

English Literature Education in England

Keiko AOKI-ITO

My original intention was just to research English literature, with a specific focus on Shakespeare's works. However, more than a decade ago, I started to research how Shakespeare's plays are taught in England. Since then, I have continued to write about educational policies on the teaching of English and reported on some of the secondary classes I observed at a number of high schools in England. Currently, I am writing about the history of how the system for the teaching of English has been established in England as my dissertation.

In the symposium, I presented some of the historical background of teaching English and English Literature in England. Because this topic was really huge, I focused on the history briefly, under four headings:

1. How English as a subject was established in the 19th century
2. English Literature as a formal subject at the end of the 19th century
3. Education Reforms in the 20th century
4. Teaching Shakespeare in English schools.

Although all those topics are related to the themes of the symposium, in this proceeding, I will focus on the topic 3 and 4.

Education Reforms in the latter half of the 20th century

A formal report called the *Newbolt Report* in 1921 stated that teaching English was already well established in most institutions. In order to research teaching English everywhere, the government pointed Sir Henry Newbolt as the chairman of an investigatory committee. This was the first investigation focusing on only teaching English in England. Before the Newbolt Report, Cambridge and Oxford University introduced their English courses though it seemed to some people that the study of English literature, a component of the courses, was of little worth. From this point of view, this Newbolt Report stated that 'literature is not just a subject for academic study, but one of the chief temples of the Human spirit, in which all should worship' (Newbolt Report p.258, Eaglestone p.13). After the issuing of the Newbolt Report, English study began to be called 'new English'. One of the most influential critics of English Literature, F.R Leavis from Cambridge, had established his new English and ways of criticism in English study as you know. Leavis chose great literary works (in the canon) that everyone with sensibility should study and admire. Authors like Geoffrey Chaucer, William Shakespeare, Jane Austen, the Brontës, George Eliot and Henry James would be included in the canon (Eaglestone 2002, p15). Leavis and his successors (known as 'Leavisites') developed the study of English and they expanded the criticism of English study. He had published some journals, however in 1952, he had to stop publishing one of his major journals 'Scrutiny', which means a little powerless English study, because practical study emerged in the 1950s. His successors were shocked and afraid of the future of English study. Two of his young successors had decided to publish a new journal with senior fellows in Cambridge University. They were Brian Cox and A.E. Dyson who published '*Critical Quarterly*' (Aoki 2018, p.38).

Professors Cox and Dyson, the editors of *Critical Quarterly*, majored in the study of English literature at the Cambridge, but they were interested in the teaching of English as well. The journal *Critical Quarterly* had been well-known to the teachers mainly, and they participated in the seminar held by Cox and Dyson. Eventually, their complaining from a conservative point of view was expanded to the movement for reform. They got support from Conservative MPs and some of the mass media as well. Finally, the movement was so influential that some right-wing writers and teachers, including Cox and Dyson contacted Conservative MPs and the then Former Prime Minister Mrs. Thatcher. So, the movement was getting politicized because of more support from the Conservative MPs. They made their case in the *Black Paper* in the 1970s. In the pedagogical field, this *Black Paper* movement, which was associated with a campaign against so-called progressive education, has been considered to be one of triggers for education reforms in England (Ball 2008, p.72). One of the biggest educational reforms in England is the Act of 1988, which is known as the National Curriculum. In this way, the teaching of English became a political consideration in the 1970s. Professor Brian Cox continued his campaigning until his death in 2008.

Teaching Shakespeare in English Schools

Finally, let us partly look at the value of teaching Shakespeare in English schools, and conclude this proceedings. You already know that Shakespeare is one of the compulsory writers mentioned in the National

Curriculum. Significantly, Professor Cox was a chairperson in the National Curriculum working group of English in the 1980s. In his writing, he shows some thoughts of teaching Shakespeare. In *Cox on Cox*, he writes that Shakespeare's plays are so rich that in every age they can produce fresh meanings and even those who deny his universality agree on his cultural importance (Cox 1991, p.82). Some teachers understand this, but some other teachers find it difficult to adapt their methodology to teaching Shakespeare in the classroom at all levels. Here is another example by Eaglestone: students (secondary) who enjoy Shakespeare are usually the 'academic' ones, the 'literary A stream'. As this is usually a minority of students, Shakespeare is thus often seen as elitist (Eaglestone 2002, p.71-72). From this viewpoint, it is hard for the mass students to study Shakespeare plays, and it became a common assumption that studying Shakespeare is difficult. On the contrary, Cox mentions that every student should study Shakespeare plays in his writing:

In particular, every pupil should be given at least some experience of the plays or poetry of Shakespeare. Whether this is through the study, viewing or performance of whole plays or of selected poems or scenes should be entirely at the discretion of the teacher (Cox 1991, p.82).

Cox also suggested practical advice for teachers of those pupils in the lower forty percent in ability. The methods of Rex Gibson, to be found in the 'Shakespeare and Schools' projects provide concrete methods which can be used for even children of low ability. One of the main strategies for teaching the plays of Shakespeare is to take the students to a live performance in a theatre, or to invite visiting theatre companies to a school. This is a practice well established in at least one of the schools which I visited in England – Prince Henry's Grammar School in Yorkshire. The thoughts of Cox still exist in the National Curriculum. So far, Shakespeare is the only compulsory writer who has never changed after revising the Curriculum. Now the compulsory writers list of the National Curriculum is not the same as the one in the 1990s, except for Shakespeare.

Note – the teaching of English Literature is not normally a separate subject from English, which includes grammar, different kinds of writing, speaking and listening practice etc, until GCSE courses start in Year 10, at the age of about 14. At Advanced Level in schools (ages 16 – 18) students can choose between courses which focus on English Language, English Literature (usually prescribed set books) or English Language and Literature combined.

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