14–16)

Moving away from the 'big picture'

One of the pleasures of English studies has always been the experience of discovering insights that go beyond language and literature through detailed discussion and analysis of text. This is what Barbara Bleiman (2019) calls 'big picture English'. A student's first exposure to a text should be geared around the primacy of the reading experience (Cushing and Giovanelli 2019). Student experience of English study today, however, tends to be a microcosmic analysis of textual features and their alleged 'effects' rather than on reading for meaning with close textual reference. This tendency has developed over more than two decades since the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy in 1997. Its effect has been to reduce English studies to the transmission of supposedly correct, objective knowledge about language and literature. This is evident at every level, from the current primary language curriculum to the official view of literary texts as 'cultural capital', knowledge of which is good in itself, rather than as a means of pleasurable reflection on and participation in life. This is not 'powerful knowledge' in the sense defined by Young (2014), which '*explains [and] enables you to envisage alternatives*'.

This development ignores and undermines a tradition of English studies that has developed over two centuries. The first report on the teaching of English in England (Newbolt 1921) asserted that education should proceed '*not by the presentation of lifeless facts, but by teaching the student to follow the different lines on which life may be explored*' p.8). Newbolt continued:

> '*We must treat literature not as language merely, not as an ingenious set of symbols ... but as the self-expression of great natures, the record and rekindling of spiritual experiences, and in daily life for every one of us the means by which we may, if we will, realise our own impressions and communicate them to our fellows*' (Newbolt 1921:21)

Newbolt wrote in the aftermath of the First World War, and his aspirational language reflects the desire for national renewal; but the view of literature as a humane, creative and democratic study was already a century old. When Newbolt writes that literature '*binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time*' (1921:253), he is directly quoting Wordsworth's description of the poet in the *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* (1798).

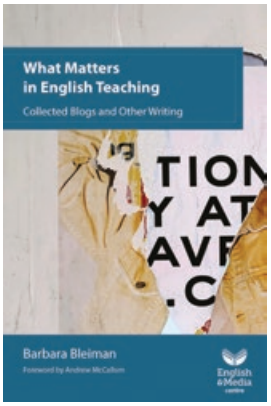
Many teachers strive to maintain a 'big picture' view of English, but are swimming against the tide of current ideology. A theoretical justification of the microcosmic approach to text approach is given by Ofsted (the UK school inspection body) in their account of cognitive load theory (Muijs 2019). It is of course sensible to avoid burdening young students with more information than their working memory can manage, given that they have yet to build much of the conceptual framework they will need to situate their new knowledge. However, this does not mean that literature study should focus on verbal detail without relating this to the larger ideas of the text.

Knowledge and the curriculum

This emphasis on textual particulars is consistent with the drive towards what is sometimes called a 'knowledge rich' curriculum, shorn of the subjectivity of a personal response to literature. Students have to attend to text on a micro level, drawing on a paraphernalia of 'technique-spotting' which they are socialised into doing from KS1, but which becomes dominant in secondary English. A fifteen-year-old told one of the writers of this paper that she had been taught to recognise onomatopoeia in every year from age 10. This is literacy as decoding rather than as understanding. This approach to texts is also reflected in the Direct Instruction and 'scripted lessons' movement, which favours transmission teaching of the meaning of texts; it disparages group work, and down-values classroom talk generally.

The privileging of the learning of contextual knowledge has also contributed to this trend. As further discussed below, the GCSE curriculum now offers a narrow choice of literature texts and requires the teaching of literary context (typically in relation to Victorian novels, Romantic poetry and Shakespeare plays) which may often be presented as information to be learned and repeated in exam essays. Further, despite the advances in teaching Shakespeare promoted by the Royal Shakespeare Company and others in recent decades, the assessment regime encourages teaching that is insufficiently focused on theatricality, performance and ideas. The insistence on assessment entirely by terminal examination doesn't allow for reflective coursework and is entirely at odds with assessment in higher education – not to mention real-life adult needs to consult a range of resources and draft for a particular audience and purpose.

