FORUM, Volume 48, Number 1, 2006 **doi:10.2304/forum.2006.48.1.69**

The Future of English

BETHAN MARSHALL

ABSTRACT This article reviews some of the documents that have recently been published on the teaching of English, and argues that the 2006 QCA *Functional Skills Draft* has important implications for the future of an 'entitlement' curriculum.

Two major reports on the teaching of English were published in the autumn of 2005. They are noteworthy partly because they paint a picture of the subject that has been lost over the last few years and also because the vision they present is threatened, before the ink has had time to dry on them, by a third document which is, at the time of writing, in its final draft stages. The first report, somewhat remarkably, comes out of Ofsted, the second and third out of QCA.

The Ofsted Report is a review of all the inspection evidence into the teaching of English between 2000 and 2005. The period under examination is in itself significant, marking as it does the introduction and implementation in primary and secondary schools of the national literacy strategy (NLS)[1] or literacy framework. The framework, while never having statutory status, found its way into most classrooms through schools' fear of Ofsted. Many teachers were anxious that they would fail their inspection if they did not conform to the suggestions of the government, which came via a very official looking ring binder carrying the DfEE's logo. The initial folder was soon followed by numerous other supporting materials and in service training by literacy consultants, speaking from an approved script. All of which served to reinforce the impression that the literacy framework was the only way to teach if you wanted to survive the fierce gaze of Ofsted. Indeed many schools believed that the literacy framework carried the same force of law as the national curriculum.[2] Little was done to disabuse them of this impression.

The framework itself atomised what it meant to be literate, for five to fourteen year olds, by listing around one hundred competencies a year for pupils to cover. In the main these lists comprised of items of knowledge, the implication being that pupils would know how to use them having been taught what they were. Each item was arranged under one of three headings – word, sentence and text level. The nature of the lists suggested that these items were

discrete, acting independently of one another. The idea that the effectiveness of a sentence might be dependent not so much on its grammatical make-up but on the meaning of the words and the force of their communication, was absent from the document: so too was the context in which any given sentence or word might appear.

Critics of the framework were wearied by the sheer dreariness of these lists and feared the impact that attempting to cover them may have on the teaching of English.[3] They were also concerned about the rigidity with which the scheme was to be implemented. All lessons were to have four parts – a starter, which was totally unrelated to the rest of the lesson, an introduction, a development and a plenary, in which the aims of the lesson were revisited.

The steady rise in national test results for eleven and fourteen year olds after the introduction of the framework seemed to belie the sceptics' belief that the quality of English, as a subject, would suffer. Even though some argued that the type of questions in the tests were less demanding and that teachers were teaching to the test to the exclusion of much of the rest of the curriculum [4], politicians made much of the success of the literacy strategy in levering up standards. Critics of the strategy were labelled, and so dismissed, as the 'usual suspects'.

It is into this context that the Ofsted Report on the teaching of English comes. Seven years into the strategy it seems that the inspectorate have found that the fears of the critics were well founded. This is not a complete surprise. Hints that all was not well with the framework were already to be found in the annual reports of the chief inspector David Bell.[5] Six months before the review on the teaching of English he bemoaned the lack of reading happening in schools, particularly in primaries. Children, he complained, were not encountering enough whole texts during lessons, being given instead extracts of novels. He worried, therefore, that they would lose out on the pleasure of reading. The previous year he noted that the creative curriculum was being constrained by teachers teaching to the test.

The Review itself is not openly critical of the literacy strategy. Under key findings it notes, for example, that it has 'helped schools to teach the full programme of national curriculum English' [6] and that it has led 'to more direct teaching and more precise learning objectives.'[7] But each of these comes with a damning caveat. The first has been done at the expense of speaking and listening to which 'too little attention' has been paid.[8] This is hardly surprising as the NLS does not mention speaking and listening despite it occupying a third of the curriculum.

And while teaching might be 'more direct' 'some teachers use the learning objectives from the Framework inflexibly, seeing them as a set of requirements to be ticked off and, as a result, learning does not match the particular needs of the pupils in the class.'[9] The Review goes on to add that 'there is evidence that many pupils are reading less widely for pleasure than previously.'[10] The observations on writing are equally disturbing. While claiming that 'Standards of writing have improved as a result of guidance from the national strategies' it

adds: 'However, although pupils' understanding of the features of different texts types has improved, some teachers give too little thought to ensuring that pupils fully consider the audience, purpose and content for their writing'.[11]

