The Place of English in the University Curriculum

D. Hooper

Abstract

This paper attempts to highlight the crucial issues that need to be addressed if we are to satisfactorily define what place English has in a university curriculum, and what the role of the English teacher should be. The view is taken that a philosophy of education needs to be clearly established at the outset. Only then can the position of the teacher of English and the subject itself be justified.

Introduction

Consideration of the place of English in the university curriculum seems particularly pertinent in the current academic climate. There is increasing pressure on all university departments to become more accountable: — pressure from the government via the Ministry of Education, with the introduction of new educational guidelines; pressure from an increase in competition with a decline in the number of students in proportion to the number of places being offered; and pressure from financial cutbacks and tighter budget controls, due to a decline in the economic strength of the country as a whole. The education debate in Japan, and more specifically, the English education debate, now involves interested parties from right across the spectrum of society: - the Government, academics, institutional managers, employers, funding agencies, parents and various political groupings. All have their own specific interests.

As people concerned with studies in English communication, and in some cases, actively engaged in the teaching of English at university level, it would seem to be particularly important at this time to re-examine some of these issues so that we are quite clear in our own minds where we stand, and our own positions and the position of our subject can be readily justified in educational terms.

The place of English in the university curriculum cannot, of course, be considered in isolation, but rather must be considered within the context of the role and function of the institution. That is to say, what is the overall purpose of a university, and how does English, as a subject, become an integral part of that defined purpose? The answer to this question is going to have important implications for all teachers, regardless of subject content. Moreover, the view is held that to be effective, teachers need to have an interest in, and be aware of, the general processes involved with all aspects of learning.

In searching for an adequate account of both the place of English at university, and the role of the teacher, the following five questions logically present themselves as issues that need to be addressed before a philosophy of education can be identified.

Five Questions to Consider:

1. What is a university for?

The answer seems at once both obvious and elusive. Most people would probably be able to offer some readily acceptable items to include in a list of objectives, many of which would be similar to those proposed by Barnett (1990):

The general aims and ideas traditionally associated with a university education:

- The pursuit of truth and objective knowledge
- Research

- Liberal education (Education for its own sake)
- Institutional autonomy
- Academic freedom
- A neutral and open forum for debate
- Rationality
- The development of the student's critical abilities
- The development of the student's autonomy
- The student's character formation
- Providing a critical centre within society
- Preserving society's intellectual culture

Universities have clearly been regarded as institutions with a particular set of linked and intrinsic aims however indefinite and ill-defined they may be.

Allen (1988), in an inquiry to the Registrar of every British university requested a copy of any documentation they might have in their possession pertaining to the aims or goals of their institution. None was able to offer anything comparable to the American mission statement, nor offer any official written statement of purpose: For example,

Cambridge University referred him to a statute drafted (in Latin) in the reign of Edward VI:

Deum timeto: regem honorate: virtutem colito: disciplinis bonis operam dato.

Oxford could do little better, quoting a section of the Oxford & Cambridge Act of 1877 to the effect that in making the statutes of the University the commissioners should consider:

... the advancement of art, science, and other branches of learning.

Salford University came up with a statement about purpose from their charter which was fairly typical from those other few universities that could find anything:

The object of the University shall be to advance learning and knowledge by teaching and research ... especially into the basic and applied sciences, and to enable students to obtain the advantages of University education.

The mission statements prepared by American universities are quite a contrast. Take for example the one prepared by Indiana University:

Institutions of higher education have a responsibility to foster an honest and ethical academic atmosphere. As part of that effort, each discipline must arrange for its students to consider and ponder the moral questions of the field. Whether this will be done by integrating ethics into all courses or by the introduction of specific ethics courses remains to be seen and must be answered soon. Regardless, our graduates should develop during their time here a keen sense of professional responsibility in these complex and changing times.

