Unmasking the Myth: English, the School Subject

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The above text traces the history of English and its cultural politics from the time of its implementation into schools at the end of the nineteenth century, to nowadays.

Bringing English to Order appears to have been conceived in three overlapping, and successive parts. The first one is historical and outlines the origins of English as a school subject. It also describes the historical debate within English itself. The second part is more theoretical. It sets out the analytical framework used by some of the authors (such as Bill Green and Robert Morgan). The main thrust of the argument is the way in which English is being used to "subjectify" and "colonise people" into a particular way of thinking. The third section deals with the context of English. The text discusses examples of English in different contexts (such as Norway, Canada and South Africa). English in these contexts has different meanings for people. In this review, I proceed by taking each "part" in turn.

1 Histories of English

This first section looks at the origins of English as a discipline. In their article "Literacy, Politics and the Teaching of English," Stephen Ball et al. (1990) explain how English was introduced in schools in England as a means of control and socialization of the masses at the turn of the century. The situation within England has parallels internationally. In England itself, the teaching of English
was used to control the working class. Outside England it was regarded as a means of colonisation:

"English culture" English language, English literature were as essential to the consolidation of English 'power and progress' as English armies had been in implanting them. (Morgan, 1990, p. 206)

What is even more striking is that the teaching of English started in the colonies before it was introduced in the schools in England (Morgan, p. 205).

Whether it be in England or in the British colonies, the implementation of English was guided by a single motive of control and order rather than enlightenment. We can see that the historical formation of English as a school subject was motivated by political and economical factors. But the teaching of English itself as a discipline also went through different models. Morgan argues that in order to talk about English as a school subject, it is necessary to look not only at the historical factors which have constructed English as a discipline, but also at other ideological transformations which affected it to make it what it is today. He makes this point persuasively when he says that:

By restoring the political historicity of English teaching we make it possible to grasp the institutional conditions of a practice, its historical shifts, internal contradictions, relationships with other adjacent and antagonistic discourses, and the normalizations implicit in its operation. (p. 231)

Ball et al. outline these histories and the various discourses which have influenced English from Matthew Arnold to F. R. Leavis and the Cambridge School and the Growth Model. This progressivist curriculum came with the implementation of comprehensive schools in England. It also occurred in the context of a fairly good economic climate.
However, since the mid-eighties and with the rise of neo-conservatism in "First World" countries (such as England, Canada and the US), there has been a return to a more conservative form of education (Ball et al., p. 71). This brings me to my discussion of the dominant theoretical framework of the book.

2 Discourse analysis

The general approach taken is to apply discourse theory. In particular, Bill Green and Robert Morgan (1990) make explicit their use of discourse analysis. However, I also feel that Laurence Walker's article "The ideology and Politics of English Grammar" (1990) should also be included in this section. All three of them aim to unmask the discursively constituted "myths" which have been associated with the teaching of English. They show how English has been used to construct "subjects" and subordinate "individuals" to dominant forms of discourse.

One instance of this process of subordination and subjectification can be clearly seen from the Fiji Form Seven English prescription. For example, in the section on the "Varieties of Language," students are made to study "the particular features that characterise the English language" (p.10). This situates the "Englishness" of the English language at the centre and the "local" varieties (such as Fiji English) on the margins. Through the process of their schooling, therefore, students come to internalise these "colonial" forms of English and reproduce them as true and natural.

In their article, Green and Morgan use the analytical approach of the French philosopher Michel Foucault (Green pp. 135-136, Morgan p. 199). Morgan also relies on the work of Edward Said on "Orientalism." To my way of thinking, all of them do a similar type of research and are concerned with discursive questions of power and resultant constructions of subjectivity. In his article "Literature: English Teaching and Cultural Politics," Green applies Foucault's notions of discourse to literature and English teaching. In his view,

"English Teaching as a specific social discourse has actively constructed literature, as both a cultural commodity and a practice with quite definite ideological and political effects. (p. 135)"

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In this context, it is necessary to see that so called "givens" like "Literature" and "Language" are constructions with a history. "Literature," for example does not have any inherent qualities. "It" is not a natural effect, rather

Literature must be seen as something made, in a number of senses, and not simply as something given. (Green, p.139)

This challenges the notion that "Literature" pre-existed its entry into the education system. As a discourse, "Literature" organizes, controls and maintains social divisions. Students are made to read certain books and they are taught certain values which exclude others. As Green points out:

[Both 'literature' and 'education' are ... social mechanisms for the mobilization, authorization and dissemination of certain specific discourses and, in varying ways, the refusal or the marginalization of others. (p. 138)]

In turn, individuals are produced as "subjects" of prevailing discursive order. They will, then, themselves reproduce those same discourses and their social meanings (Green, p. 146).

Morgan endorses many of the things which have been said by Green about discursive formations and the "process of subjectification" (Morgan, p. 199). He uses Foucault's work to perform an historical "archaeology" of English in Ontario to show how Canadians have been "culturally colonised" by the discursive power of England English. Morgan works by tracing historical documents on the subject of English, as well as practices in schools (such as Empire Day celebration). By doing this, he makes visible the role played by the State in its maintenance and consolidation of power through English and the practice of English teaching (Morgan, p. 204).

