

**Ian Michael*****English as a Subject: Its Development over Four Centuries.***

University of Southampton : Centre for Language in Education. 1994. Occasional Papers, 23.

**T**HIS paper is the text of a lecture delivered at the Centre for Language in Education at the University of Southampton in May, 1994.<sup>1</sup> Anyone who has ever heard a stimulating talk, live or on the radio, and lamented that they did not have a copy of it to study at leisure, will welcome the text being made available in this way. It is also a positive sign that academic institutions are prepared to increase the awareness of their students that their subject – in this case English teaching – actually has a history.

Michael's theme is the slow emergence of "English" as a curriculum subject in schools up to the nineteenth century. The first problem, as he rightly points out, is the complexity of the concept of "English" as "a subject." According to Keddie, "... subjects are what practitioners do with them ..." (Keddie, 1979: 144) and in the absence of a single stable definition one can sympathize with Michael's approach in pulling together many of the activities which have come to constitute part of the English syllabus, and putting them in a historical perspective.

In order to exercise some kind of control on his material, Michael sets up three "constants" as guidelines for what should be included in or excluded from his survey: *expression*, *interpretation* and *control* (that is, of both expression *and* interpretation – i.e. grammar and logic). Within this framework, he looks back through history at the various genres through which these aspects have been expressed.

To do this, Michael divides the period under discussion into three phases: (1) up to 1700; (2) the eighteenth century, and (3) the nineteenth century. He then does a quick "scamper through" each period, sketching in its "main lines of growth" (p. 2), summarising the main points at the end of each section. The lines of growth in each period are illustrated by a representative work for one of the genres studied. (The 22 works chosen – dating from c.1530 to 1869, and arranged neither chronologically nor in alphabetical order by author, but in order of their introduction in the text – are listed on p.13). This treatment in successive "slices" of history well brings out the changes which take place century by century. In the first phase, works are treated under one of six heads: oral expression, written expression, interpretation, logic, grammar and literacy. By the 19th century, interpretation ("literature") has moved into first place, followed by grammar and literacy. Oral expression is not treated at all, and logic appears to have got lost in the eighteenth century.

Among the merits of this publication are that it puts – for historians of linguistics – grammar, rhetoric and logic in the wider context of the world in which they were used. Here, a more detailed picture is skilfully sketched in, with variations in age, social status (the aristocracy, the poor) and the kind of school (grammar, dame, petty, major public school, as well as the home) being taken into account at the appropriate points. Particularly illuminating is the variety of genres alluded to – rhetorics, commonplace books, miscellanies, hornbooks, primers, anthologies, readers etc. – since the concept of

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<sup>1</sup> The paper can be obtained (while stocks last) from: Mrs. Rita Corbridge, School of Education, University of Southampton, Southampton SO9 5NH, England.

genre is often important to the historian of linguistics for the accurate assessment of individual works.

Michael's conclusions suggest a continued unhappiness at the diffuse nature of the term 'English.' Quite rightly, he stresses the speculative nature of what we know, or think we know, about teaching methods – (How were these 'subjects' actually taught?), – and about the books themselves – (Who possessed them – the teacher? the pupils? And how were they used?). Thus, while the presentation maps out the major areas for us, it also brings out how superficial our knowledge of many of these areas still is, and hence how much still remains to be done.

The vast amount of research and knowledge which underlies this apparently superficial scamper through history will be apparent, even to the uninitiated reader, from numerous asides. It is a pity that the sourcebook which could best help interested readers or listeners further (Michael, 1987) should not have been given greater prominence, perhaps by being better integrated in the main text: it is in fact located at the *end* of 'Occasional Papers so far published' by the Centre for Education.

Altogether, the survey offers a useful platform for considering the momentous developments which have taken place under the mantle of 'English' this century, when the same complaint of heterogeneity is still made: "... the English syllabus not only tends to fragment into the conventional compartments of language and literature, with subdivisions for composition, grammar, and vocabulary, and for poetry, prose, and drama, but also spills over from both of these spheres in very diverse directions – into current affairs, play-acting, debating, journalism, logic, choral speaking, italic handwriting, miming, puppetry, and a host of other no doubt excellent but diffuse activities ..." (Mittins, 1964: 91). Michael seems to take the view that 'a subject gains from fluidity among its components' (p. 12). More recent history suggests that this fluidity is less productive when major components such as language and literature develop in different directions. What we have witnessed in the U.K. this century has been a series of sustained attempts on the part of literature specialists to eradicate the study of language ('grammar') from the curricula of schools, if not of universities (cf. Mittins, 1964: *passim*). If works such as Michael's help to make teachers more conscious of such currents in the history of their profession, so much the better.

#### REFERENCES

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