Whether or not the university in which one is teaching has a prepared statement of purpose or a formally defined set of aims or goals, there is a need for those involved in the learning process to step back away from the confines of their own courses, subject matter, department or faculty and consider the most fundamental question of the overall purpose of the institution in which they are operating. Within that framework they must then be clear about the changes they are hoping to bring about in their students from the time they enter until they graduate. The question then, *What is a university for?*, might be thus better phrased in terms of: *What is a graduate?*

The participants in an education conference in the UK last year, when faced with this question, offered the following attributes that would be desirable in a graduate:

- Someone who has a base of knowledge in a given field.
- An ability to acquire / reconstruct / apply knowledge / ideas / concepts.
- Be capable of reasoning and critical thinking.
- Should be disciplined, motivated, independent, creative.
- Should have developed life-skills & strategies: time-management skills, communication skills.
- Should have learned how to learn.
- Should have a degree.

If we accept, then, that these are the attributes that the whole university experience is intended to enable our students to acquire, we must surely ask ourselves the extent to which our own courses contribute and assist in this process. If they have no bearing on these wider aims and objectives then perhaps we need to question whether the course of study is really appropriate for university.

Take, for example, a one-year language course at university level. The aim of the course should not be confined merely to teaching the student how to speak English (or French etc.). At this level one should be concerned about the student's understanding of how to *learn to learn* English. At the end of such a course, what has been learned about the nature of the language? What understanding has been gained about the way in which the language reflects the culture of the people who speak it? To what extent are the traditions and customs of any society portrayed through its language? How much has been learnt about one's own society through the study of the foreign language? Has the student learnt anything about the nature of communication, or developed personal communication skills? Have any other worthwhile skills been learnt that can be further enhanced and developed once the course has come to an end?

2. How does Higher Education differ from any other level of education?

To go back to our example of the one-year language course, if the aim of the course is limited to *teaching English* in the same way that that a language school might aim to *teach English*, then given the obvious time constraints that exist, the size of many classes, the initial levels of motivation etc., such a class is almost certainly destined for failure. Trying to compete on this level is inappropriate. This is not to say that at a language school the students will learn little about foreign culture, their own society, the nature of language, or how to develop communication skills. What it does mean is that any such understanding that does occur, does so largely as a by-product.

At the university level, however, there are additional attributes and skills that we want to encourage our students to develop, and English is the subject through which this is done. What might be a by-products or a bonus in a course of study at the language school becomes an integral part of the university course, and the criteria by which we measure the success or failure of the course is adjusted accordingly.

What we are really concerned with here is not a problem of course content or methodology or even curriculum. It is about establishing or perhaps more formally clarifying a philosophy of Higher Education. This should take precedent over any discussions on curriculum restructuring and reform, evaluation or assessment procedures, or any other issues that are subsequently going to arise. Niblett (1979) makes the interesting observation that:

> *For every book on the philosophy of higher education, it may well be that there are six on its planning, five on its administration, four on the methodology of teaching its subjects, and three even on its curriculum.*

It may be that the overall philosophy is taken for granted. However, the process of restating and redefining a philosophy is essential if these other peripheral issues are going to be adequately dealt with within an overall framework that has clearly recognised aims and goals. Otherwise, the whole object of the exercise becomes lost.

3. What do we know about different approaches to learning, and the framework within which students construct knowledge?

Constructivism is a term that represents a view point about learning. It is not a single theory of learning in itself, but subsumes a whole range of theories including information processing and cognitive theories of learning. The common factor with all such theories is that they all conform to the view that people construct knowledge for themselves as a result of their interactions with the environment. That is to say, that when learners arrive at meaning, they do so by actively selecting, and cumulatively constructing, their own knowledge, rather than by receiving and storing knowledge. In other words, the learner brings with him/her an assorted baggage of assumptions, motives, intentions, and previous knowledge and experiences, all of which go together to form a framework that encompasses the immediate learning/teaching situation, and the direction and quality of the learning that may subsequently take place.

Shuell (1986) made the comment back in the 80's that:

> *If students are to learn desired outcomes in a reasonably effective manner, then the teacher's fundamental task is to get students to engage in learning activities that are likely to result in their achieving those outcomes ... It is helpful to remember that what the student does is actually more important in determining what is learned than what the teacher does.*

This statement, which seems on the surface fairly obvious, is, in fact, quite profound, and has serious implications for teachers. Constructivism places students firmly at the centre of the learning process, with the implication that they need to be ACTIVE learners involving the use of a variety of learning strategies to bring about learning and understanding.