These caveats, when read alongside the document as a whole, create a powerful subtext, which acts as a critique of the literacy strategy. While the criticism is never overt, what becomes increasingly evident is that if teachers actually teach using the framework as their guide, their performance will be merely satisfactory or worse. Quoting from the HMCI's annual report the Review notes, in its section on the quality of teaching, that trainee teachers tend 'toward safe and unimaginative teaching . . . partly because [they] use the structure and content of the strategy too rigidly.'[12] And again, 'For too many primary and secondary teachers, however, objectives become a tick list to be checked off because they follow the frameworks for teaching too slavishly.'[13]

The effects of such approaches are made clear throughout the Review. If we look for example at the comments on reading, the authors cite research evidence in support of its inspection findings. The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) found that while ten year olds in English schools had comparable reading standards to other countries they were less interested in reading for pleasure. NFER also found in its 2003 survey that 'children's enjoyment of reading had declined significantly in recent years.'[14]

While reading for pleasure may simply seem an inessential but pleasant bi-product, in the business of raising literacy standards, research evidence of the last thirty years would suggest otherwise. As the Ofsted Review notes, the Bullock Report of 1975 found that a major source of adult illiteracy was that, ''they did not learn from the process of learning to read that it was something other people did for pleasure''.[15] The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) also found that: ''Being more enthusiastic about reading, and a frequent reader, was more of an advantage on its own than having well educated parents in good jobs'' concluding, ''finding a way to engage students in reading may be one of the most effective ways to leverage social change.''[16] Yet Ofsted's own Report on the situation in England, *Reading for Purpose and Pleasure*, observed that reading was, ''negatively associated with school.'' [17] particularly with boys and their parents.

The section on writing is peppered with similar cautionary notes on one of the bedrocks of the literacy strategy – the teaching of grammar to improve writing. The review ends the section on writing with a quote from a research survey on the impact of grammar on the quality of pupils' writing. The survey recommends the teaching of grammar as a source of knowledge about language in general but found that, ''The teaching of the principles underlying and informing word order or syntax has virtually no influence on writing quality or accuracy.''[18] The prevalence of genre theory, also prominent in the framework as a means of raising standards, comes under similar scrutiny. The Ofsted review echoes the progressive educationalist John Dewey in the advice it gives to combat the dominance of genre theory. In his lectures on the setting up of an experimental school in Chicago Dewey noted that, 'There is all the

difference in the world between having to say something and having something to say.'[19] Observing that, 'Teachers have tended to allow form and text type to dominate their teaching rather than focusing pupils' attention on the purpose and audience for writing' Ofsted recommend that when writing, 'A pupil's first question should be 'What do I want to say?' followed by 'how do I say it?''[20] For as the Review points out, 'Many texts do not conform to that particular genre.'[21] The aim of the teacher then becomes motivating children to write.

Speaking and listening fares no better. Noting that the national strategies have emphasised, 'direct teaching approaches' the Review goes on to observe that, 'In too many classes . . . discussion is dominated by the teacher and pupils' responses are short and limited.' It adds: 'Too few lessons now use small group work effectively. The recommended four part lesson structure appears to have inhibited good collaborative group work.'[22] And again, 'They interpret the recommended four part lesson as something to be applied on all occasions' so impairing their ability to teach well.[23] Overall the Review makes clear that far from being an equal third of the curriculum explicit teaching of speaking and listening, as well as its use as a teaching and learning strategy, is a very poor relation.

Published in the same month as the Ofsted Review English 21 came to very similar conclusions about the constraints of teaching to the framework, while, again, never open acknowledging it as the problem. English 21 was a 'national conversation on the future of English'. Its stated aim was to consider, 'How the subject of English should develop in the next ten years' [24] and was divided into four strands:

- English for learners, focusing on the shape of the subject and how developments in society and in knowledge will change what young people need to be able to do;
- choice and flexibility for ages 14-19, considering developments in qualifications;
- e-English and the impact of new technologies on the nature of texts and assessment possibilities;
- assessment, inviting views on how assessment should develop and the range of techniques which should be used in English.[25]

Organised by QCA, over a six-month period, English 21 was designed as a consultation in which major stakeholders in the teaching of English could take part. This included teachers, parents, employers and pupils. Participants could contribute in written form or attend a series of events that were organised as part of the conversation. These took the form of conferences, lectures and symposia. All contributions were written up in what QCA were at pains to point out was 'not exactly a report' but more of a, 'Play back [of] the main elements of the discussions which have been held all over the country.'[26]

The playback signalled 'New Emphases' as a result of this consultation. The first on the list is:

> A desire from teachers to give more time and space to the creative and arts aspects of English. They recognise the importance of engaging pupils' imagination and commitment and that encouraging new ways of thinking and using language is fundamental to success in English. Teachers' sense that this has seeped away seems to be a response to a number of pressures including perceived demands of assessments, crowded time in the classroom and a loss of confidence.[27]

And under the heading 'Time for Renewal' adds:

> The current demands are well understood and the importance of an education which equips young people with competence in language is recognised. Many comments imply that trying to ensure this success has squeezed out opportunities for creativity in the classroom . . . there is uncertainty about the best critical approaches and place of the linguistic and literary frameworks in critiquing ideas and meanings.[28]

Both these comments tell us much about consequences of the framework on the experience of English teaching for pupils. The desire of teachers to change this is palpable.

The document itself is something of a smorgasbord of opinions on topics ranging from the place of the canon to the teaching of standard English via the importance of speaking and listening. Quotes, presumably from the consultation process, are woven into the text, framed by introductory statements. In a section headed 'Working with Literature', for example, the authors of the document note: 'A theme in many suggestions for change is about engaging more deeply with their reading, for example, by allowing more time: 'profound, structured and personal responses to literature . . . require time.'[29]

The eventual document that came out of this process *Taking English Forward* [30] observed that:

> There is a strong consensus about the need to give more weight to the teaching of speaking and listening,'

adding,

> Another view, clearly supported by many, is the need for creativity and imagination to be given more opportunity to develop in English.'[31]

In response to this desire, the authors of the document divided the teaching of English into four, interdependent 'threads': competence, creativity, cultural understanding and critical skills. The introduction to the section on creativity is again telling of the current climate in schools:

> English 21 respondents suggest that the English classroom has become rather mundane, where pressures have led teachers to

> assume that success will be achieved by routines and structure with little time for experiment or expansion or following interests. Many suggest the power of literature has a role to play in the encouraging of creativity and that young people need to be in contact with those whose business is words to learn what language can do.[32]

The indictment of current, framework-dominated practice is plain. One other area of major dissatisfaction with the present system is identified by both the QCA and Ofsted documents – assessment. Admittedly in its opening statement the QCA, who produce all the national curriculum tests, only see the 'perceived demands of assessments'[33]as constraining the English curriculum. Ofsted is more forthcoming. 'It needs to be acknowledged that many English teachers have severe reservations about the efficacy of the national tests at KS3 [for fourteen year olds]'[34] and again, 'They tell inspectors that over-preparation for national tests reduces their enjoyment.'[35]

⁂

In the light of the clear critiques these publications offer, on the limitations of the literacy framework and the testing regime that assesses them, the *Functional Skills Draft Standards: English, mathematics and ICT*[36]comes as something of an unwanted surprise. This document is, in part, the legacy of the Tomlinson Report.[37] In addition to his diploma Tomlinson recommended literacy and numeracy tests, which could be taken at any point when the pupil was ready. Under Tomlinson's model the test burden in secondary education was to be considerably reduced from its current load. In rejecting Tomlinson's idea of a diploma, retaining the current exam system of KS3 tests, GCSE, AS and A-level, and keeping these skills tests, the government has effectively increased the amount of testing for fourteen to nineteen year olds. The functional skills draft standards are:

> The initial stage in the process of defining a qualification . . . for the purposes of ensuring that the content of knowledge, understanding and skills developed is captured. They allow the scope, content, level of demand and parameters of the areas of knowledge, understanding and skills to be defined.[38]

There is nothing intrinsically objectionable in any of the standards themselves, nothing one could quarrel with – except the tone. This is, as the title suggests, functional. At the highest level, for example, the learning outcome of reading is defined as, 'Read, understand and compare texts and use them to gather information, ideas, arguments and opinions.'[39] Writing is similarly drab. Pupils must be able to 'Write documents communicating information, ideas and opinions effectively.'[40] While the learning outcome of good speaking and listening is, 'Make a range of contributions to discussion and make effective presentations.'[41]

This is truly a joyless document. Where is the significance of enjoying reading as a means of social enfranchisement highlighted in Ofsted? Where is the idea that good writing is an act of creation, found in English 21? And where is the sense that an effective presentation needs a hint of passion and imagination, qualities emphasised in any airing of the TV show *The Apprentice*?

None of this would be problematic were it not for the fact that a test looms at the end of these draft proposals. Once more it will skew the English curriculum away from the notion that the subject is about the art of language and towards a syllabus that prioritises somewhat arid technical skills. This should not, of course, be a debate that revolves around questions of either/or. Accuracy is important in effective communication. But creativity, pleasure and the imagination are central to the English curriculum. The Ofsted Review and English 21 recognised this. The *Functional Skills Draft* does not. Worse, it fails to acknowledge the lessons that Ofsted and English 21 seem keen to point out.

