Teaching English in Europe: Towards a single curriculum?

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Travel, for the younger sort, is a part of education. Every few months some of my students go abroad, most frequently with ERASMUS. When they return they want to have their studies acknowledged as equivalent to the requirements at their home university, as they are entitled to do by ERASMUS regulations. But I have always wanted them to tell me about the courses they attended, and to see the written work they did (partly out of curiosity, partly out of prudence). And increasingly I have been asking myself: is it possible to create a single European curriculum in English? Is it possible to design this in terms of modularity, giving credits for individual units?

In discussing these questions I am deliberately bracketing certain issues and problems. They concern the relationship between literary studies, cultural studies, and linguistics, the role of English in relation to American and New Literatures. I am also aware that English can be taught in a wide range of ways (*civilisation* in France, for example), but for practical reasons I am taking for granted an approach, considered somewhat old-fashioned by some, which focuses on the canonical works of literature and literary history, the kind of English that is still influential in many places.

Imbalances

There is an imbalance between teaching English in England and teaching English on the Continent. It is an imbalance that becomes clearly visible at symposia like those on "Teaching English in a Changing World" organized by the British Council in Salamanca and in Milan (important events for English studies in Europe), where speakers from England address a Continental audience. The world is not only changing; it is also diverse.

Those teaching English in England find themselves, along with their colleagues in History and Sociology, at the centre of a cultural debate, on the site where cultural meanings are formulated, enforced, resisted and displaced. Issues of canon forma tion, also of what literacy itself is supposed to mean, have to be addressed continually; the dispute about the National Curriculum is a good example. English faculties, whether they like it or not (and some definitely do), are drawn into an ideological and political debate that is crucial to the culture.

Teaching English on the Continent is in many respects different, even if we discount the challenge of English as a second language, which in various ways affects the *way* English literature is taught. Ideological and political issues will be fought over in History and Sociology, and, as in England, within the departments where the traditional national literatu res are taught (to my knowledge there are as yet no departments of European literature). English departments, on the other hand, tend to be rather quieter places. Sometimes they try to keep up British traditions of pragmatism and enlightened compromise, possibly in a hostile environment. Usually they find themselves on the margins of public debate. This need not be a bad place to intervene from, however; there is an admirable tradition of this kind in Italy, for example, but people tend to intervene as intellectuals rather than professors of English. The sense of being marginal is reinforced in universities (like mine) where students have to take more than one subject, so that issues will often spill over into English from the fields where the debates take place.

This difference of perspective between teaching English in England and teaching English on the Continent is crucial. In England English literature may be taught without much reference to other literatures, languages, and cultures. On the Continent English as such is the Other that has to be confronted; in England the Other tends to be defined socially or sexually.

On the margins

Having emphasized differences, let me just mention one area where teaching English in England and on the Continent may share concerns. Over the past twenty-five years or so there has been a marked shift from the study of so-called "mainstream" literature to that of women, of minorities (Black American and British, Native American, etc.), of the third world, and of marginalized groups (gay, lesbian, etc.). This is certainly due to the wish to question traditional notions of homogeneous culture, and to a sense of social justice. But it may also be the result of the feeling that we ourselves as professionals, along with the literary culture we stand for, have been marginalized in a media-dominated culture, a feeling that makes us sympathize with these communities. The remarkable ease with which Continental academics have taken up new literatures in English may be partly due to their sense of having been (doubly) marginalized for a long time.

Complications

But the two perspectives which I have labelled English and Continental cannot simply be put beside each other, as I have done so far. There is one more complication. The Continental perspective will always include the English perspective as well, if only because much of the secondary material used in the study of English literature is written from an English perspective.

There are two ways of dealing with this problem of perspectives. One, which is quite common, is to claim that it does not really exist, because all scholars contribute to the same kind of knowledge; those on the Continent just do so under more difficult circumstances. Those who think like this run the risk of being left behind, of becoming provincial.

The other possibility is that we (and I am slipping into the "we" deliberately) accept our specific Continental situation and turn what may have looked like a disadvantage into a point of strength. As Agostino Lombardo emphasized at the Milan symposium, *we* should speak from the vantage point of our own culture, because this is our best chance of contributing something significant. Many important studies in our field have grown out of this intercultural situation.

Being aware of difference we will also take a strong interest in how English critics deal with the same material that we study. Recent debates on Englishness have been intriguing in this respect. They are bound to be of interest to the ethnographer, for example, and thus English studies, even defined in the narrow sense of literature, will turn into cultural studies, into the study of the culture of English studies.

Opportunities

How can we make use of these opportunities in our teaching? How can we make visible the borders that are to be negotiated with profit? First of all, our students will usually carry these borders inside themselves, especially if they also study other languages. In my experience, however, the compartmentalization of students' minds in this respect is quite effective; they do not, for example, feel the need to mediate between different uses of the same terms in the study of different literatures.

We therefore have to draw attention to the borders. But how? Obviously we cannot burden our crowded curricula with additional courses. Rather we should introduce elements in our courses that highlight intercultural issues (and many among us do so already, of course). I see three possibilities in particular.

The first is the most obvious. Wherever there is an opportunity for intercultural reference in our courses we should seize it. Notions of Romanticism in different countries, for example, lend themselves to this purpose.

The second, which I have found quite successful, is the use of translation, not in the sense of translation studies (even though this may also prove useful), but the practice of literary translation from English into the students' mother tongue. This makes us juxtapose two cultures; it raises questions like: What is the relative position of a text in the source and target literatures? How can the poetics on which the source is based be transposed into the target culture? How do the audiences of the text in the source and target cultures compare? And answers have to be articulated in a text of the students' own making.

The third possibility concerns methodology. We can try out an approach common in English English studies (e.g. cultural materialism) on a text in the students' mother tongue. This will bring out almost immediately different notions of history, of the function of literature, and of its relationship to other arts.

Convergences

I have emphasized specific differences here, because, seeking commonality as a discipline, we rarely articulate these in academic discourse. There are also shared traditions, of course (the Classics, for example); there are convergences (reader-oriented criticism and its appropriation in various countries may be a case in point; see Robert Holub, *Crossing the Borders,* 1992). And I should argue that the kind of juxtaposition I have suggested, in the very act of making visible differences, also highlights what we have in common, and how differences may be made fruitful to all concerned. As such these juxtapositions also contribute to further convergence.

Let me return to where I started from: can we create a single European curriculum in English studies, one that is based on modules and credits? I almost find myself saying: I hope not, not for some time. One of the great opportunities of Europe, as I see it, is learning how to negotiate difference. Cultures have different traditions of dealing with this problem; those with imperial and rationalist, i.e. universalist, traditions may have particular difficulties with difference. And the rather fundamental imbalance I have mentioned will only disappear once the links between nation, language and culture have been weakened.

Individual cases will continue to be judged on their merits (even where credits have been introduced we know that not all of them are considered equal). This is a good thing. It forces us to consider alternatives. It teaches us to be flexible without being lenient. It opens our minds. What we need is mutual credit, not credits.