

OTHER ARTICLES

English in Malta, English in Bristol. What implications for teacher education?

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This article explores some emerging issues surrounding two teacher education courses in different parts of the world which share a similar purpose: preparing student teachers to become secondary school teachers of English. In one context the English language is the first language, in the other, the second. However, the distinction is not so neat when learner differences in levels of proficiency are factored in, and is even less neat with the influx in both contexts of immigrant students who are new to learning English. How are teacher educators and student teachers responding to this changing scenario while simultaneously acclimatizing to new national curricula, both placing an emphasis on developing students' writing skills? The article refers to this one aspect of teacher education course - the teaching of writing skills to secondary school students - and compares the curricular implications in terms of how the PGCE teacher education courses respond.

Keywords: English language, teacher education, writing skills, secondary school students, national curricula

Introduction

This article proposes to map out some of the issues that surround two teacher education institutions as they prepare student teachers to become teachers in two different but related contexts. In both the student teachers are getting ready to teach at secondary school, in both English is the subject. However, in one it is the first language and in the other it is the second language. What

are the implications of this and are the boundaries between first and second language always straightforward?

The methodology for this exploration included a review and comparison of the national curricula of the two educational contexts and the programme of studies of the two Post-Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) courses. In both contexts, the PGCE initial teacher education programme is a year-long, post-graduate course during which teacher candidates focus on teaching one secondary school subject – in this case: English.

The two teacher educators engaged in discussions about their respective contexts in a bid to further understand one's situation by way of comparing, contrasting, and analysing and subsequently highlight some issues that could be the basis for deeper study and analysis.

In the following sections, the language background in terms of the place of English in the two countries is provided, followed by a comparison of the two curricula guiding the teaching and learning of English at secondary school level. The authors then discuss how their PGCE programmes are preparing student teachers to teach English writing skills against the contextual and curricular background previously outlined. Reflections and discussion on the issues are interspersed in the article as the argument unfolds.

English in Malta

English language and literacy development ranks highly in Malta's educational system. The vast majority of people speak Maltese as the first language, in a country that hosts different levels of bilingualism ranging from near native proficiency in English to near inexistent. The English language is the subject of much debate, scholarly articles, educational interventions and research. Talk of falling standards and subtractive bilingualism, is rife. Research (Sciriha, 2002) shows that although attitudes towards the Maltese and English languages are coloured by social factors such as type of school attended (whether State, Independent, or Church), the vast majority of Maltese people rank the Maltese language first in importance in the local context but second to English in the international context. This strong identification with the Maltese language and the recognition of the value of proficiency in English are interesting when viewed against the decline of use of English as a medium in schools and the low pass rate in English at school-leaving age (16). It is interesting to weigh the above against the results of a survey on foreign language learning carried out in 2011 among 16 European countries (SurveyLang, 2011). This survey sought to 'collect information about the foreign language proficiency of around 54,000 students and it focussed on the two main foreign languages taught in each educational setting. For Malta, the first foreign language taught is English and in terms of

general proficiency, Malta ranked second among the 16 countries. For writing skills in particular – which is the focus of this article – results show that ‘around 55% achieved B2 level on the CEFR scales’. Clearly, this ranking has to be unpacked and seen in the light of several variables, not least of which is the status of English in Malta and the early start in learning the language.

And yet, the relevance of the English language in Malta cannot be understated. In secondary school, curricular time for English is the highest. Lessons in English in secondary school (age 11 to 16) amount to 6 a week compared to 5 in Mathematics and 5 in Maltese (the first language). In an educational context where every school subject apart from Maltese, Personal and Social Development, and Social Studies is taught through English language textbooks, where a pass in English at the end of secondary school (age 16) can make or break your entry into the job market and higher education, the significance of the language is indisputable. The increase in the number of lessons in English is not unrelated to Malta’s showing on international studies such as PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment 2009+) which sent shock waves through the educational establishment (Malta ranked 24th out of 26 European countries for Reading attainment).

