MARKING AND ASSESSMENT IN ENGLISH

PAULINE CHATER

London METHUEN *New York*

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Development, Oxford University Press (1980), pp. 2 and 3; J. Dixon, *The Role of English and Communication*, Macmillan (1979), pp.16–17; T. Burgess and E. Adams, *Outcomes of Education*, Macmillan (1980), p.26; P. Medway, *Finding a Language*, Writers & Readers (1980), pp.21–2; Julius Lester, *Basketball Game*, Puffin (1982), pp.47–52.

GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

English remains a core subject in the secondary school curriculum as the confident words of a recent HMI document reveal:

> English is of vital importance in the development of pupils as individuals and as members of society: our language is our principal means of making sense of our experience and communication with others. The teaching of English is concerned with the essential skills of speech, reading and writing, and with literature. Schools will doubtless continue to give them high priority.
>
> (*The School Curriculum*, DES, 1981)

Such confidence belies the fact that there has been, and continues to be, much debate among practitioners as to exactly what constitutes English. If the desired consensus remains rather far off at least the interested teacher now has a large and useful literature on which he or she can profitably reflect in the attempt to answer the question 'What is English?' There have been notable books designed to reorientate teachers' thinking

about the subject ranging from those absorbed by the necessary theoretical analysis, like John Dixon's *Growth Through English* (Oxford, rev. edn 1975), to those working outwards from new research into classroom language, like *From Communication to Curriculum*, by Douglas Barnes (Penguin, 1976); but there are not so many books intended to help teachers get a purchase on their day-to-day activities (a fine exception is *The English Department Handbook* recently published by the ILEA English Centre). To gain such a purchase requires confidence built not from making 'everything new' so much as learning to combine the best from the older traditions with some of those newer ideas. And preferably these ideas have to be seen to have emerged from effective classroom teaching. The English teacher's aims have to be continually reworked in the light of new experience, and the assurance necessary to manage this is bred out of the convictions of other experienced practitioners. This is of particular importance to the new and inexperienced teacher. It is to such teachers and student teachers that this series is primarily directed.

The books in this series are intended to give practical guidance in the various areas of the English curriculum. Each area is treated in a separate volume in order to gain the necessary space in which to discuss it at some length. The aim of the series is twofold: to describe good practice by exploring the approaches and activities reflected in the daily work of an English teacher in the comprehensive school; and to give a practical lead to teachers who wish to try out for themselves a wider repertoire of teaching skills and ways of organizing syllabuses and lessons. Taken as whole, the series does not press upon the reader a ready-made philosophy, but attempts to provide a map of the English teaching landscape in which the separate volumes highlight an individual feature of that terrain, representing its particular characteristics while reminding us of the continuity between these differing elements in the overall topography.

The series addresses itself to the 11–16 age range with an additional volume on sixth-form work, and assumes a mixed ability grouping, at least in the first two years of schooling. Each volume begins with a discussion of the problems and rationale of its chosen aspect of English and goes on to describe practical ways in which the teachers can organize their syllabus and lessons to achieve their intended goals, and ends with a brief guide to books, resources, etc. The individual volumes are written by experienced teachers with a particular interest in their chosen area and the ideas they express have been proved by them or their colleagues in their own classrooms.

It is at the level of the practical that any synthesis of the various approaches to English can be gained, and to accomplish this every teacher must be in possession of a rationale and an awareness of good methods wherever and however they have been achieved. By reading the books in this series it is to be hoped that teachers will be encouraged to try out for themselves ideas found effective by their colleagues so gaining the confidence to make their own informed choice and planning in their own classrooms.

Peter King
July 1983

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PART ONE:
WHAT DOES ASSESSMENT MEAN TO YOU?

1
ONE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT'S VIEW

Introduction

> It is pointless giving pupils wide experience in reading, writing, listening and talking if we only assess their writing.

This comment is taken from the policy document of one English department which has mixed-ability classes in the first three years. Part One looks in detail at that department's assessment procedures, not in order to lay down any hard and fast rules, but to identify some of the key issues and questions in the 'assessment' of English. The word is used here in a broad sense to include a wide range of activities from examining, testing, marking, responding to and discussing children's work. As Stibbs (1979,9) puts it, 'We show our assessment of a pupil's language when we smile at it, listen to it, or read it.' Rowntree (1977,4) suggests that assessment occurs

> whenever one person, in some kind of interaction, direct or indirect, with another, is conscious of obtaining and interpreting information about the knowledge and under-

standing, or abilities and attitudes of that other person. To some extent or other it is an attempt to *know* that person.

ASSESSMENT OF FOUR LANGUAGE MODES

The opening quotation to this chapter echoes the Bullock Report's view that 'A child learns language primarily by using the four modes of talking, listening, writing and reading in close relationship with one another' (1975,162). This sums up a crucial issue in the assessment of English, namely that writing is often the only mode of language that is assessed. In some schools this imbalance simply reflects a restricted English curriculum which concentrates too much on writing, while in others assessment is seen as something distinct from learning. For instance, one non-specialist teacher of English encouraged her third-year pupils to undertake a wide variety of tasks in the four language modes only to find that the head of department, without any consultation, set an examination paper which comprised O-level type essays, followed by a comprehension paper. The literature paper, again with essay questions, was separate. In this case assessment was *totally* divorced from an English course which had taken an integrated approach to language and literature and had required a much wider range of writing than the 'narrative', 'descriptive' and 'expository' titles on the paper. The pupils' abilities in the three other language modes were ignored since the annual examination mark in a subject was the main item in the school report.

INTEGRATING TEACHING AND ASSESSMENT

This severance of assessment from teaching and learning is roundly condemned by one member of the particular department under consideration here:

> You can't separate assessment from the aims and objectives of your teaching. How you respond to a kid's writing or talk