

Are English lessons caught between the emoji devil and the prescriptive grammar deep blue sea?

In response to an article by Amanda Foreman in the Sunday Times suggesting that “[public schools shun classic novels](#)” a teacher of English at Taunton School, James Brodie, points out that literary texts considered to be ‘classics’ shouldn’t be upheld simply because of their reputation, or level of complexity. He explains that the selection of reading material for classroom study should be down to each piece of work’s individual merit and “[ability to inspire and educate](#)”.

Of course Brodie makes a perfectly valid point, but it would be a shame if his (sensible) point was taken to the extreme so as to justify removing all ‘classic texts’ from the syllabus, even if all of the more modern replacements did in fact inspire and educate.

The balancing act that English departments across the country are tasked with, to whittle down such an enormous literary catalogue into a practical number of texts for students to tackle as part of an English syllabus, is no easy one. As with any non-scientific selection, the decision will come down to a combination of personal tastes in literature, authors and contexts (within the parameters of the syllabus which itself is set in line with the personal preferences of the government’s education minister). Tess St Clair-Ford, English teacher at Epsom College, effectively describes the difficult decision-making process that goes on in English departments to agree on the combination of texts from our “wealth of literature” on which to focus “[to explore the truth about the human condition](#)”.

My own favourite author as a youngster was John Irving, and I enjoyed *The Cider House Rules* enormously – Irving is absolutely brilliant at bringing characters to life through funny, yet tragic, plotlines. I want young people to have similarly joyful experiences of reading. It’s also vitally important that children should be able to use language creatively. What we think, and what we are able to imagine, is determined in part by how we can find ourselves in language. That requires a more participatory model than a lot of early 21st century syllabuses and teaching models allow. Literature should be enjoyed in a more exploratory spirit – in the end this is what resulted in the global success of English.

Children will read books if they are inspired to do so – by teachers and parents, peers and siblings. To achieve this we collectively need to provide children with wide and purposeful reading opportunities from as early an age as possible. We also need to retain such ‘old fashioned’ things as libraries with shelves full of books to explore, and should take on initiatives in schools such as Good Reads to motivate a group of children to come together to enjoy reading and discussing one longer text over a period of time. If schools, in partnership with parents, introduce children to the habit of reading at a young age – whether through popular modern novels like *Harry Potter* or *Holes*, or more ‘classic’ children’s series such as *Anne of Green Gables* or *The Chronicles of Narnia* – they will be much better prepared to access more difficult texts by the time they reach their GCSEs.

No doubt there are bound to be differences of opinion, then, within English departments, across schools, among parent bodies, and even in the media, as to what children should be reading at

school (and in their own time) in the 21st century. There seems to be much more agreement, however, with the notion that what's really important is that we get children reading at all – and expose them to a broad variety of influences. I'm sure Foreman, Brodie and St Clair-Ford can all agree on that. Whichever texts might feature on an English syllabus, teaching Chaucer, Hardy, Shakespeare, Virginia Woolf or Julian Barnes, all become much more enjoyable when students already have positive attitudes to reading, even when texts might seem initially 'difficult' or even 'foreign'.

That all said, I am sympathetic to Foreman's plea to retain a focus on these 'classics'. I'm sure other members of my own generation feel similarly, having presumably tumbled with and delighted in these 'classics' in equal measure as students. To truly understand English, learners need to have an appreciation of our language's development over many centuries, and reading the likes of Chaucer and Shakespeare is one of the most straightforward ways to pick up on some of our language's historical nuances. Shakespeare still informs so many of our idioms and popular phrases today, and to explain, by way of example, Stanley Johnson's reaction to the quashing of Boris' leadership aspirations, saying "Et tu, Brute?", native English speakers would need to understand the context of *Julius Caesar*.

This quiet revolution is taking place in the UK in terms of English Literature syllabuses, as some classics step aside to make way for more modern, edgy texts, which feature non-standard language. Of course, the linguistic and literary influences children are exposed to – in English lessons and their own reading, but also on the radio, television and online – inform their own use of the English language, and so this impacts students' acquisition of the English language and the departments' teaching of the language in lessons, too.

Researchers have suggested that teachers should "[stop stressing about split infinitives, as a study finds they are now part of everyday language](#)", but the vast majority don't worry too much about split infinitives. Other people do, though, and so children should be made aware of where prejudices lie, but not in prescriptive terms. Otherwise they may fall foul of those who do subscribe to such things. Other grammatical issues, such as saying "My mother and me went shopping", are more realistic examples, and English departments do still need to spend time educating children about this sort of grammar usage.

There seems to be, then, yet another minefield for English departments to navigate at the same time. According to Dr Claire Dembry, principal research manager at Cambridge University Press, "learners of English deserve to be taught in a way which is informed by the most up-to-date research into how the language is used in the real world... language teaching should reflect these changes". Is it time we reflected more purposefully on the imbalance between the many ways speakers of English actually speak and write? With regional and international terms becoming ingrained into the language of native speakers, and technology influencing the way we greet people in emails or express ourselves using emojis and text speak, our youngest students (those following the National Curriculum, at least), in stark contrast, are being required to have a better understanding of prescriptive grammar rules than any of my generation would have had at the age of seven.

The main crisis is that the paradigm for English is becoming the spoken language rather than the written language. English is being written far more closely to the way that it is spoken than it was up to the mid-20th century, and the challenge is to sort out what is essential to written expression and what is not. Whereas in the past there was a battery of prescriptive rules, a lot of those are now essentially redundant, but there remains an urgent need for children to be able to express themselves accurately and creatively without relying entirely on the emoji devil on the one hand, or the prescriptive grammar deep blue sea on the other.

What's more, with schools having many more students on role who don't have English as a first language, how should English departments decide which 'version' of English should be the benchmark? Much of the native-speaking population might not spot the error in Tesco's famous check-out signage – '10 items or less' – while learners of English as a second language, who have learnt the language through instruction as opposed to picking it up in use around them, may well spot the error. In this Tesco example, prescriptivists have had what I think of as being a positive impact on the nation's grasp of the English language.

It might seem that grammar bores, pedants and fans of literary classics are just that – boring – but with English being such a great joy, and one of the main selling points of the UK (from international students wanting to study at UK boarding schools to become fluent in the language, or English being one of the most dominant international business languages), it would seem to me to be a great shame if our native speakers were not able to keep up with international peers and colleagues. Being sufficiently familiar with the 'rules', and the rich literary, cultural and historical references, empowers speakers to be able to flout or ignore the rules as they wish, but it also puts them at an advantage – being able to be on the front foot in interviews or in interactions with new people – over those who simply do not know the difference.