The most recent national minimum curriculum recognizes the complexity of the issue surrounding the language used for instruction and makes no new recommendation on those in the previous curriculum (NMC, 1999) which considered ‘....bilingualism as the basis of the educational system’. This document regards bilingualism as entailing the ‘effective, precise and confident use of the country’s two official languages: Maltese, the national language, and English’ (p. 37).

In the absence of a language policy therefore, the 1999 recommendation still holds, namely that all schools should adopt a policy of utilising the two languages, i.e. Maltese and English, specifying in their respective school development plans the language strategy they intend to adopt over a period of time.

Moreover, it should also be noted that the 1999 NMC recommends code-switching at both primary and secondary levels to meet context-specific needs so that for particular school subjects, communication and instruction is facilitated. This however comes with a proviso: ‘...one should revert to code-switching only in those cases where the use of English or Maltese poses problems’ (p. 103).

In spite of this, prospective teachers of subjects taught through English are not trained in strategies for using English in the classroom to maximise

learning through a second language. Instead, in Malta it has taken the shape of the non-language subject teacher code-switching between Maltese and English when necessary.

The teacher's skill in teaching a school subject through English to Maltese learners who possess varying proficiency in English, is further compounded by the presence of immigrant learners for whom both Maltese and English are unknown. For such learners English is an additional language, as is Maltese, and to date little systematic provision is in place to provide appropriate learning conditions for such students (Micallef Cann, 2013). Interestingly, it is questionable whether the terminology used in the UK context can transfer satisfactorily in Malta. To what extent can English be classified as an Additional Language in a country where it is not the first language and it is not the primary language of communication?

For the teacher of English, the situation is less dire. The teacher of English is prepared to teach students of varying attainment levels, and is strongly encouraged to use English throughout the lesson and so in a sense the Maltese learners and the foreign learner are not too dissimilar. However, any recourse to Maltese that might normally have taken place will isolate the immigrant learners as the class is no longer monolingual. To date, this issue is not yet being addressed on the PGCE course, primarily because the need is not yet felt to be acute; however, with immigrant children totalling 3.6% of the school population and when these join classes where learners already have had some years of learning English, it will not be long before the need for special provision will be felt. Nationally, some provision is in place in Primary schools characterized by a pull-out system which sees immigrant students attending special schools in the morning and returning to the regular schools after lunch. The system is not without its detractors who, among other things, point out the segregation aspect of the pull-out system, and the reduced opportunities for peer learning. In secondary schools the situation is decentralized and individual schools are doing the best they can in the absence of a programme for these learners with limited language abilities. Bearing in mind that the teachers who actually attempt to put in place special lessons for these students, have not been specifically trained and are practically making it up as they go along, the situation is far from a happy one. One cannot quite start to talk in terms of entitlement in such circumstances.

English in England

As in Malta, there is anxiety in England about falling standards of English in schools. The latest PISA rankings (2013) place England 23rd in the world for reading, firmly in the middle of the pack; a recent Ofsted (2013) report acknowledges that “[w]hen those in the wider world – employers, for

example, or representatives of national or local government – complain about falling standards of literacy, they most often have in mind spelling, punctuation and grammar. The blame is then directed towards schools” (p.4). The concern has manifested itself in arguably reactionary attempts to ‘drive up standards’ through, for example, changing GCSE level descriptor boundaries and the specification content even *after* students had embarked on the course: whilst the official reason for removing the Speaking and Listening element from the 2014 English/English Language GCSE was due to difficulties in moderating it effectively, perhaps an unacknowledged reason was to increase the weight on writing (and reading).

An interesting parallel is that unlike in Malta, of course, English is the first language for the majority of learners, but the number of EAL students is an increasing minority. Recent statistics indicate that for one in six primary school children and one in eight at secondary level, English is a second or additional language (NALDIC, 2013). Helping these students to develop proficiency in English is an additional challenge for teachers in English schools already under pressure to improve the ‘English’ of the first language speakers. Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) teachers are underrepresented compared with the students they teach (DfE: 2011); in the vast majority of cases, then, native English speakers are teaching EAL students. There is strong awareness in schools that these students need to be well-provided for: the progress and outcomes of EAL and bilingual students continue to be monitored by Ofsted (Office of Standards in Education); schools need to be seen to be meeting their needs in order to achieve a strong Ofsted grade. Learning how best to support EAL students is, accordingly, a core element of the PGCE course for student teachers in any subject. Most EAL students are taught in class, with levels of support varying according to their ongoing needs and the availability of additional help (dependent on the school’s budget), so it is incumbent on the class teacher to provide input and resources that ensure the students’ progress. The success of this approach is perhaps best underlined by the fact that EAL students often out-perform their monolingual peers: a recent Parliamentary report (Education Committee, 2014) focuses on the problems associated with the low performance of white working class boys - currently the lowest-achieving cohort in England.

