Chapter 3

English for the Few or English for the Many?

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Introduction

There is nothing very new in Michael Gove's culturally elitist attitudes to English teaching and the comprehensive ideal. He joins a long line of those who have always been opposed to the basic principles of comprehensive education and democratic ideas about language and learning.

As Akpenye (2013) makes clear, the campaign against the comprehensive ideal has always been virulent. The 'child centred approach' to English teaching in comprehensive schools has come under particular attack. As long ago as 1969 a group of Conservative thinkers wrote a series of pamphlets, known as the Black Papers, that hit back hard against the key elements of what, for example, John Marenbon (1987,1994) dubbed 'the new orthodoxy'. The ideas in these papers constituted a full frontal attack on the ideas of progressive education and child-centred English teachers who, they suggested, were too concerned with ideas of personal growth. Instead, this group of Conservative thinkers argued that English was about teaching a body of knowledge, which involved re-establishing the pre-eminence of the English Literary Heritage and the explicit teaching of grammar and Standard English. They also began to establish the importance of

'standards' by arguing that standards would only be maintained in schools if they were clearly and publicly defined, hence the need for tests and league tables. These ideas influenced both major political parties and began to put Labour on the defensive in relation to comprehensive ideals.

The Coalition's educational polices stand on the shoulders of this attack on the comprehensive ideal and in this article I will identify some themes of the right's counter offensive against inclusive approaches to English teaching, explore some of the limitations of these ideas and begin to suggest how English might be promoted as a subject for all.

The pre-eminence of the English Literary Heritage

The over arching priority given to the English Literary Heritage or the canon is a key feature in this debate. In the new English curriculum (2013), secondary school pupils will have to study two plays by Shakespeare, Romantic poetry, a 19th century novel, First World War poets, post-war poetry and some world literature. This literary diet of 'dead, white men' has been described as 'impoverished' and 'too narrow' by the National Association for the Teaching of English (Garner 2013). One NATE member suggested that while 'it was good that we had a curriculum for a new century – it's just a shame it's the 19th and not the 21st' (Garner, *ibid*). NATE has argued that a wider range of contemporary literature and multi-modal texts should have been included.

Gove has justified his prescriptive approach on strongly nationalistic and conservative grounds:

> 'Our literature is the best in the world... It is every child's birthright and we should be proud to teach it in every school.' (2010, 41)

Such a dogmatic assertion implies a vast knowledge of world literature that he can surely not possess. It involves a dismissive attitude to literature from a wide range of cultures. It fails to acknowledge that many of the accepted great 'classics' of late nineteenth and twentieth century literature include works by, for example, Irish writers e.g. Yeats, Joyce, Wilde, Heaney. The new curriculum also marginalises the new multi-modal literacies that are at the centre of modern literacy practices. English Literature in the new GCSE is also in danger of once again becoming an option only for the top sets in state schools as the texts studied and the exam at the end will make some schools shy away from a whole cohort entry. White (2010) argues that Gove has an essentially rigid rather than a rigorous approach to the curriculum and that he is opposed to interdisciplinary collaboration and to areas that he conceives of as 'soft' knowledge, such as Media Studies.

The recitation of poetry is also given pride of place in the new English curriculum and, while the recitation or choric reading of a particular poem may be appropriate on some occasions, the overarching priority given to this 'puts pressure on teachers to rely on rote learning without understanding' (Bassey *et al* 2013).

A fixation with phonics as a panacea

When it comes to the teaching of Early Reading, rote learning is at the forefront as systematic synthetic phonics we are told is the most efficient way of delivering the 'alphabetic principle' (Rosen 2012). The screening test imposed on children at five includes non-words to assess their decoding skills. This extremely narrow approach, as

Mansell (2013) suggests, strongly promoted by those such as Ruth Miskin who have a financial interest in its success, is highly controversial and contested by many with expertise in the teaching of reading. Rosen (*ibid*) makes the point that the alphabetic principle is very difficult to sustain as the only principle in the teaching of reading as there are so many 'tricky words' that are in common use that do not adhere to this principle. Yet the new *Teachers Standards* (2012) are very explicit about how teachers must teach reading:

> 'A teacher must… If teaching early reading, demonstrate a clear understanding of systematic synthetic phonics;'

This contrasts starkly with what a teacher of early mathematics must do, which is 'demonstrate a clear understanding of appropriate strategies'. So Maths teachers have some opportunity to make some professional judgements about which approaches they should use but English teachers do not.

Again, we see how rigid the restrictions are on English teachers' pedagogy and pupils' learning. As Richmond (2013, 5) suggests 'the government is fixated on one and only one methodology, and is determined to impose its will'. (p5). He also refers to the role of New Labour in paving the way for this with its 'monomaniac zeal for phonics as strong as its Conservative predecessor' (Richmond 2013, 21).

Grammar - what big teeth you have?