A student's approach to learning (i.e., the student's way of going about learning) is seen as a major determinant of the quality of the learning outcome. The approach adopted depends upon the student's goals, motives and strategies as well as his interpretation or perception of the demands and requirements of the learning task.

Three different approaches have been identified to describe the ways in which students approach their learning (Biggs, 1995):

i. *Surface approach*

With a surface approach to learning, the intention of the learner is external or extrinsic to the learning task itself. This means that rather than attempting to learn or understand the task, the learner's aim is to obtain good marks or complete the task, or give the impression that learning has taken place.

The strategy adopted involves meeting the task demands with as little time and effort as possible. It may involve memorising material as isolated items, which will be easily forgotten. (It should be noted here that rote learning itself does not necessarily mean that the student is adopting a surface approach, because there are times when rote learning maybe appropriate. It is only "surface" when it is inappropriate — for example, when large chunks of material are repeated in order to give the impression that the information has been well-learned and understood.)

Students who have quantitative conceptions of learning typically adopt a surface approach when faced with a learning task.

ii. *Deep approach*

This is the opposite to the surface approach. It is based on the principle or intention of extracting the maximum meaning from the learning task. The focus is on the underlying meaning rather than on the details themselves: on main ideas, themes, and principles, rather than on conceptually unsupported specifics.

The strategies based on this approach may vary, but all involve working with the information at high cognitive levels, identifying main ideas and looking for themes or unifying principles. Students thus become involved with restructuring their knowledge to interpret and understand new information, and are able to view knowledge from a variety of perspectives. Understanding is retained for much longer periods.

Students who have qualitative conceptions of learning typically adopt a deep approach when faced with a learning task.

iii. *Achieving approach*

This approach is similar to the surface approach in that the intention is external to the real purpose of the learning task. The intention is to get high marks, not because they indicate a high level of learning, but simply for their own sake.

The strategies used by the students will vary according to the requirements of the task. If the task requires the simple reproduction of information, then students will adopt reproduction and recall strategies typical of a surface approach. If the requirements involve active engagement in the task to get high marks students will adopt strategies more typical of those used in a deep approach. The important point is that with the achieving approach, the students will adopt whatever strategies are necessary to achieve high marks. Some of these strategies may, in themselves, be quite commendable. The problem is that students who adopt achieving strategies do so only to obtain their marks, and are unlikely to engage in class learning for the sake of learning.

4. To what extent do teachers' approaches to their teaching determine the eventual learning outcomes?

How teachers view their teaching is going to play a significant role in determining the approaches ultimately adopted by the students, and thus how much learning is going to occur. A study four years ago by Samuelowcz and Bain (1992) identified five conceptions of teaching that were held by university teachers:

1. *Imparting information.*
   The teacher's aim is for students to know more as a result of the teaching. The teacher provides the information, the framework and the appropriate examples.

2. *Transmission of knowledge and attitudes to knowledge, within the framework of an academic discipline.*
   The teachers aim is for the students to know more and be competent users of the knowledge received from the teacher. The teachers responsibility is to provide the conceptual framework of the subject to that the students can readily acquire it.

3. *Facilitating understanding.*
   The teacher's aim is for students to be able to apply their knowledge and understanding in new circumstances. The teachers responsibility is to make this understanding possible by pitching explanations at the right level.

4. *Activity aimed at changing students' conceptions or understanding of the world.*

The teacher's aim is to change students' naive understandings so that they become more like experts, within the conceptual framework of the discipline. The teacher's responsibility is to involve the students actively in their own learning by using a variety of teaching strategies and methods to achieve that end.

5. *Supporting student learning.*
The teachers' aim is to encourage and sustain the students' own interests. The teachers' responsibility is to help plan, monitor and provide feedback on students' work as well as to provide conceptual guidance.

The first three conceptions all clearly see teaching as a teacher-centred activity. In each case, the purpose of the class is for the teacher to present subject matter clearly and accurately. Student learning is generally assessed by determining how much and how accurately information is known — rather than what is understood.

The final two conceptions involve a two-way co-operative approach to teaching, where the existing abilities and knowledge of the students is used as the starting point for the teaching process. The teacher is less central and classes are usually interactive and often group orientated. Student learning is assessed by what is understood, rather than what is known.