Morgan shows how English studies have marginalised and excluded discourses other than those which endorse Anglo-Saxon values. They do this in order to retain institutional power over the "Other." Therefore, through what Morgan calls "an institutional division of knowledge," (p. 207) the State has been able to sustain
the division between "us" (the centre) and "them" (the margins), that is "enlightened inside and barbarian outside" (Morgan, p. 205).

In the same way, the article by Walker discusses the "colonising" power of English grammar and its teaching in 1894 in Newfoundland. Walker shows that in Newfoundland, the discourse of English grammar was also a process of "othering." It excluded vernacular Canadian English from English grammar and as a result, alienated the students' identities. "Grammar" itself is a powerful discursive field. The teaching of English grammar is another way of reinforcing institutionalised power structures in society. It "works" by ordering and regulating the experience of its "subjects."

I firmly believe that "English" has to be theorised, and the politics of its practices analysed. Teachers and students have to be made aware of the ideological and political implications of the discipline and its teaching. It is important to realise that teachers do contribute to the legitimisation of the dominant discourses of the State when they "teach their subjects" in the classrooms.

3 English in context

Whereas the essays by Walker and Morgan show how English studies can act as a means of control in Canada, within a different context it can be seen as a mode of "resistance" (Goodson and Medway, p. ix). English as a discourse takes on different meanings depending on the context in which it appears.

In the case of South Africa, the meaning of English has obvious links with resistance to the dominant hegemony. Hilary Janks (1990) describes the position of English within the education system. In her article "Contested Terrain: English Education in South Africa 1948-1987," she shows how the education system has two types of syllabus: one for the Whites and in favour of the maintenance of the status quo, and one for the Blacks. This situation reflects the racist educative discursive formation of that country. For example, the syllabus for the Black students is very prescriptive in its choice of literature. And because of lack of funding and resources, students are kept in a constant state of subordination (Janks, pp. 247-248).
As a means of resistance, *People’s Education for People’s Power* was established in 1986 (Janks, p. 255). Within this curriculum the term “English People” was constructed as a counter discourse and as a means to empower the individuals, whether they be Whites or Blacks (Janks, pp. 258-259). In the context of South Africa, then, to be able to master English is, indeed, a means to “freedom.” As well as this, the mastery of English allows Black South Africans to communicate with the rest of Africa (Janks, p. 246). Janks concludes by saying that

... the struggle over English is part of a broader struggle for the emancipation of an oppressed majority and the liberation of an entire nation.

(p. 259)

4 Interrogations/New departures

*Bringing English to Order* presents a challenging collection of articles which address the question of English from an historical, theoretical and political viewpoint. This type of reading of English as teaching subject was probably long overdue. Indeed, I agree with the editors that there is a need to

... challenge the prevalent view that changes in English teaching have resulted largely from changes in ideas about the nature of language and learning and about developmental psychology. (p. xiii)

In my opinion, this text shows successfully that English is closely linked with the politics of the State.

Nevertheless, there are some critical remarks that I would like to make about this book in general. There is a marked absence of woman-representation, the exclusion of indigenous people and "Third World" representation.

I find it regrettable that the main thrust of the inquiry rests on the question of class and ethnicity. I feel that cultural politics also encompasses gender politics. Except for passing references, there has been no attempt by the writers to look at the gender politics of the "subject." Women are entirely absent from the debate.
Along with the woman-absence, indigenous people such as the Australian Aborigines, Canadian Indians, and Pacific Islanders have also been erased from this "History and Politics of a School Subject". This is at least another example of contextually constituted "otherness." *Bringing English to Order* does not even touch on this issue.

The third point that I would like to make is that there is no "Third World" representation: English as a discursive field and mode of colonisation is still prevalent in the ex-British colonies such as India, Pakistan and South Pacific islands. Although some countries are now independent politically, they are still economically and culturally "colonised". In the context of the international post-colonial discursive order, I question the notion that "Third World" "local education systems" reflect unambiguously the demands of "the State". Such a view presumes that the State is unified. *Bringing English to Order* is a very engaging book. It brings a new perspective to the subject of English and opens up the field for further investigation. It shows successfully that "English" is a "constructed" discipline with educational and political ramifications. to participate in teaching English is therefore a political activity.

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References


Green, Bill (1990) *A Dividing Practice: Literature, English Teaching and Cultural Politics.* In Goodson and Medway (eds.), pp.135-161.


There are 4 activities: 1-match, 2-write the name of the subject under the picture, read the sentences and match, 3-wordsearch, 4-complete. School Subjects - reading comprehension + By zailda. Tasks on comprehension and conversation (pair work). Pages 2 and 3 are fully editable. Hope it's useful. Unmasking the Myths will be held on Saturday, November 7, 2020. Our 7th annual event is a Masquerade Gala Dinner Fundraiser in support of Little Warriors. A non-profit organization focused on the prevention, awareness, and treatment of children who have been sexually abused. Buy your tickets now! Unmasking the Myths 2019 is the sixth annual masquerade gala dinner fundraiser in support of the Little Warriors. Book Now. Buy your tickets now! Unmasking the Myths 2019 is the sixth annual masquerade gala dinner fundraiser in support of the Little Warriors. Unmasking the Myths. 3 July at 07:52. Hello everyone! The Unmasking the Myths committee wanted to reach out to get an understanding of how our community and supporters feel about this year’s gala.