The absolute importance given to the secretarial aspects of English such as grammar, punctuation and spelling as skills to be taught, learnt and tested at Key Stage 2, separately from their use in a piece of writing is another feature of this new curriculum (DfE 2013). This explains the new Key Stage Two grammar test where

skills in these areas are to be policed with rigour (Gove 2013). The new Key Stage Two Grammar test that pupils will take at 11 consists of decontextualized grammar exercises and multiple choice questions. Again, this links closely to the themes of the Black Paper writers who insisted that a body of knowledge must be established in English and that it must include grammar, punctuation and spelling (Jones 1989). The insistence on the separate testing of these secretarial skills again puts pressure on teachers to prepare pupils for the test in a decontextualized manner as the school's results will appear in the league tables and define the 'success' or 'failure' of the school in future inspections. The league tables will thus impel Senior Managers in Primary schools to conform to the new curriculum and prepare their pupils to perform well in this test of the secretarial aspects of English.

It must also be remembered that New Labour's National Literacy Strategy (DfES 1998) attempted to impose a form of teaching that lent credibility to the view that the secretarial aspects of 'Literacy', defined as reading and writing, were as – if not more – important than composition and meaning. Harshly critical of the whole language approach of the previous era that used pupils' life experiences and tacit knowledge of how language works as a stimulus for language development and writing, the NLS materials downgraded speaking and listening and focused on the deconstruction and analysis of the grammar of the text. New Labour's drive on literacy standards thus laid the groundwork for Gove's even sharper attack on progressive and inclusive approaches to English teaching (Coultas 2007, Coultas 2012).

Standard English

Another clear example of the elitism of the new Curriculum's approach to knowledge is the way in which the model of spoken language is changed in the new Curriculum (Coultas 2012). The *Teachers Standards* (2012) instruct teachers 'to take responsibility for… the correct use of Standard English whatever the teacher's specialist subject'.

The new English Curriculum (DfE 2013 a) has outlawed the speaking and listening strand and the new English language GCSE (DfE 2013b, 6) specifies that: 'Spoken language will be reported on as part of the qualification, but it will not form part of the final mark and grade'. The emphasis throughout the new curriculum is on the use of formal language, presentational talk and the use of spoken Standard English, imposing a passive and traditional view of the learner's spoken English. As others have noted, not only speaking and listening but also 'drama and modern media have almost disappeared from English…' (Bassey *et al ibid*).

This new 'cultural restorationist' (Jones 1989) Coalition English Curriculum represents a decisive break from the talk for learning model with regard to speaking and listening. It purposely puts Standard English on a pedestal 'as the language of knowledge' but obscures its class basis (Jones 1989, 69). This view is elitist because it directly contradicts the view expressed in the Bullock Report (1975) that pupils should not have to leave the language of the home behind them when they enter the classroom (Coultas 2012). While pupils should have opportunities to use standard and non-standard English, the new curriculum instructs teachers to promote the use of Standard English even in informal classroom conversations (DfE 2013a). It therefore seeks to turn the clock back on democratic views of spoken language development that

highlighted the importance of informal talk, dialogue and classroom conversations (Barnes 2008). Such a retrograde view could encourage teachers to start 'correcting' pupils' spoken language and humiliate pupils who use colloquial language or non-standard dialects as happened in the past.

In a recent focus group discussion on oracy and dialogue in classrooms (Coultas 2013), the teachers felt that the dual nature of classroom talk, where as pupils learn to talk more effectively they should be also be talking to learn more effectively, was not fully understood. In the case of coalition Education policy, they thought the talk for learning model was under direct attack and that even the word 'oracy' was vanishing from the vocabulary of teachers.

A return to a one shot view of writing

By abolishing coursework and imposing a written exam at the end of the course the new Curriculum returns to the one shot view of writing, where the only writing that will count is that written under pressure in an unprepared exam. Real writers collaborate with others to share ideas and get feedback before they publish. The Process Approach to writing (Graves 1983) recognised this and allowed children to compose, draft and reflect on their writing. This view of the writer has informed the way English teachers teach children to write and written coursework allowed pupils to refine and enhance their writing skills as they used talk to compose writing and gain feedback on first drafts and then redraft. This led, in the 100% coursework era, to pupils producing a folder with a wide range of fiction and non-fiction forms of writing. This coincided with the natural development of the writer as many pupils begin to mature as writers at Key Stage four.