Writing itself has become detached from a long tradition of authentic response to experience. Students are taught to routinely include specific linguistic features such as 'wow words' (unusual adjectives), varied connectives and subordinate clauses. As Debra Myhill and her colleagues (2012) have shown, there is value in helping students apply their linguistic knowledge to their writing, but direct teaching of particular linguistic features is no substitute for substantial and extended



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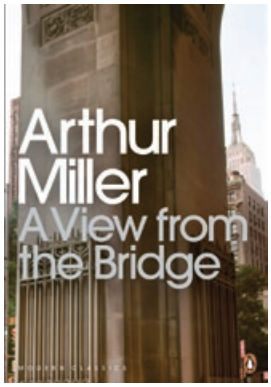

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experience of both reading and writing (Barrs 2019). When children write about their reading, there is now an overwhelming emphasis from Year 7 onwards on writing paragraphs of micro-analysis of literary texts using formulae such as the ubiquitous PEEL (Gibbons 2019). It is little wonder that many 15-year-old students report they no longer read for enjoyment (Lough 2019). An English graduate known to one of the writers reported that her 14 year old daughter asked her: '*Why would you want to study English at university? It's so boring!*' The experience of initial teacher education (ITE) tutors is that beginning teachers usually don't want to teach like this, but the overall school and political-educational culture is too powerful to resist.

Because of the importance of GCSE as a qualification, this microcosmic approach to texts has now also inflected the curriculum at Key Stage 3 (ages 12-14). Across the country, KS3 is being used as a preparation ground for GCSE exams; in more than a few schools, students start studying their GCSE texts in Year 7, and return to them every year until Year 11.

Narrowing the curriculum

In addition to this shift in dominant approaches to *response* to reading, the reading *curriculum* has also narrowed since the introduction of the 1989 National Curriculum, and especially since the new GCSEs in 2015. As suggested above, the emphasis on canonical or 'classic' texts, especially pre-20th century texts, has increased, and opportunities for reading contemporary and socially diverse texts – always particularly enjoyed by GCSE students in the past – have decreased.

At KS4, in addition to Shakespeare, there is a new emphasis on reading Romantic and Victorian texts, fiction and non-fiction, as set texts and as unseen passages – including the compulsory study of Romantic poetry and a whole 19th century novel for all students (regardless of ability). Whilst such reading has its place in the GCSE course, it has now come to dominate it, not least because of the insistence that all students must be assessed on their understanding of these texts in terminal written examinations, and that they must be prepared to comment on any part of the text. Consequently, there is an increase in 'ploughing' through long difficult texts, an increased emphasis on 'drilling' for exam responses, and significantly reduced opportunities for a range of modern, accessible writing with direct relevance to students' lives and contemporary issues. The arbitrary and ridiculous banning of American texts from the GCSE exams (removing some of the texts most enjoyed by students such as *Of Mice and Men* and *A View from the Bridge*) has further reduced the possibilities here. (The International GCSE, increasingly taken by private schools in the UK, allows coursework assessment and includes international texts.)

The language curriculum at KS4 has also narrowed. Spoken Language Study at GCSE – removed in 2015 – was the only significant aspect of 11–16 English which was able to prepare students for the kind of linguistic study which characterises A Level English Language, and one that was enjoyable and appealing to many students, as well as a hugely important educational focus which significantly broadened the English curriculum. The scope for varied language study has also been reduced, for instance, by the decrease in emphasis on media, digital and other non-literary texts in GCSE English Language.

As also suggested above, the KS3 curriculum has narrowed in some instances because of the incursion of GCSE texts into KS3. Even where this is not the case, however, there is widespread evidence that the range of material encountered by students at KS3 has narrowed. In particular, many departments have started preparing students for GCSE at this stage by focusing on the study of pre-20th century texts, especially Victorian texts, again reducing the opportunities for reading contemporary literature. There has also been a move in many schools towards a more literature-dominated KS3 programme, with considerably reduced opportunities for work in language study/knowledge about language, creative, personal and extended writing, media study, drama, and so on.