In the light of these two educational contexts, where English is the first language in one - but where a significant proportion of students have English as an additional language - and a second language in the other, how do two teacher education institutions in Malta and England approach the business of preparing student teachers of English to teach English? And, in particular, given that both Malta and England are currently acclimatising to new national curricula, how is the teaching of writing skills approached?

English in state secondary schools - Malta

In Malta, a new curriculum launched in 2012 marked a considerable departure from the previous English Language and Literature syllabus. The curriculum for English is in its most developed form for learners aged 11 to 13 (first two years of secondary education 11 to 16). The document lays out week by week the topics and learning outcomes of lessons that teachers for all levels of that year are required to cover, and suggests additional resources. A Handbook provides the rationale for the new curriculum, and teaching objectives and learning outcomes are listed on a progression of 8 levels of ability, for the macro skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking as well as grammar. These objectives and learning outcomes are subsequently grouped into units of 9 lessons of around 40 minutes each and examples of teaching experiences and activities are provided. These are broken down according to level of access, supported with various forms of resources and accompanied by indicators of learning outcomes. The curriculum 'is envisaged to be active, engaging, meaningful and purposeful' and intended to 'lead to further improvement of learners' (foreword, Handbook for the Teaching of English, 2012). The English curriculum also has a literature component and learners come in contact with examples of prose fiction, drama, and poetry. At the macro level, the curriculum is prescriptive; however, there is room for adaptation and teachers are encouraged to reach the same learning outcomes in ways relevant to their students' interests.

Specifically on writing skills, the new curriculum requires learners to engage in some form of writing on alternate weeks. At age 11 and dependent on their level of attainment, learners are guided to, for example, write *syntactically correct sentences on familiar topics using a range of vocabulary and structures*. Those learners in the same year but at a lower attainment level will *complete simple sentences on familiar topics by filling in missing phrases*. This carries on throughout the five years of secondary education and writing tasks grow increasingly complex while allowing for differentiating to meet learners at their state of development as emergent writers of English as a second language.

From the perspective of this university teacher educator, this curriculum is most welcome as it mirrors the largely communicative approach to teaching language that had been advocated for several years while still allowing room for the teacher to personalize the curriculum to the learners' needs and interests. The approach to language teaching promoted on the PGCE course would in the past come up against a largely grammar-based approach that typified the earlier syllabus and which teachers followed. For years, student teachers on field placement reported to their university tutors that the cooperating teachers listed mainly grammatical structures for the student teacher to teach. No specific language skills used to be mentioned, less so

vocabulary areas. This state of affairs made teacher educators' recommendations sound hollow and often led to dissonance between the student teachers, the cooperating teachers and the university tutors (Smith & Spiteri, 2013).

Research is not yet available on whether the new curriculum has been well-received by teachers and to what extent it is being implemented. Anecdotal evidence gathered from the student teachers suggests that resident teachers are following the curriculum guidelines to varying extents. The upshot however is that the attention to the four macro skills that is stressed during the Malta PGCE course finds resonance in the new curriculum.

English in secondary schools - England

It is interesting that the national curriculum (NC) in England is heading in the other direction. Resulting from the Education Act of 1988, the NC has undergone several iterations as successive governments have sought to influence what is taught in schools. One of the most marked changes was the introduction of the 'formalistic' (D'Arcy, 2000, p.30) National Literacy Strategy (NLS) (2001) which, although not statutory (although tied to the NC that *was*), had a strong impact on what was taught in the early secondary years. Like Malta's new curriculum, the NLS was prescriptive (breaking down reading and writing into word level, text level and sentence level objectives), yet unlike in Malta it was not widely welcomed by the profession. The NLS was shelved by the new government in 2010 and has now generally been 'shrug[ged] off' (Dickinson, 2010, p17). The 2007 version of the NC has now also been disappled and what takes its place is a new curriculum that will be statutory from September 2014; it is a considerably slimmer document that offers schools more autonomy than its previous versions and considerably more autonomy than the NLS.