That English 21 and *Functional Skills Draft* should come out of the same quango only serves to demonstrate the complete lack of independence of any of the key government agencies. In the end, English 21 had no statutory force. It could only recommend and, as the only qualifications authority, QCA could not refuse to develop skills tests in English when required to. Nor does New Labour have to listen to Ofsted unless it chooses.

But perhaps the greatest worry is that the *Functional Skills Draft* signals the end of an entitlement curriculum for all. One of the key principles underpinning the original and subsequent national curricula was that all pupils, of whatever ability, were entitled to follow the same curriculum. The Government's take on Tomlinson means that there will be vocational and academic pathways from the age of fourteen. It is quite conceivable that sections of the school population, following the vocational track, will take the test in functional English, and nothing else, if this is to be the new benchmark of acceptable standards in English rather than a C grade in GCSE.

This will mean that those pupils who most need convincing of the pleasure of narrative, or the release in writing something that matters to them, may never have the opportunity. They will be consigned to classes in which they are drilled in the mechanics of English to get them through a test. Their imagination will remain unstimulated; their creativity stifled. If the history of the last seven years is anything to go by, the impact of these measures will not be realised until conscientious teachers have tried to implement them and found, like the inspectors, that to do so means barely satisfactory lessons.

Notes

[1] DfEE (1988) *The National Literacy Strategy.* London: HMSO; and DfEE (2001) *Framework for Teaching English: Years 7, 8 and 9.* London: HMSO.

[2] DfEE (1999) *English: The National Curriculum for England.* London: HMSO.

[3] See for example T. Furlong, H. Venkatakrishnan & M. Brown (2001) *Key Stage 3 and the National Strategy: an evaluation of the strategies for English and mathematics.* London: ATL; M. Hilton (2001) Writing Process and Progress: where do we go

from here? *English and Education*, 35(1), pp. 4-12; R. Marshall (2002) Revolting Literacy, *English in Education*, 36(2), p. 1-7.

[4] Hilton, M. (2001) English Tests: rapidly rising starndards or are they? *Primary English Magazine.*

[5] Speech made on 2nd March 2005.

[6] Ofsted (2005) *English 2000-5: a review of the inspection evidence*, p. 6. London: HMSO.

[7] ibid

[8] ibid

[9] ibid

[10] ibid

[11] ibid, p. 6-7

[12] Ofsted (2005) *The Literacy and Numeracy Strategies and the Primary Curriculum* (HMI 2395) London: HMSO. cited in ibid, p. 16.

[13] ibid, p. 16-17

[14] ibid, p. 22

[15] Bullock Report (1975), cited in ibid, p. 24

[16] OECD (2002) *Reading for Change: a report on the programme for international student assessment*, cited in ibid, p. 2.

[17] Ofsted (2004) cited Ofsted op cit. (2005) p. 23

[18] R. Andrews (2004) *EPPIE The effect of grammar teaching (syntax) in English on 5-16 year olds' accuracy and quality in written composition*, cited in ibid p. 29.

[19] J. Dewey (1899) *The School and Society,* being three lectures by John Dewey. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 57.

[20] Ofsted (2005), op. cit., p. 27

[21] ibid

[22] ibid, p. 19

[23] ibid, p. 16

[24] QCA (2005) English 21 Playback: a national conversation on the teaching of English, p. 2. London: HMSO.

[25] ibid, p. 2

[26] ibid, p. 2

[27] ibid, p. 4

[28] ibid, p. 5

[29] ibid p. 19

[30] QCA (2005) *Taking English Forward.* London: HMSO.

[31] ibid, p. 1

[32] ibid, p. 6

[33] op cit

[34] Ofsted, p. 12

[35] ibid, p. 16

[36] QCA (2006).

[37] DfES (2004) 14-19 Curriculum and Qualifications Reform. Final Report of the Working Group on 14-19 Reform [The Tomlinson Report]. London: HMSO.

[38] QCA (2006), p. 2.

[39] ibid, p. 8.

[40] ibid, p. 10.

[41] ibid, p. 6.

BETHAN MARSHALL teaches at Kings College, University London, and is a member of the *FORUM* Editorial Board. *Correspondence*: Dr Bethan Marshall, Department of Education & Professional Studies, Kings College London, Strand, London, WC2R 2LS, United Kingdom (bethan.marshall@kcl.ac.uk).