Language for life

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James Britton on Education: an introductory reader

Myra Barrs, Tony Burgess, John Richmond, Jenifer Smith and John Yandell (eds), London, Routledge 2025.
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James Britton lived from 1908 until 1994. His influence on the way English teachers understood the subject and their work was significant in his lifetime. Thirty years after his death, we urgently need to attend again to what he has to say about young people and their reading, writing and talking because, along with its teaching, English as a subject is in a bad way. Barbara Bleiman, much-respected English teacher and subject consultant, implied as much when she wrote recently in the *Times Educational Supplement* about two contrasting poetry-based lessons.[1] In one, the teacher asked open questions and drew from students deeper insights into what seemed to be going on in the poem. The other lesson was entirely didactic, of a kind which, although off-putting for students, has become the norm in the wake of the 'knowledge-rich' curriculum and the shallow forms of assessment it has encouraged. In this lesson, students were furnished by their teacher with factual information about the poem and required to remember and rehearse this. At no point were they invited to encounter the poem as themselves. Rather, they were being trained in how to present in due course to the English literature GCSE examiner an identical set of approved responses to a given text.

The effect of such teaching inhibits rather than enhances the way in which people naturally read, and tries to supplant it. The English teacher is no longer meant to help students make their own sense of the text by encouraging them to respond to it honestly and then to develop their engaged reflexiveness as individual readers – for example, by valuing initial meaning-making and then honing sensitivity to subtleties of language, subtext and irony, resourcing students' appreciation of the complex cross-currents of a text's historical genesis and reception, and enabling them to tune in more alertly to the text's political dimensions. Instead, students are coached in what someone else has determined to be the one correct and necessary reading.

Capitulation to the pressures imposed by high-stakes public testing, which this model of teaching exhibits, exactly prevents the articulation of considered, informed, yet always personal and hence honest responses. It makes a travesty of what teaching English literature should properly be. And what, in the recent past, it not uncommonly has been, as Barbara Bleiman surely knows, for she helped foster such teaching. But the teacher-led, whole-class discussion her article seemed to favour, while far preferable

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to the instruction-based approach, falls short of the rich and rigorous practice James Britton looked to advance.

Along with peers such as Douglas Barnes, Harold Rosen and Joan Tough, James Britton understood that the language which young people bring to the classroom, and in which they articulate their own experience and thinking, cannot but be the starting point for any English teaching that hopes to make a beneficent lifelong difference for those who are taught. Accordingly, the balance of a teacher's professional consideration tilts away (though not wholly away) from matters such as curriculum sequencing and 'delivery', and towards (though not entirely towards) what is learned and how learning may be better enabled. As the editors say in their introduction, it 'throws the focus on to process. It insists on our attending to what is happening in and for the child' (p12).

Influenced by his reading in psychology and philosophy, notably the work of Vygotsky and Langer, Britton argued for the centrality of language in the representation of thought and its development in the individual. He urged teachers to ensure pupils and students write, read and talk for real purposes and audiences. We work on the world directly through our representation of it, and we also work on the representation itself. For Britton, this second possibility warrants the teaching of English. For we represent the world in language through the plenitude of genres, forms and language-games to be found in our culture, from the transactional to the expressive, from gossip to epic. Our purposes, intentions and audiences infuse how we talk and write, influencing our linguistic choices as we inform, explain, describe, dramatise and express. We can become more adept at representing in language; more secure, precise, insightful, nuanced, critically aware. Good teaching helps us become so.

The editors make clear the ways in which English practice so warranted reproves today's official outlook:

> Britton's work offers an approach and a set of resources that might enable us to rethink current priorities and practices: to become properly attentive to what is going on in classrooms and in other more informal sites of learning; to appreciate the agency of children and young people, and to involve them as full participants in their own learning and development; and to question the reduction of school to mere exam factories. (p12)

So their reader is timely. Its modest apparatus of contextualising introduction, along with clear, brief commentary to frame each section of material culled from Britton's work, welcomes and supports a new generation of student teachers and practitioners to the encounter with his ideas.

Five sections of material follow the introduction, taken in the main from *Prospect and Retrospect: Selected essays of James Britton*; *Literature in its Place*; the seminal *Language, the*

learner and the school; and a chapter of *A Language for Life*, the influential 1975 Bullock Report into English teaching in schools. The first section considers the way very young children acquire language, or are acquired by it, and how, as they make meaning, their use of language as speakers and writers develops at home and at school, not least through play. The second section explores the vital significance of different kinds of talk for learning, especially student-led small group talk. Here Britton explores conditions which can best foster learning in the classroom. This leads him to consider the nature of a teacher's authority. 'I have been fascinated', he writes, 'by the way new teachers arrive at the discovery that the managerial role is both (a) necessary at times and (b) of no use in the actual process of teaching' (p107).

