

Appendices

Appendix I: Transition from English at A level to English at degree level

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There has always been a tension between English as taught in schools post-GCSE and the English courses encountered by students when they arrive to begin their degree. Before 1993, when the overwhelming majority of students studied English Literature (just called 'English') for A level, the tension was between the detailed study of individual texts at school and the much broader scope of literary study encountered at university. It is fair to say that, before the 1990s, the influence of literary theory had had little direct impact on A level English examining. Very broadly, the key criteria for A level success were a) knowing the texts in detail b) producing an "informed personal response" – though the questions of how "informed" should be understood and what was meant by "personal" were usually begged – and c) writing with fluency and accuracy. The quality of work produced by strong candidates was often very high, but "flair" was best demonstrated through unseen practical criticism, sometimes relegated to S 'special' papers taken only by a tiny minority of candidates. Wider reading, contextual and critical study certainly formed a large part of the teaching, though rarely in the examining, of English. In part this was due to the fact that all assessment took place at the end of two years: modular assessment and AS levels had not yet been introduced, and many teachers felt able to devote a good part of the course to an introduction to the study of Literature. This introduction often included an historical outline.

At the same time, *English Language* A level was beginning to be offered by some examining boards, but taken by only a small minority of A level English candidates. Teachers with the qualifications to teach specific Language courses were relatively rare, most having themselves taken literature-based degrees before entering teaching. More popular was the introduction of combined *English Language and Literature* courses, where candidates typically took a combination of Literature and Language papers. Such courses had the advantage that they could be taught jointly with conventional Literature and/or Language classes. Initially, therefore, they were more popular in the tertiary sector, which usually had greater flexibility in staffing and timetabling. It is fair to say that the emphasis in the Language papers was more generally socio-linguistic than based on any systematic approach to frameworks for the study of language.

It is important to add that during the 1990s the popularity of English at A level appeared to decline markedly, often to the benefit of subjects such as Psychology and Media Studies. The main victim was *English Literature*, while *English Language* and *English Language and Literature* remained steady or made a slight advance:

	Lit.	Lang.	Lang-Lit.	Total
1997	61979	14006	19238	95223
2000	53763	14138	18661	86562*

* Data extracted from *Inter-Board Statistics*, compiled annually by AQA

The introduction of Curriculum 2000 (September 2000 onwards) radically changed this pattern. The introduction of compulsory AS (Advanced Subsidiary) representing half of the A level course, with AS set at a standard half way between GCSE and A level, meant three things. First, the burden of assessment was dramatically increased: students now had to take three units in the first half of their A level course, and this put immediate pressure on teaching time, with many English departments complaining that they could no longer offer the type of introductory course that they had regarded as essential in the past. Second, the remaining three units had to embody the more demanding elements of A level to balance the easier level of AS work. At both AS and A2, however, English Literature courses now placed much greater emphasis on contextual study, which had scarcely featured at all in the so-called legacy syllabuses.

The third, and equally significant, change was the introduction of synoptic assessment, a final unit of the course which would draw together the knowledge, skills and understanding acquired over the course as a whole. In English specifications (as syllabuses are now called) this innovation has had the beneficial effect of requiring teachers to teach and students to learn techniques and approaches to literary and language study that go some way to bridging the gap between A level and degree level work in English studies. Work for this unit typically involves studying and comparing a range of texts or textual material and invites a range of literary and/or linguistic discussion, sometimes from a theoretical perspective.

The course content of each English subject, and the skills to be taught and assessed, are now prescribed in Subject Criteria documents drawn up by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA). QCA produced separate Criteria for *English Literature*, *English Language*

and *English Language and Literature*, each with its own subject content and assessment objectives. This effectively removed the flexibility that had previously been enjoyed by schools and colleges to combine Literature and Language teaching, so that students could combine elements of both syllabuses into *English Language and Literature*. Whereas it had been hoped and expected that this subject would grow rapidly in popularity and hasten the integration of literary and language approaches to English studies, the opposite has happened. In 2003, the take-up of the three separate subjects was as follows:

	Lit.	Lang.	Lang-Lit.	Total
2003	50082	14971	14694	79774*

* Data extracted from *Inter-Board Statistics*. (It may also be noted that between 1997 and 2003, the proportion of male candidates taking English subjects has continued to drop. By 2003, 70% of all candidates were female, and 70% of all candidates achieving grade A at A level in English were also female. This clearly has significant implications for future recruitment to university English departments and, in the medium term, for the profile of English teachers in secondary schools and colleges.)

The most significant change of emphasis in *English Literature* for Curriculum 2000 was a much increased weighting given to contextual study. Indeed, the requirement that, at A2, students should be able to "evaluate the significance of cultural, historical and other contextual influences on literary texts and study" (Assessment Objective 5ii; *Subject Criteria for English Literature*, QCA 1999) goes well beyond what the QAA *Benchmarking Statements for English* (2000) expect: these call only for "awareness [not evaluation] of how different social and cultural contexts affect the nature of language and meaning" (3.2: *Key subject-specific skills*).

