
English in classrooms: only write down what you need to know: annotation for what?

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Abstract

The annotation of texts in the school English classroom is central to the curriculum, examination and the history of English as a school subject. In this paper we explore 'the way it is done' across two different classrooms. We focus on the relationship between official definitions of annotation offered by national policies and examination syllabuses and its actualization in particular classrooms. The article takes a multimodal approach: attending to all modes of representation and communication in the teaching of English including image, gesture, gaze and the spatial organization of the classroom.

Key words

Annotation; multimodality; school English; examination; policy

Introduction

The 1990s were a period that witnessed a sustained series of educational 'reforms'. While all aspects of teaching, all curriculum areas, and all children, are now subject to regimes of assessment and judgments of performance not seen before, changes to the curricula of most subjects have been nowhere near as far-reaching as those in school English. That alone is an issue worthy of close attention: what is it about English and its role in the school curriculum, that has made it the focus of such change?

In this paper we report on one aspect of the research project *The Production of School English* conducted between 2001 and 2003 (funded by the Economic and Social Science Research Council) which relates to the annotation of texts. When the project began it was the largest funded study on English since the major work of Barnes and Barnes (1984). Hence, it was the first major study of the subject after the impact of the educational reforms of the 90s. In the decades since 1984 there had been vast social, economic, political and technological changes, which were bound to affect how English could and might be taught.

The Production of School English project spanned a range of issues central to contemporary school English. It encompassed not only the spoken and written language of classrooms, but also extended to other modes of representation and communication that are important in the teaching of English, including image, gesture, gaze, movement, and the spatial organization of classrooms. In the project we examined how English is shaped by policy, by institutions, by the physical and social environments of any school, and by social, cultural and linguistic diversity. Our focus was thus not only on the official definitions of the subject offered by national policies, or examination syllabuses, but also on its actualization in particular classrooms.

It was inevitable that in the process new questions would need to be asked about English. One key set of questions we asked was: 'How is English produced? What does English come to be when it is 'made' in classrooms marked by such diversity, in the social environments of an inner city that is more globalised than ever, and in the policy environment of post-1988 education?

In order to address such questions we analysed common practices and curricular 'entities' that have a key role in the English curriculum and which therefore occurred in all the classrooms we visited and observed. In this paper we focus on just one of these, annotation. The research is discussed in full in the project book, *English in Urban Classrooms*, (Kress, et. al, 2004). As with most of the other practices that we observed, annotation is not only central to the curriculum, it is central to examination and to the history of English as a school subject. To explore 'the way it is

done' - across different classroom environments - can thus suggest much about the contemporary state of English.

Annotation in the English classroom

The annotation of texts of all kinds is a key practice in English. An annotated text can be seen as a direct pedagogic link between the actualisation of English in the classroom and its official (re)production via an examination. In this paper we analyse two examples of annotation in two classrooms, in two schools, in order to describe how the teachers' deployment of annotation constitutes what the text comes to be, through notions of 'textual meaning' developed largely implicitly in that practice. That meaning in its turn positions students (and teachers) to English as a subject. Both examples are from lessons focused on 'wider reading', at the end of which students were asked to write an essay comparing two short stories. These examples allow us to explore issues of student agency and curricular control, and we try to make the link between annotation and examination apparent. In this way 'annotation of texts' becomes one of a number of lenses through which we can view the central question of this paper, and of the project 'How does English come to be as it is in a specific classroom?'

The analysis provides a description of what it is that the teachers and students are engaged in when annotating a text. This description enables us to pose the question what sense of literature the teachers are hoping for and attempting to create; and what view of literary study they are attempting to construct.

Teachers use annotation to shape their students' responses to a text. In as far as it also elicits their responses, it is a means to bring students' 'private thoughts into public words' (Hackman, 1987: 12) leaving 'a trace on the page of the sense you have been making of the text' (Northedge, 1990:41). In this way annotation is a means for reflection, through which a reader can respond to what she or he find significant and meaningful. The marks that students make on the copy of the text as they work around and with it can be seen as signalling a sense of the text as an object (Hackman, 1987). Annotation, and more general note taking, is seen as one way of making reading an 'active' process and focusing the readers' attention on the text.

Annotation as it appears in the classroom is embedded in historical practices of textual analysis that go beyond school English:

If you ask annotators today what systems they use for marking their books and where they learned them, they generally tell you that their methods are private and idiosyncratic. As to having learned them, they have no more recollection of having been taught the arts of annotation

than of how to fasten a wristwatch. If you listen to their accounts of what they do, or if you are allowed to examine their books, however, you find (with very, very few exceptions) that they reproduce the common practices of readers since the Middle Ages. These are traditional practices culturally transmitted by the usual tacit and mysterious means - example, prohibition, word of mouth.
(Jackson, 2001: 5)

In our first example, what annotation means seems relatively unregulated and implicit: the teacher rarely instructs the students in 'how' or 'what' to annotate. For her, annotation serves as a general device for developing 'reading', seen as a major tool for learning; she sees the need to read critically and to gather information as requiring the students to exercise judgement on a text, to modify, reject or develop views of the text (Lunzer and Gardner, 1979). By contrast, the teacher in our second example makes the marks and devices of annotation explicit. Despite that difference, both teachers link the work of annotation directly to preparation for examination.