Yet this document has not been wholly welcomed either; although the new NC allows for flexibility and professional freedom, critics point out the danger that the paucity of references to aspects of English such as media, drama, language study and ICT that English teachers and English teacher educators prize may mean that some schools decide not to include them in their English plans. A feature of the revised NC that is clear, however, is a greater emphasis on spelling, punctuation and grammar (SPAG). The document opens with the statement, "English has a pre-eminent place in education and in society. A high-quality education in English will teach pupils to speak and write fluently" (2013, p.2). Whilst few would argue with this, it is interesting to note the change of emphasis between this and the NC of 2007 which was modelled around the '4Cs' of competence, creativity, cultural understanding and critical understanding. While 'competence' heads this list, the other three areas were seen as near-equal partners. There are no

references at all to 'creativity' in the revised NC and only one to 'imagination'. The return to students' written work being marked with 'sp' to indicate any spelling error and 'gr' to indicate any grammar error – the 'spitting and growling in the margins' for which English teachers used to be renowned, at the expense of marking for content, tone and style – is a distinct possibility. Indeed, it is interesting that the Writing sub-section of the new NC requires students to learn to "write accurately, fluently, effectively and at length for pleasure and information" and to 'plan, draft, edit and proof-read" (p.5), and there is a whole *additional* sub-section on Grammar and Vocabulary, as if the two were separate entities.

It is perhaps ironic that despite its statutory status (and in spite of its controversial content) not all schools are obliged to follow the revised NC despite: state-funded academies and free schools, together with independent schools, are all exempt. In a further contrast to Malta's new curriculum, the levels of progress and attainment have been removed and will not be replaced. Schools in England, accordingly, are free to develop their own system of assessment.

Anecdotal evidence collected during visits to schools in the South West of England is that many schools will largely continue to follow their current curriculum and methods of assessment, with those obliged to follow the NC tweaking their practice to ensure compliance (such as ensuring that Romantic poetry and two complete plays by Shakespeare are taught at Key Stage 3). Some, however, mindful of the premium put on English 'for life' and the focus on SPAG, have opted to divide the time allocated for English on their timetables into 'English' and 'Literacy' sessions, in order to enable them to teach key skills in a discrete lesson. Perhaps this is helpful in reinforcing the message to both students and teachers that literacy matters across the curriculum – not just in English – and the role of teaching literacy does not fall to English teachers alone. Here is an interesting parallel with Malta: for the several school subjects mediated through English, the teachers are teachers of English; in England, teachers of all subjects are expected to be teachers of Literacy, and many schools have developed the role of Literacy Coordinator to ensure that spelling, punctuation, and grammar are promoted across the school as a whole.

Course Programme PGCE English - Malta

Students on the PGCE course reach the Faculty of Education mainly after having done a first degree in English at the same University. A few join after completing a first degree in another country such as the UK. All come with a mixed bag of prior learning; some come with a healthy mixture of English language, literature, and linguistics. Others, with a largely literature-rich portfolio, including literary criticism, none with a largely language and

linguistics background. A foundation in first and second language acquisition and in grammar, for example, cannot be taken as given. In order to ensure that prospective teachers of English come to the PGCE course after having followed a variety of courses at undergraduate level, recent changes to regulations will require candidates to have followed a mix of courses that sees a balance between language, literature, and linguistics. This should go a long way to ensuring that tomorrow's teachers of English come with a healthy combination of content knowledge and relieves the teacher education course from the onus of filling in the gaps.

As the students are all English graduates, an undeclared understanding prevails that their proficiency in the English language can be assured. This is not necessarily the case for all the candidates on the PGCE course in other subject disciplines and is certainly unlike the practice in the UK where prospective PGCE students are required to pass a literacy and numeracy test before being accepted.

