Billy Clark, Marcello Giovanelli and Andrea Macrae argue that ‘language and literature’ points the way towards a coherent vision of English, both at school and at university, as a unified but diverse subject encompassing literature, language, drama, media and creative writing.
The segregation of sub-disciplines is deeply embedded within the structure of English, and is in some ways unhealthy. We see English as a strong, varied and interconnected area of study which can be further enhanced through a commitment to more integrated work within the discipline.

The Identity of ‘English’

English is a diverse and fascinating subject. However, the separation of its different tasks is sometimes overlooked, sometimes by focusing on it as compartmentalised and sometimes by focusing on specific parts at the expense of others. It is often practical to split English into areas such as history, linguistics, literature and so on, or into mediating writing. But this compartmentalisation can foster a false sense of distinctness, and can conceal important kinds of interconnectedness. On the other hand, discussion about ‘English’ as a field of study is sometimes reduced to the study of either language or, more often, literature. This misrepresents a subject which is both broad, creative and fundamentally multidisciplinary, both within itself and in that it often naturally engages with other fields, including cultural history, social anthropology, psychology and philosophy. It is a clear mark of both the interdisciplinary nature of the subject and of the possibility of its compartmentalisation (though not in a negative sense) that different Higher Education institutions map ‘English’ out in such varied ways. One thing which all areas of English do share, however, is the acknowledgement that the different parts of English are interconnected and that the production, interpretation and evaluation of texts (through metaphor, irony, ‘voice’, etc.) can be seen as a property of different texts and disciplines. There is, of course, considerable debate about what might constitute literariness and how different areas of text can be seen as unified by shared interests in texts. We do, however, think that it would be (and sometimes can be) misleading to see these different parts of text and one kind of reading practice over another. This risks neglecting the key role of language in most discussions of literariness. On the other hand, discussion about literariness often in some ways correspond to different contexts: some focus on historical contexts, on writing including metaphor, irony, ‘voice’, etc.; others as a property of particular moments (literary or historical), and of course in work on creative writing, which can be seen, sometimes primarily, as a way of exploring ideas about the nature of texts, language, literariness, and so on.

Connections Between Schools and Higher Education

At the same time, there is clearly a lot to be done. The recent research (Eaglestone and Kövesi 2014) found much room for the content of secondary curricula to reflect current developments in English scholarship more fully and to keep in step with the transition from key stage 5 to undergraduate level. We argued that many of the teaching and learning approaches adopted in schools could be useful for those in higher education. We identified a lack of knowledge among teachers in both sectors, of the pathway from primary to undergraduate English, which could usefully be addressed. Higher education institutions could be much more aware of what is (and is not) taught within each of the three strands of English at A level, and of how English is approached at key stages 2 to 4. Increased channels of communication between schools and HE could contribute to the health and coherence of the discipline, and to the educational experience of the continuing student.

Eaglestone and Kövesi aimed ‘to keep to facts and data; to keep to the real effects of policy changes, and to try to assess all the data in the round.’ Despite this, we think that they make one incorrect claim when they suggest that English at A Level is becoming rather less popular. Looking at the A level which...
“There is a bright future for English. We just need to work together to create it.”

have ‘English’ in their title, over the last ten years, awarding bodies’ entry records show that the number of students taking English Language at AS and A level has increased radically, and that the numbers taking the English Language and Literature AS and A levels have also grown. English Literature has fallen a little, but can be seen as holding steady (Clark and Macrae 2014; Clark, Giovanelli and Macrae 2014). While future trends are hard to predict, English is still popular at AS and A Levels, and English can be seen as being in a good position to grow in the coming years. Communicating a clear understanding of the content of each of the three A Levels (enabling a more informed assessment of the relative intellectual demands and educational benefits of each), and clarification of their relationships to each other, and to the different arrays of English at HE, can further help to maintain student uptake. Perhaps it is only when English is appreciated as a united whole that the size, strength and potential future of the subject can be recognised, celebrated, and developed.

Some Things We Can Agree On

In 1980, responding to a perception that linguistics was a fragmented field with linguists in perpetual disagreement, Dick Hudson set out to find ‘Some issues on which linguists can agree’. In 1981, he published an article with this name in the *Journal of Linguistics*, listing 83 things on which he thought all linguists could agree. Here, we propose a much more modest list of five statements for English educators:

1. Working with English involves working with texts (understood broadly, to include texts which are spoken, written or in other modes).
2. The notion of ‘literariness’ is open to debate and usually understood as scalar, i.e. texts and other phenomena can be ‘more or less literary’ rather than ‘either literary or not’.  
3. There is considerable and fruitful overlap across a range of work in Language, Literature, Media, Drama, Creative Writing, Stylistics, and other areas of English which share an interest in culture, communication and history, all related to an interest in texts (understood broadly, as above).
4. English teachers in all sectors should continue to collaborate and develop a secure understanding of what is being taught from primary education through to degree level courses.
5. Key aims of teachers of all areas of English (and other subjects) include helping students to understand previous work in the field, to develop their own interests, understanding and research, and to understand how their own work relates to the subject more broadly.

In addition, here are five things which we think would help to develop understanding of English as a unified subject from school through to university, and help students to develop both their own work and their sense of the discipline within which it is located:

1. ‘English’ is strongest (in disciplinary, institutional, ideological, political and economic senses) when considered as a whole encompassing English Literature, Language, Drama, Media and Creative Writing. This argues for a principled pedagogy that promotes teaching and learning around a vision of English as a unified discipline in all phases.

2. The introduction of an annual conference, at which teachers and lecturers share developments in curriculum innovation, and in teaching practices in English teaching from primary level through to HE, would make a very significant contribution.

3. HE institutions should contribute to the continued training and development of school teachers through English subject workshops, as previously offered by the universities of Nottingham, Huddersfield and Lancaster in English Language and in Language and Literature.

4. Summaries of content at Key stage 4 and 5 (for example Bleiman 2008) would be very helpful for HE admissions and teaching staff.

5. The English Subject Centre was a very good portal for communication and enabled the sharing of knowledge, practices, and pedagogical developments. A similar organisation, with appropriate funding and a broad remit, could work very effectively in collaboration with University English, in its new form, NATE, the HEA and other stakeholders. This could help facilitate and support wide scale interaction and collaboration among FE and HE English teachers and academics.

There is a bright future for English. We just need to work together to create it.

References


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