The view of the teacher, then, is going to play a significant role in determining how much learning is going to go on. The conceptions of learning by both the students and the teacher will affect the role both parties attempt to play. It is, however, a common misconception to try and separate the roles and responsibilities of the student and the teacher by regarding teaching as something that happens at one end of the classroom under the control of the teacher, and learning that takes place at the other end, under the control of the students. Chalmers and Fuller 1996 refer to this danger:

> *... teachers who focus exclusively on their role as teacher and transmitter of knowledge may use teaching strategies that have a lot to do with transmitting knowledge but little to do with learning. Conversely, students who focus exclusively on the student role as receiver of knowledge will not actively seek new knowledge or understanding but will learn only what the teacher provides. In the first example, the teacher holds the students accountable for their learning; in the second, students hold the teacher accountable for their learning. Neither view is likely to lead to learning for understanding.*

What is far more desirable is for the responsibility for learning to be shared by the students and the teacher. Both hold qualitative conceptions of teaching and learning, and see their roles as facilitating each other and co-operative. Any mismatch in expectations by either teacher or students is going to be detrimental to the learning process. When a teacher sees the teaching role as facilitating learning, and the students are sitting in their seats like sponges waiting to absorb the information that the teacher is expected to provide, there will clearly be resentment on both sides, as will be the case in the opposite scenario.

5. How can students be encouraged to develop and use appropriate learning strategies, and thus become effective learners?

In any English class at any given university, there will inevitably be a range of conceptions about learning held by the students. The teacher has a responsibility to ensure that expectations on both sides are fully understood. If student expectations differ both from the teacher and from each other, this should not be allowed to become an insurmountable problem. Rather, the teacher can encourage the students to examine their own approaches to learning and then try and address any differences that exist.

Teachers must be clear about their overall aims and goals. At the university level all teachers should be aiming to enable their students to not only achieve a full understanding of their subject matter, but be able to assess and critically analyses and evaluate concepts and ideas. If

the teaching approach adopted encourages students to use deep approaches, then these goals are more likely to be achieved.

One thing that teachers must be aware of is aligning their assessment procedures to their stated aims and goals. There is little point in stating aims and objectives that are seen to be encouraging the development of those worthwhile attributes that we have, if we then encouraging the very opposite kinds of approaches to learning by giving to our students that are based on nothing more than their attendance record throughout the year, and a final examination in which they repeat as many of items of knowledge that they have been given over the year. As Biggs (1995) so rightly observes:

> *Assessing generalizability or even comprehension with a memory test is a travesty of tertiary teaching, yet it happens.*

Conclusion

To some extent the title of this paper is misleading. Rather than focus on the place of English in the university curriculum per se, it has briefly considered some more general approaches to teaching and learning, and questioned the wider goals of university education. This is not seen, however, as a departure from the main topic. On the contrary, it is suggested that these are the very issues that must be confronted before any other question can be adequately answered. Indeed, a philosophy of education needs to be firmly established before getting down to the nitty-gritty of teaching English for communication within a university classroom.

Surely, if we cannot justify our subject in sound academic terms, and see its place within the overall context of a university education, then we have no right to assume that English has any place at university. And if that is the case, those who are currently employed as English teachers at universities, would be well-advised to think about alternative options and careers!

References

Allen, M. (1988) *The Goals of Universities*. Milton Keynes, SRHE & University Press.

Barnett, R. (1990) *The Idea of Higher Education*, SRHE and Open University Press.

Biggs, J. (1995) *Student Approaches to Learning, Constructivism, and Student-Centered Learning*. Twentieth International Conference, Improving University Teaching, University of Maryland University College and City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong.

Chalmers, D. and R. Fuller (1996) *Teaching for Learning at University*, Kogan Page.

Indiana University. (1981) *Guidelines for Planning and Development*. Bloomington, Indiana University.

Niblett, W. R. (1979) Review of Brubacher's On the Philosophy of Higher Education. *Higher Education* **8** (3): 349-350.

Samuelowicz, K. and J. Bain (1992) Conceptions of Teaching Held by Academic Teachers. *Higher Education* (24): 93-111.

Shuell, T. J. (1986) Cognitive Conceptions of Learning. *Review of Educational Research* **56**: 411-36.