Whatever their starting point, all PGCE students have one thing in common: after a short course of 8 months and a month of examinations, they need to be ready to start their careers as teachers of English in secondary schools.

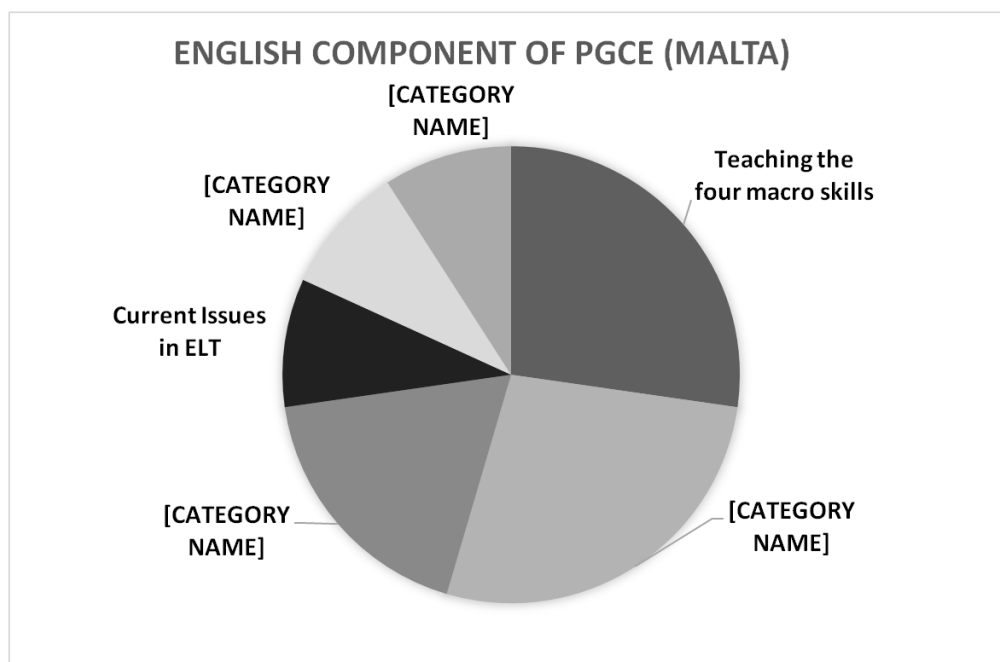


Figure 1

During this time their programme of studies consists of the following areas (Figure 1) as regards the English track. Other areas of study such as philosophy, psychology, sociology etc. have been omitted for the purposes of this article.

The graph should be read as a reflection of the weighting the various study units have in relation to each other, intended to give the reader an idea of the proportion of time allocated to the different components.

The part of the course that focuses on teaching writing skills is but one part of one study unit that deals with the four basic skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening. An attempt at quantifying this further may be achieved by looking at the attention given to writing skills in the required course book on the PGCE course. Here, the unit on Teaching Writing is but one of 20. However, reference to writing is also made on other study units such as that on assessment where student teachers learn about marking students' written work and how marking is one step in the writing process. The topic also comes up under lesson planning in a different part of the course.

The approach adopted to teaching writing fits in with communicative language teaching, CLT, which has as its rationale the notion of language as communication. This mirrors the national curriculum (2012) (above) that advocates 'an integrated-skills approach' and 'presenting the teaching of English in a motivating and meaningful context' (p.9). It also meets the brief description in the syllabus (MatSEC) given by the national examination board in Malta for the English language examination taken at the end of secondary school when students are around 16 years old:

'Candidates will be expected to:

1. select, order and present information, ideas and opinions
2. express what is thought, felt or imagined
3. write with a sense of audience and purpose showing an awareness of style in a variety of situations.'