Assessment matters

Behind all this disintegration, as we have indicated above, is the assessment regime. Currently there is a strong link between assessment practices and both in-service teacher education (INSET) and continuous professional development (CPD). The examination boards themselves currently provide most subject INSET, and many multi-academy trusts (MATs) provide their own CPD alongside such organisations as PIXL and the Inspiration Trust. MATs produce schemes of work that have to be followed in partner schools without any professional oversight or quality assurance, and school leadership teams increasingly intervene in English departments' decision-making processes in relation to what is taught and how. Teachers are often intimidated into pedagogic methods of which they may not approve because of the demands of the assessment and the need to ensure that students gain acceptable results. Progress 8, which measures students' attainment against a benchmark created by testing in the first year of school, is a method of linking student performance over a number of years to teacher performance.

Generally, assessment in schools shows little recognition of the complex nature of learning in English, which involves non-linear progress and a wide range of skills. The concept of 'learning ladders' assumes that progress follows a straightforward pattern. 'Good' teaching at all levels now means giving students instructions to progress through fixed data points. English departments are now increasingly subject to whole-school assessment frameworks, with regular 'data drops', which are scrutinised for evidence that students are making progress – which is inimical to the way learning should take place in English. Departments have to create with their own assessment objectives at KS3, and have resorted, as indicated above, to the requirements of GCSE. The Commission for Assessment without Levels has worked to liberate schools and students from the stranglehold of levels, and OFSTED claim they now wish to assess schools qualitatively rather than quantitatively – but governing trusts and other stakeholders still require data to make comparisons between schools in their MAT and against national performance statistics. And fear of a bad inspection report may encourage a school to shore up the institution with walls of data to 'prove' that their teaching approaches are working.

Ways forward

We have focused in this paper on curriculum and assessment at Key Stages 3 and 4, as these are likely to be the main factors in the decline in student enthusiasm and enrolment for A Level English. However, the disintegration of English studies affects the entire curriculum, from the teaching of reading and grammar in the early years to the lack of progression and coherence between A Level and university English. Here we propose three ways in which the profession can move forward to transform the current situation. We need to agree a broad set of principles for coherent and productive English studies. We need to collaborate as a profession to argue the case for these with policymakers at all levels. And we need to convince students of the value of English studies – not only by what we do in the classroom, but also by addressing issues of employability and relevance beyond the academy.

1. Principles

The evidence we have adduced here underlines the importance of fundamental principles of English studies that have become obscured by a focus on narrowly conceived 'performance'. They concern coherence, progression, and integration. This outline, necessarily brief, draws on the long tradition of debate about English studies. More detailed recommendations are given by Richmond *et al* (2018a, 2018b).

English needs to make sense to its learners and teachers from the earliest years of study. Many young people have developed considerable competence in spoken language and some are beginning to write by the time they start school. Teachers of children in Key Stages 1 and 2 can build on this subconscious linguistic knowledge and introduce appropriate metalanguage to help learners understand how language works within social life. They will adopt a similarly sensitive approach to teaching reading: young children learning to read are not only decoding individual words but also beginning to grasp features of narrative, poetics and genre. Students in key stages 1 and 2 will read a variety of texts in all genres appropriate to their stage of development and communicate their responding and thinking in a range of modes, spoken and written. Teachers will give students the tools to discuss the grammatical structures of literary texts with reference to their meaning-making capacity and their potential to create effects in the minds of readers (Helks & Harris 2018; Cushing & Giovanelli 2019). As students move from KS2 to KS4, they will increasingly learn to apply their growing grammatical knowledge to their own writing. They will employ talk and other modes of communication to explore the larger themes of human life that are the subject of literature. Exploratory talk and drafts of coursework will assist their developing skills in writing appropriately for different purposes and audiences. By the end of KS4, students who so choose will be ready to progress to the more sophisticated, theoretically informed study of language and literature at A Level. Their A Level studies will continue the practice of exploratory discussion and writing, integrating language and literature study and preparing them for English at university. Assessment at all levels will be fit for purpose: talk, coursework and terminal assessment will be employed appropriately, with reference to the skills and knowledge being assessed. Both curriculum and assessment will look forward and backward from early years to undergraduate study to ensure a coherent, progressive and integrated experience for students and teachers.