The third section addresses the teaching of writing, perhaps the area where Britton made his pre-eminent research-based contribution. Questions of audience and purpose are central, but so are issues of correctness, of assessment, and of writing 'voice' and the role played in its emergence by reading and talking. 'What is important', Britton suggests, 'is that children in school should write about what matters to them to someone who matters to them' (p115). How often is this dictum heeded now?

Equally significantly, Britton recognises that, thanks to the inescapability of each child's uniqueness, there is:

> A metabolism of the mind in learning … In other words, learning has an organic shape. Like a plant or a coral … A child's learning has its own organic structure. Hence the value of writing in the expressive, which is the language close to and most revealing of that individuality. Hence also the importance of individual work and work in small groups, and of the sea of talk on which all our school work should be floated. (p133)

Section four addresses the relationship between teaching and research, or rather between the work of academic educationalists and of classroom practitioners. Against the currently prevailing model whereby academics conduct research whose findings are handed to the practitioner to apply, often in the guise of 'best practice' or 'what works', Britton recognises teaching, research and the development of practice as 'interrelated models of inquiry [and] sources of knowledge' (p154). He insists on the significance of teaching's distinctive situatedness – the specific, unrepeatable nature of each moment in each class – and honours teachers as reflecting *in media res* on the success or otherwise of what he terms 'an ever-developing rationale' (p161) for their work, informed by the experience of every lesson.

The final section asks, 'What is English?', and offers answers which reveal how entirely today's approach has gone awry. The proper domain of English is not mapped by a body of knowledge but by attention to the (re)shaping of experience in language,

with all this entails for thinking, understanding and knowing. Britton writes: 'We learn language by using it. By that I mean operations and not dummy runs … In English lessons the area of operations is that of personal experience; and that is the nearest I can go to finding a substance which I would call, "This is English"' (p186).

Britton's work can still resonate with teachers today, despite the rolling-back of much that makes for more meaningful teaching and learning in English classrooms. In the reader's final text, student teachers who have read something of Britton offer thoughts 'in the light of their recent school experiences' (p203). I hope these students read the rest of the book they find themselves a part of. They will deepen their acquaintance with Britton's principled beliefs about teaching English, some of which they may share. For example:

> Nothing has done more to confuse current educational debate than the simplistic notion that 'being told' is the polar opposite of 'finding out for oneself'. In order to accept what we are offered when we are told something, we have to have somewhere to put it; and having somewhere to put it means that the framework of past knowledge and experience into which it must fit is adequate as a means of interpreting and apprehending it. Something approximating to 'finding out for ourselves' needs therefore to take place if we are to be successfully told … All genuine learning involves discovery, and it is as ridiculous to suppose that teaching begins and ends with 'instruction' as it is to suppose that 'learning by discovery' means leaving children to their own resources. (p70)
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> A child can learn by talking as certainly as by listening. (p74)
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> If we succeed in harnessing or arousing a child's intention to write something … or to read something, we shall release … tacit powers favourable to … success, and it is in that process of satisfying his own intention that [the child] will learn most effectively. But if we then 'evaluate' performance … giving a mark or grade or comment which will indicate a 'verdict' … we are in effect providing an alternative objective to his own satisfaction. In fact the evaluation becomes the real objective, his satisfaction no more than an ostensible one. The evaluating procedure … *drives a wedge between a child's intention and its satisfaction*. (pp80-81; original emphasis)

James Britton on Education: an introductory reader complements the pair of recent volumes, also published by Routledge, which reintroduce for practitioners the work of Lev Vygotsky and which are edited by two of the editors of this volume. It takes its place alongside the valuable collection of writing by Harold Rosen, edited and introduced by John Richmond, which UCL/IoE published in 2017.[2] The reader shines a light on the historicity of the subject English and opens the road to a pedagogic heritage that trusts imaginative lesson-planning, licenses creative teaching and urges practitioners

to reflect seriously on the essentials of practice: principles; relationships; temporality; assessment as against testing; the affective and aesthetic dimensions of learning as well as that of propositional knowledge; and the importance of a teacher who listens.

When the reader was launched, one of its editors said that Britton's writing signposts a lifetime's work for teachers. It sets a challenge to the community of practice, and lays out a mission. For the subject English, rightly conceived, enables young people not simply to learn skills, knowledge and acculturation, but furthers their becoming human. Learning, as the late Dwayne Huebner put it, being after all a trivial way to speak of the journey of the self.

Notes

1. Barbara Bleiman, 'English: how the subject lost its spark', *TES*, 7 April 2025: Teaching English: why the subject is losing its appeal | Tes.

2. See 'Vygotsky the Teacher: a companion to his psychology for teachers and other practitioners', reviewed in *FORUM* 65,1; 'The Vygotsky Anthology', reviewed in *FORUM* 67,1; and 'Harold Rosen: writings on life, language and learning 1958-2008', reviewed in *FORUM* 61, 1.