To this end, the focus on the PGCE course is on teaching school learners to write pieces that are realistic and which meet the requirements that most writing in life achieves, namely that it is written for an audience/reader, it has characteristics of a text type, and it has a purpose. Leading learners to see that in life most writing tends to meet these requirements, and transferring this knowledge to the writing task at hand, makes for appropriate choice of language as well as form to suit the purpose and the audience (reader). However, it cannot be assumed that students in Malta will have the necessary range of vocabulary to carry out the task. Consequently, the writing task is scaffolded by input in the form of reading, listening, and vocabulary building. This should equip the learners with the linguistic tools to carry out the writing task in tandem with a focus on the conventions of text types such as layout and genre requirements (for example, a recommendation that typically end a review etc.). Typical writing tasks that 12-year-old learners of

English in Malta are taught to write include informal emails, articles for school magazines, biographies of famous people, formal emails seeking information from youth organizations, blogs, review of films, books, digital games, etc.

What about interactive assessment / process writing?

Student teachers are also introduced to the practice of sharing with their students what the success criteria are for a piece of writing; these then double up as assessment guidelines intended to guide the student teacher to mark written work systematically. One group of success criteria are fairly constant in that most pieces of writing will be expected to demonstrate characteristics such as accurate grammar, range of vocabulary, spelling and punctuation, and task achievement; others are task specific such as layout, specific greetings, and stylistic choices on the formal / informal continuum among others. Although weightings are suggested, these are not written in stone as the teacher may vary the attention given to one or more of the criteria according to the desired learning outcomes associated with that particular writing task.

Also, student teachers learn about the process of writing and are encouraged to ask learners to submit a draft of their writing which is marked by the teacher using a mixture of comments and a correction code. This is subsequently returned to the learners who act on the suggestions and corrections and re-submit a final copy of their writing.

Whereas in Bristol there are visible interventions to encourage student teachers to continue to develop their own writing skills and to view themselves as writers (v. below), this is not evident on the Malta course. Although student teachers do a fair amount of writing both during teaching practice (lesson evaluations, self-evaluations, student profiles, class profiles) and for assignments, it is seen as serving other purposes, not as a writing process in itself.

Course Programme PGCE English - Bristol

A recent report on the 'preparedness' of graduates to teach school English (Blake and Shortis, 2010) highlights the literature-heavy diet of the majority of those who are accepted onto PGCE English courses across England. The raw data indicates that 37% of student teachers from representative universities surveyed in 2008-9 had a degree exclusively in Literature; a further 15% had a Language/Literature combined degree. Only 4% had an English Language degree, with less than 1% having a Linguistics or Creative Writing degree. Twenty nine percent had a combined degree, which might have included combinations of the subjects mentioned above, as well as media studies, drama/theatre studies, film/cultural studies or any

other subject. The report implicitly questions the high proportion of Literature graduates, pointing to a possible imbalance between the student teachers' areas of expertise and the prescribed elements of the then broad NC (2007). It is interesting that since the revised NC (2013) has marginalised the more specialised aspects of English and that literature is now arguably more dominant, a prevalence of English teachers who have a literature background might be more appropriate (although this is not to suggest that the report in any way shaped the curriculum revisions). The ratios stated above are roughly representative of the current cohort of the Bristol PGCE in English. What might be sobering for the system in England but a point that chimes with that made above about the proficiency of Maltese students in English is that, anecdotally, the fluency and accuracy of the written English of foreign nationals studying for a PGCE in other subject disciplines is better than that of many native speakers.

Figure 2 (below) seeks to present a snapshot of the amount of time student teachers spend on writing on the University-based part of the course and is offered accompanied by several important caveats. Firstly, of course, it is impossible to separate the segments fully: they would be better represented as interlocking.

