

A DISCUSSION ABOUT TEACHING OF ENGLISH AND LITERACY

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ABSTRACT

In this discussion document we put forward some tentative answers to the question of what is the difference between literacy learning and learning in subject English and examine the possibility that there are differences which may have implications for different levels of the curriculum, and other curriculum areas. Debates about the relationship between English and literacy have been common in countries where English is an official language, such as Australia, England, Singapore and Canada, for the last two decades. While concerns were expressed about the roles of literacy and subject English in the early and mid 1990s in Abroad it was not until the late 1990s, they came into sharp focus. The concerns were largely as a result of international assessment data that show wide disparities of outcomes for specific groups of students, in particular Maori and Pacifica students. As a result, literacy has become a crucial education goal and higher student achievement is a key policy priority for the Government.

INTRODUCTION

To provide some insights into how the debate is being handled, and the challenge is being met, statements relating to curricula from some representative countries will be examined to ascertain how subject English is conceptualised, and in what way and at what level literacy is addressed. The tension in the relationship between subject English and literacy arises, in part, because as Luke (2004) states “English education has reached a crucial moment in its history, because of changing demographics, cultural knowledge“s, and practices of economic globalization.”

It is further complicated because of the range of interpretations of what subject English is, and what it is for, as well as multiple conceptualizations of literacy, and what is involved in becoming literate. For some it seems that English and literacy are almost interchangeable, for others they are distinguishable fields of learning.

At a time when the structure and content of the abroad curriculum is being reviewed, and should be establishing a „design for the future „,it is essential to come to some consensus over these issues because:

“[English is] above all, the subject which deals with the means of representation and communication: the means whereby we say who we are, to ourselves and to others; the

means whereby we can examine the visions others before us have had about themselves and their times and the means of giving voice to our visions, for ourselves, and for others: the proposal of alternatives for debate, and, after that debate, for common action“

These are widespread concerns which, as we will examine later, have been addressed in somewhat different ways. However there appears to be confusion as to whether these should be addressed through a more specific focus on literacy skills or a greater emphasis on the linguistic and literary aspects of subject English. But is English a study of the language of English speaking people, or is it literary studies; is it communication studies or is it a specific set of skills that are should be acquired within a wider context of learning? Should a curriculum be an English curriculum, a language curriculum, a literacy curriculum or a communication curriculum? On the other hand should it be all of these?

The answer will be, by necessity, culturally and socially determined because of the way in which both English and literacy are socially conceived and constrained. It is imperative, therefore, for us to engage in the debate because, as Luke (2004) argues:

“Without a radical re-took at purposes, consequences, powers and practices of English (and by implication literacy, our addition) we risk descending into politically driven and historically naïve arguments over methods competencies and approaches.”

ENGLISH

This question is currently a key topic being debated by the Select Committee for Education and Skills in the United Kingdom. Peel, Patterson & Gerlach (2000) provide a useful overview of the evolving views of what is meant by English. Is it language or literature, or indeed literatures? Is it becoming literate, or all of the above? They point out that English as a subject is only 150 years old. Prior to that, it was simply the language of England and of countries initially colonized by the English. Studying English was simply learning to speak and, for some, write the language. According to Peel et al., in the eighteenth century and the preceding years the teaching of English was through implementation of a set of practices to teach literacy. English as we know it now only became established in the middle ages with literacy restricted to a minority of the population. It wasn't until the mid nineteenth century that the study of English was split into language and literature, and not until the mid twentieth century that it became expressive English and imaginative writing and literature for primary and lower secondary school; English and media studies in upper secondary schools; and critical theory and interdisciplinary studies in universities.

For a long time English has been a complex subject with different, even competing approaches to teaching and learning all of which are still influential today. Within the past fifty to sixty years these approaches have included: a skills approach with an emphasis on the procedures for

reading (decoding)and writing (encoding); cultural heritage and growth approaches which have emphasized personal growth and knowledge of a literacy heritage; and the critical-cultural approaches which acknowledge that literacy practices vary from site to site and are culturally bound and emphasize the importance of analytic and critical approaches to literacy and cultural and political implications of literacy. Luke claims:

“There is disquiet among English Teachers ...some wonder aloud
Whether English teaching might return to a kind of depoliticized “normalcy”
Of a stable and uncontested curriculum taught to groups of students
With more or less similar English –speaking backgrounds. Yet others
Ask why and how schools can persist in teaching as if there were
Such a curriculum and as if today’s students were the monolingual
And mono-cultural print- based kids of another era”.

He suggests, further, that these tensions are exacerbated partly because, in comparison with maths and science, in English the body of knowledge that informs the curriculum and the pedagogy is less clear cut: that is there is less distinction between content and practice in English than there is in maths or science. In English, the content under study is also the medium through which it is studied, that is, it is “subject and object, lingua franca and corpus, instructional medium and messages”

LITERACY

Literacy and literacy education have undergone radical transformation even within the past one hundred years, and in recent times, have been hotly debated. In New Zealand, as in Canada, Australia, the United States and England, the „great debate“ over literacy education has taken the form of a near-continuous heated dialogue over instructional extremes such as phonics and whole language. Our debates about literacy education have been centred more around a search for finding the „right“ and correct scientific methods of teaching reading and writing, and targeting these at marginalized groups, and less on the concepts of literacy and implications of changing interpretations of literacy for literacy education. It is interesting to note that the term literacy was rarely used other than in relation to „illiteracy“ until recent times. The curriculum statements and handbooks of the Ministry of Education and previously the Department of Education referred only to reading and writing up until the late nineteen nineties.

The stated aims focus on language. They are that students should be able to enjoy **language** in all its varieties and understand, respond to and use oral, written and visual **language** effectively in a range of contexts. Essentially, in this context, the use of the term literacy means literacy in written English, that is, reading and writing.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN LITERACY AND ENGLISH

Before examining the differences and similarities between learning in English and literacy learning, we believe it is useful to try to establish what English is and what literacy is. We will also look at how over time, and across communities, understandings of these two concepts have differed. We draw heavily on the work of the New London Group and especially Alan Luke and Günter Kress as well as examining the work of a number of academics working in literacy predominantly in United Kingdom and Australia.

CONCLUSION

In trying to answer the question, what is the difference between literacy and subject English, we have identified a range of views that are held about each term. What is significant, and similar, is that both are constantly evolving.

This concept assumes that cultural, social and cognitive factors are all implicated in literacy, and in English, and consequently in students' literacy achievement. Becoming literate involves cultural knowledge and social practices that use language for thinking and making meaning in the culture. The implications are that English as a subject needs to include knowledge of how a language works in particular texts, and how it typically works in a culture. English literacy's in this model integrates social semiotics; literate capabilities; and explicit knowledge of how language works in texts and how ideologies are incorporated in discourses and linguistic choices. This last aspect includes knowledge of a wide range of texts: for example, „canonical texts, on-line texts and texts valued in different culturally communities. Literacy and subject English are clearly part of a paradox. Literacy is a component of English but at the same is wider than the study of English, and English is a part of literacy. Literacy then is both the particular and the universal.

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