2. Collaboration

Despite the wide-spread dissatisfaction we have recorded here, a great deal of good work continues to be done. The way forward must involve a collaborative professional focus on research into and promulgation of good practice. Newer associations of teachers and researchers including ResearchED, Team English, LitDrive and others provide online teacher support and well-attended teach-meets, conferences and other inservice events. LitDrive, for instance, presents talks by committed teachers about texts and ideas that are not driven by assessment objectives. The subject associations NATE and the English Association, alongside the English and Media Centre, continue to work for English students and teachers, offering resources, inservice education and a research-based, holistic view of classroom pedagogy. Some of these associations meet under the umbrella of the Common English Forum. The NATE Post-16 & HE Committee, the English Association, University English, Integrating English and others have organised conferences and meetings where university teachers and school teachers can meet to learn from each other and share good practice. The large *English Shared Futures* conference is a prominent example. The British Library offers a wealth of digitised resources to support curriculum planning and enrich the study of language and literature. Cumbria Local Education Authority, NATE, Canon and Adobe have collaborated to produce high quality classroom resources to facilitate the study of advertising. Recently, the National Education Union has held an exploratory meeting to discuss the possibility of mutual collaboration to involve more teachers in asserting a professional alternative to the retrograde tendencies discussed in this paper. Given that no common consultative body such as the former Qualifications and Assessment Authority currently exists, the various professional associations must find alternative collaborative means to promote productive subject philosophies and practices.

3. Students

If current practices at GCSE and A Level have given the subject an undeserved reputation, teachers can not only transform these practices but also make students aware of the relevance of English studies to their futures. Williams (2019) gives a list of the career pathways of some of her former A level English students: teacher of English; publisher; novelist; leader of actors' company; chief press officer for a key government department; writer of podcasts for the BBC; accountant; doctor; vet. Williams explains to her students that English studies is creative and analytical: it requires students to take on new ideas and create and develop telling arguments. It enhances students' communication skills as they interact with language in a wide range of demanding texts. Most significantly, in the contemporary world, it demands that students confront the ways in which narratives are formed and reformed.

Two articles published in the English & Media Centre's *e-magazine* for A Level English students may

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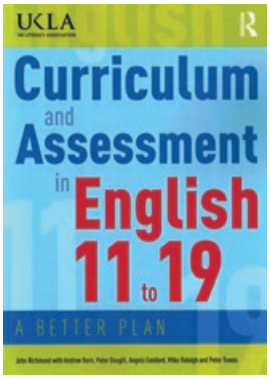

"Reforms over the last decade have tended to emphasise a superficial focus on student performance in literacy rather than a deeper and more satisfying engagement with language and literature."

inform students who need to be convinced of the social and economic value of English studies. Darics (2018) points out that the skills that employers require of new graduates include oral and written communication, critical thinking, teamwork, and the ability to apply knowledge. Studying English Language in depth will help students develop critical awareness and gain invaluable skills for their future working life. Shaw (2018) similarly argues that a degree in English Literature will train a student to be an independent critical thinker who can process and communicate diverse data in creative ways. Employers value an individual who is reflective in practice and analytical in approach.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to discern why students are withdrawing from English studies at A Level and beyond. We argue that this alienation derives from an accretion of discontent over previous years of English studies. Governmentally imposed reforms over the last decade have tended to emphasise a superficial focus on student performance in literacy rather than a deeper and more satisfying engagement with language and literature. The profession must agree principles on which to collaborate to attempt to rectify this situation. Meanwhile, we should take every opportunity to remind students that the world outside education desires the skills of English graduates.

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