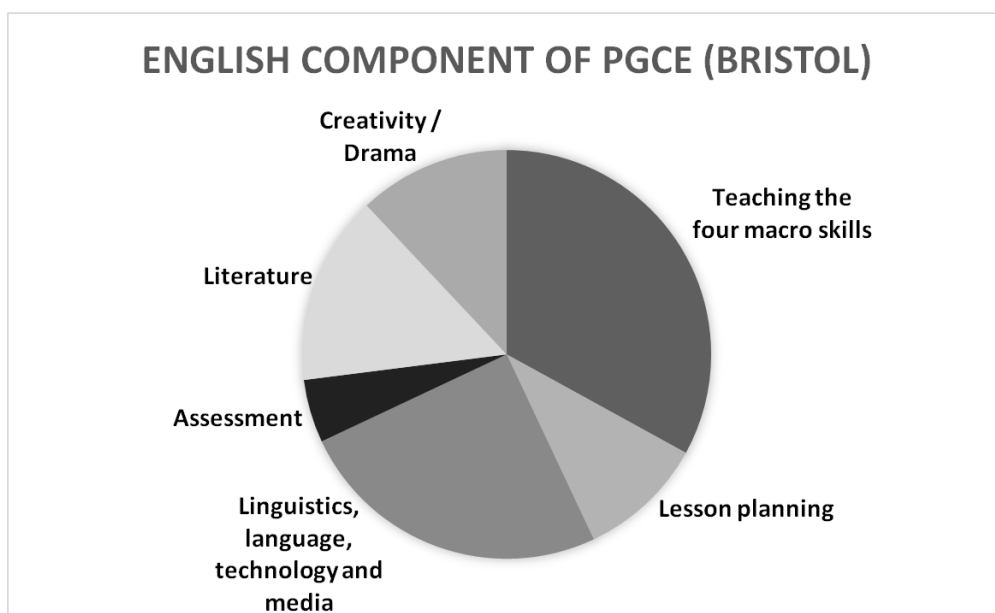


Figure 2

Lesson planning is not covered in a vacuum, but through planning lessons on, say, reading or on writing or on media; a focus on reading Literature will necessarily focus on the process of reading, to some extent, as well as the content. Secondly, the University-based part of the course makes up approximately a third of the PGCE year: the majority of time (120 days) is

spent in schools. Under the guidance of their Associate Tutor (or mentor), the student teachers teach any aspect of the curriculum as required. Some lessons may be heavily focused on writing (and it may be relevant to point out that 50% of the marks in the current GCSE English specifications are for writing) yet others may not contain any written activity at all. It would be interesting to map how much time in classrooms is devoted to writing, the type of writing undertaken, and the purpose of the writing activity: is it primarily to develop students' writing skills, or as a method of recording other learning processes?

Thirdly, the course at Bristol is only one example of over fifty across England and, although its primary objective is the same as all the others - to prepare student teachers be the most effective classroom practitioners that they can be - it will not necessarily be fully representative of practice elsewhere in the country.

Given this, it might be helpful to try another means of roughly assessing the relative importance of writing as part of a PGCE English course in England through examining PGCE English textbooks, yet these give a mixed story. In one popular text, 'Writing' is one chapter of 16, making up 5.5% of the whole (Fleming and Stevens, 2010); another devotes 7% to 'Writing' with a further 6% on 'Teaching language and grammar' (Davison and Dowson, 2009); another, written twenty years ago, devotes exactly 25% (Brindley, 1994).

In the context outlined above, then, what does it mean for a student to be 'good' at writing, and what does a teacher need to ensure she teaches writing well? The NC's stated aim is that all students will be able to "write clearly, accurately and coherently, adapting their language and style in and for a range of contexts, purposes and audiences." (2013, p.2). Students need to understand that writing takes many forms and that we write in different ways for different things: some writing is 'one-off' (an email to a friend or a thank you letter to a relative); sometimes it needs to be drafted and developed (a newspaper report, a story). Moss (in Davison & Dowson, 2009) suggests a journey metaphor - we, as teachers, need to provide students both with maps for writing (so they can see the possibilities available to them, in terms of choice of genres, purpose, etc.) and a compass (the skills that will enable them to navigate successfully to their chosen destination). In some instances, the assessment cycle is integral to the writing process: if the assessment criteria (the 'destination') are known at the outset, students know where they are heading, and can be then guided to plot their way; as in Malta, student teachers are encouraged to share the success criteria with students to inform the writing and assessment process. However, that is not to suggest that successful writing cannot also be the result of an exploratory journey, with students finding their destination en route.

Thus, the focus of the English PGCE is to help student teachers be able to create conditions likely to lead to productive writing – that which is ‘vigorous, committed, honest, and interesting’ (Cox, 1994, p.175) - and some key principles underpin our approach. Primary amongst these is the idea that writing is inextricably integrated with reading and speaking and listening (Andrews stresses the full interconnectiveness of these ‘modes’ (2011, p.55), but there is not always a set order: for instance, student teachers are encouraged to ask whether or how a reader makes a writer or a writer makes a reader.