A deficit view of working-class culture and knowledge

These elitist themes in the New English curriculum are linked to a wider philosophy that views working-class culture, linguistic practices and knowledge as a deficit. This philosophy is also sceptical about educational theory and dismissive of ideas that link educational practices to child development. By caricaturing progressive educational ideas in headline grabbing and simplistic ways Gove seeks to re-establish meritocratic values that preserve elitism. For example, he deliberately and crudely counter-poses the acquisition of knowledge to a child-centred approach to teaching:

> 'Progressive educational theory stressed the importance of children following their own instincts *rather than being taught'* (Gove 2013, 3, my italics)

Yet at the heart of the new ideas about language and learning that developed in the '60s and '70s (Barnes *et al* 1969) was the need to link the new abstract ideas of the subject to the pupils own experiences and understanding. For as Barnes (1976) argued:

> 'Our pupils will learn most by reading, writing and talking about the experiences they meet and through *this in time will come to terms with subject knowledge*.' (126 my italics)

Not only did the new progressive language and learning approach require more skilful and sophisticated teaching techniques by the teacher, by using the social situation more effectively to set up small group learning and dialogue (Barnes 2008), but this approach also allows pupils to contest and interrogate knowledge itself rather than treating knowledge as a fixed and unchanging entity.

English for the many

Teachers will need to use the power they have in the classroom to continue to identify new collective ways forward that challenge retrograde approaches and go 'beyond the false certainties of performativity' (Clandinen 2012). The role of the teacher has some continuity and agency over different periods and phases for promoting English for all. As Amanda Coffey suggests, while

> 'the world of the teacher has changed... the everyday realities of the classroom have considerable similarities with the past.' (2001, 88)

Teaching, she suggests, will always be concerned with social practices and interactions in the classroom. Despite the many obstacles in the current context, the teacher or the department is still capable of mediating the curriculum and interpreting it in different ways (Kress *et al* 2005). I will now consider how English might be defended as a subject for the many in relation to the themes highlighted in this article.

Canonical and non-canonical texts

English teachers have always embraced canonical and non-canonical literature. Long before there was a National Curriculum teachers chose to teach Shakespeare and other pre-twentieth century texts and found ways to connect these texts with the lives and experiences of the pupils they taught: through drama, discussion and comparison with film and stage versions of the texts (Coultas 2009). But there was also an attempt to find modern and new literature that could stimulate new thoughts and discussion. Among these texts were those that more directly resonated with the experiences of contemporary pupils in multicultural Britain and we should continue to research and use the widest range of literature and texts in classrooms (*Collaborative Learning* 2011).

Reading as a meaning making process

We also have to insist that learning to read is a meaning making process. As John Richmond suggests, this is the big question about reading. When it comes to reading, young children

> 'learn to read by being introduced to and then recognising and remembering whole words in contexts that make sense, drawing on their existing understanding of those words in the spoken language.' (2013, 120)

He also outlines the other cues and prompts that assist children in making sense of print, for example: semantic, syntactic, phonetic, visual cues, bibliographic and textual cues. He points out that recent reports from Ofsted on reading bemoan the lack of reading policies in schools and

> 'the loss of once popular and effective strategies such as reading stories to younger children, listening to children read, and the sharing of complete novels with junior age children.'

Defending a balanced approach, where phonics is blended with other strategies, he argues that young children must learn that

> 'reading… is one of the principal sources of pleasure… indeed of joy and delight… that life affords.' (29)

Grammar is also about making meaning

The debate on grammar has never been about whether it should be taught but how it should be taught. Every time an English teacher marks a piece of work they comment first on the content of the writing but also on the secretarial aspects of English. But when it comes to teaching grammar directly, it's so much more effective to teach grammar in context, allowing pupils to use words and phrases in their own sentences and speech before parts are named. If you play I spy with a group and begin to emphasise the prepositions by

speaking them aloud, the pupils begin to understand the role of that *part of speech* in the sentence. They begin to understand how the word works in a context. They are drawing on their own understandings and their own vocabulary to make meaning and then, when their understanding is more secure, they can give that word or phrase a name. Grammar cannot be truly understood as a technical list of terms, as a naming of parts, it has to be part of our tacit knowledge as we use language to communicate and make sense of the world around us.

Real writers collaborate

When it comes to writing, it is widely established that real writers draft and re-draft and that they often start from thoughts, observations and diary entries to express themselves and begin to compose ideas. This is because the crucial first question faced by any writer at any age is what do I want to say? Established writers then begin to write and often re-read and re-write their work for their chosen audience. English exams in the progressive era attempted to work with this process approach and English teachers will need to continue to create opportunities for this kind of practice as it is the best way of teaching all children to write with greater confidence.

Democratic education and equal societies

But, of course, curriculum and policy will need to change and in a true and inclusive English Baccalauriate or Diploma, taken at 17 or 18. English, a wide range of Literature, Drama and Media will need to play an essential part. Forms of assessment that allow pupils to show what they can do and that are relevant for the modern world must include oral skills and multi-modal forms as well as more traditional written forms as these are the literate tools that will be needed in the 21st century.

The comprehensive ideal, despite its critics, has been immensely powerful. Even Michael Gove tries to dress his elitist arguments up in terms of equal opportunities to access privileged and traditional knowledge. The bipartisanship of the two major parties on schooling must end. A progressive alliance needs to be re-established that defends the comprehensive principle and democratic and modern ideas about, for example, language in education much more rigorously and links this to the demand for greater equality in society as a whole. For, in more equal and democratic societies, the many not just the few are better educated.

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