It is important to realize, also, that students arriving at university will have had very different experiences of English at A level. Students studying *English Literature* will have studied a minimum of eight texts, four for AS and four more for A2, including (at AS) Shakespeare and at least one other pre-1900 text. They will have had to cover prose, poetry and drama at both AS and at A2. In the second half of the course they will also have had to study at least one pre-1770 text and another pre-1900. The textual requirement for *English Language and Literature* students is precisely half this, with no commitment to studying Shakespeare or a pre-1770 text. On the other hand these students will have also have been required to study non-literary textual material (though not necessarily

extended, full-length texts) and to be able to analyse spoken as well as written texts. All discussion of texts will have had a language-centred focus, with correspondingly less emphasis on cultural and historical context.

The main thrust of the *English Language Subject Criteria* is on learning to apply different analytical frameworks (e.g. lexical, semantic, phonetic, pragmatic) for the systematic study of language at different levels. To some, the strength of the English Language specifications is that they require the learning of different methodologies rather than the acquisition of a particular body of knowledge; to others this is their drawback.

Within the 14-19 English teaching community, indeed, there is no consensus as to whether the present state of English studies is an improvement on what went before. On one side of the fence stand those who want to see the subject aligned more explicitly with the notion of communication in the widest sense and who believe that existing specifications (especially in *English Literature*) adhere too closely to outdated notions of canon and literary value, and have failed to move sufficiently to reflect the increasing fluidity and mobility of English studies, or to acknowledge and assimilate the theoretical developments and arguments of the past thirty years. On the other side stand those wishing to defend the traditions of English as taught and studied before Curriculum 2000, who believe that the imposition of Assessment Objectives with their complex weightings and definitions have undermined the creative and innovative elements of English study post-GCSE. In the middle are those who have welcomed the forward momentum in thinking about how English should be conceived and taught, who recognize the need for an informed debate about the relationship between English as taught in schools and as studied at university, but who regret the degree of prescription and regulation imposed by the Subject Criteria, which they believe have made an holistic approach to English studies more, not less, difficult to achieve.

This fragmentation of English into three quite self-contained subjects is the greatest difference now between English as studied at school and at university. Ironically, however, the most significant post-Curriculum 2000 development in English has done much to reunify English studies. The introduction of Advanced Extension Awards (AEAs) in 2002 has re-established the principle of English as a coherent and integrated discipline post-16.

The AEA in *English* is a single 3-hour paper aimed at students who are likely to achieve a good A grade in

whichever of the three English A levels they have studied. It is an unprepared paper, based on the subject criteria for *English Literature*, *English Language* and *English Language and Literature*. There are no set texts, for the AEA is designed for students whichever awarding body's specification they have studied. No specific preparation for the examination is required, apart from familiarization with the format of the paper; and candidates for AEA English have, in each year so far, come equally from the maintained, tertiary and independent sectors.

At the start of the examination candidates are given a reading booklet with a range of material to be studied and assimilated in the first hour. This material consists of passages from primary texts (literary and non-literary, including transcripts of spoken English) and secondary material (mainly extracts from critical and theoretical writing relevant to the primary texts and to the candidates' wider study). In the first section of the paper, candidates choose two or more passages for comparative discussion; they are required initially to identify the framework for discussion that they will employ and then at the end to evaluate its effectiveness for the task. In the second section, they select one of five or six essay topics (one of which will include an exercise in adaptive or recreative writing) making use as appropriate of the critical and theoretical material in the reading booklet.

In the three years that the AEA has been running, English has consistently been the most popular AEA subject and the papers have been effective in identifying students' potential for future study and independent learning, rather than simply measuring their level of attainment against a set of prescribed assessment objectives. Significantly, AEA's have only one, generic, assessment objective – a feature welcomed by students, teachers and examiners alike. AEA English has provided the best indicator so far that A level English can be studied and assessed as an integrated and coherent discipline. UCAS has this year recognized AEA examinations as a valuable way of discriminating potentially excellent A level candidates, from whatever background they may come, and will be allocating points on the UCAS tariff (Distinction 40; Merit 20) from 2006.

The value of AEA's has been identified in the Tomlinson Final Report on *14-19 Curriculum and Qualifications Reform* (October 2004). The Working Group states that

For the highest attaining young people, the framework offers the prospect that whatever their diploma line they would be able to take their learning as far and as fast as they are capable of through the extended advanced level grade range, incorporating the levels of demand currently associated with the AEA in the A level system" (Ch. 10, para. 241, p.90).

Tomlinson also recommends that "GCE A level specifications should be revised to reduce the number of units in an A level from six to four, and reduce the weight and prescription of the assessment criteria" (Recommendation 29, p.89). He is concerned to move away from the present situation where assessments must address exhaustively all the course content and assessment objectives, towards a slimmed-down system where learning would be sampled (e.g. though eight texts might still be studied, they might not all need to be examined in the same way through eight discrete essays):

This recognizes that the assessment of the qualification can be more holistic and focused on the broader areas of learning while retaining and enhancing the depth and variety of assessment (Ch.9, para. 230, p. 87).

It is too early to know exactly how the Tomlinson recommendations on restructuring A levels – which should be implemented for first teaching from September 2007 – will impact on English studies post-16. However, with their recognition of the value of the AEA, their emphasis on reducing over-prescription and their call for a more holistic approach to assessment, they should be welcomed by schools and colleges on the one hand and by university English departments on the other. They should genuinely help to ease the transition from A level to university for those who choose to embark on the challenging and expanding discipline of English studies.

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