Secondly, it is important that student teachers appreciate that the main processes to be taught (whatever the genre of writing) are assembling strategies, developing the text, editing and proof-reading (following Fleming & Stevens, 2010) and understand that writers make choices at each of these levels of construction. If one views students as writing apprentices, it might sometimes be that helping them get better at each process is more important than the final product; in fact, a further principle is that writing is ‘recursive’ (Cox, 1994, p.174), so that students improve at different types of writing at different rates, and that therefore students should have opportunities to experiment with different kinds of writing over the year.

A fourth underpinning principle is that teachers of writing need to be writers themselves. All student teachers are invited to be part of National Writing Project, a growing movement in the UK in which teachers are encouraged to ‘explore writing’ (nwp.org.uk) with the aim of using their own writing experiences to enhance their teaching of writing. The student teachers keep weekly reflective journals in which developed writing is encouraged; creative writing sessions are integral to the part of course, as well as the mandatory academic assignments. In this way, the student teachers experience different kinds of writing themselves, and they are encouraged to consider how their personal writing odysseys can colour their teaching. Reflect on their own development as writers does not stand out on the Malta PGCE course. And yet we might suggest that honing one’s writing skills as a teacher is as important in a second language context as it is in a first.

And the school students?

In the case of students for whom English is an additional language (Bristol) or for those for whom it falls somewhere in between a second and a foreign language (Malta) their levels of L1 literacy could vary greatly. In both Bristol and Malta, student teachers engage in teaching writing to such students who may already have well-developed literacy skills in their first language or they could still be developing these if they continue learning their first language. In this case, transfer of skills from the first language to the target language may take place. In the absence of both, students may be developing their

literacy skills *through* the target language – English (McKay, 2006). In this scenario, the challenge for the language teacher is therefore greater as first language literacy skills cannot be relied on.

Another challenge lies in the students' oral skills in English. Emergent writers in a second language are greatly helped if their oral skills are well developed. Indeed, McKay describes the ability to use language orally in the target language as *the foundation for reading and writing* (ibid., p.221). Some of the onus for providing oral interaction falls on the shoulders of the student teachers; much depends on contextual circumstances beyond their control. Certainly both issues discussed above – first language literacy and the centrality of oral skills – need to be added to the complexity of teaching of writing skills to EAL and ESL / EFL students.

Conclusion – what can we learn from each other?

In two different parts of the world two teacher educators are involved in PGCE courses for secondary school teachers of English. What emerges from the practices of the two and the contextual effects on the work of both?

Both PGCE courses of necessity work with an eye on the school curricula; in Malta the new English curriculum is moving towards greater prescription. In the UK, the move is in the opposite direction. Perhaps there is a cycle in such matters and a period of teacher autonomy is followed by a period of curricular prescription which is eventually resisted and is replaced by a period of autonomy. Could it be that the two countries are at different points in the cycle?

What is certain is that both teacher education courses lead the student teacher to teach in ways that are aligned to the curriculum without losing sight of the need to reflect critically on the relevance of the curriculum content to the particular context. Writing in particular is seen as a process and attention is paid not merely to accuracy but also style, genre, effect on target reader, and task fulfilment. In both Bristol and Malta, the teaching of writing skills is seen in relation to the skills of speaking, listening and reading to reflect ways that these interconnect in real language use. Promoting writing as a form of enjoyable expression is sought in both contexts, however the difficulties of doing this through a second or additional language rather than a first, have to be acknowledged.

The two contexts appear to be similar in terms of the changing linguistic profile of school children. In both, the number of students of English as an additional language and as a second language is increasing and teacher educators face the challenge of preparing student teachers to respond to these new circumstances. Interestingly, although the term EAL fulfils its function

in the England context, in Malta the issue is compounded because the context is a bilingual one and the presence of the English language on the island is quantitatively and qualitatively different to that in the UK.

This exploratory overview has shown that several aspects are core to both sites and the differences appear due to a response to contextual characteristics.

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