The English GCSE examination procedures (AQA, 2002) offer a specific definition and regulation of annotation. The NEAB Anthology can be taken into the examination room and may be annotated; and AQA stipulates what is included and excluded from the term *annotation* for the purposes of examination:

Annotation means brief hand-written marginal notes, underlinings, highlightings and vertical lines in the margin but not continuous prose. Additional notes, 'post-it' notes or loose inter-leaved sheets of paper and prepared answers are not permitted.

Dymoke (2002) comments on the limiting effect which the NEAB poetry anthology has had on the study of texts: students learn to concentrate and focus on annotation rather than on creative engagement, as they are anxious to cover all potential examination questions. She argues that a focus on annotation and examination 'produces kids who can produce responses rather than kids who can write poems' (Dymoke, 2002: 88). Our data similarly shows that teachers and students (year 9) can become both fixed on and successful at attending to the tasks of examination rather than on the meaning of the literary texts. Of course this raises serious questions about what English is in this area. Protherough (1986: 39) warns with some alarm that a line-by-line exegesis of a text can 'degenerate into an alternative text'. We do not echo this way of posing the problem - annotation of any sort necessarily produces a new text - yet we share the sense that practices of annotation can work to close down certain possibilities of interpretation and response. Annotation is one practice - maybe the practice, where the pressure of exams is most clearly apparent.

There is much evidence of the incredible pressure of examination on teachers, students and schools (Elsheikh and Leney 2002). This pressure can lead to the teacher handing over - and students accepting - ready-made readings of a text. Such pre-packaged interpretations by-pass the need for students to develop their own skills in reading and the time required for repeated readings. In this scenario, played out in example two here, the response of individual students becomes redundant: response to the text is no longer the issue; rather the point now has become 'getting it right'

Our first example focuses on a series of lessons on William Trevor's short story *Theresa's Wedding* taught by Irene (fictitious names are used for teachers and schools) in 'Ravenscroft' School. The teacher works with the students, focusing on the theme of marriage and gender. The second example draws on data from John's classroom in Wayford School, in which he works with Sylvia Plath's short story, *Superman and Paula Brown's New Snow Suit*. Here the theme established by the teacher is 'the loss of innocence'.

Irene's classroom, Ravenscroft School

Irene has two aims: the process of annotation is clearly linked to preparing the students for examination, as the excerpt below, from our interview with her, demonstrates. However, for her it is also a device to support the students in developing an understanding of a text and give them the ability to relate the literary text to their own life experiences. As she commented during her interview:

Every time you teach something you feel that it is where the child is going that you will have to be taken, so you are teaching annotation, finally for the exam. How will that child make sense of it? Will the child just start answering the question or will the child be reflective, go through the steps. There is a key word here and reading through and making notes. **Because they will come out with a better exam result.** We try hard to give them a bit of exam technique and there are all these things we have to consider and annotation is important because when the child first encounters a passage and then decides to structure a response - they have read all the questions yet sometimes they are not reading at the heart of the text - they are missing those critical points and so annotating is bringing a wealth of experience... This is analysis; before that it is retelling so annotation empowers them to be more analytical and see beyond. It is always beyond. **What we want is for them to make what they are reading match to real life** - do you know what I mean? There is a story that is purely for enjoyment: what are the author's intention? And in annotating they realise the writer is possibly saying a or b and whether they are wrong or right, if they can give evidence, then you have to say 'well, that is their perception and they can back that up.'

For Irene annotation is a part of the process of reading as deep engagement with texts. Her focus is on the meaning of the texts; and annotation as a technical process in the terms set out by the exam board is less prominent. On several occasions, she tells the students what to write, but her specific instructions occur in the midst of a lot of talk and reading that *isn't* about annotation. By contrast, in our second example, the mechanics and the *process* of annotation are foregrounded: the places where marks should be made, and how they are to be written and symbolised, are all made explicit.

Throughout Irene's lesson she and the students sit at their desks; the text is in front of them, their pencils in hand or on the desk. Their attention is on the text; they hold it, gaze at it; and run their fingers and pencils across its pages, underline sections and write on it. They constantly return to it; it begins and ends every exchange. Sitting at her desk, holding the text, the teacher starts the lesson by clearly framing the purpose of re-reading and annotating:

We've read the story and now we're looking at the issues arising in the story. So you need a pencil to annotate. Remember what I said - when it is comparative writing you need to be aware of the various issues that arise so that you can group similarities and differences in order to write a valid response.

Throughout the lesson the teacher works to establish that 'the story' is a general comment on marriage, rather than on this specific wedding. The lesson is structured, at this point, as a series of rhythmic, cyclical movements across sections of the text; of discussions between teacher and students; and acts of annotation. The teacher does not offer a specific reading: she does not interpret the text for them. Rather she offers a conceptual lens - that of 'marriage' - through which to read the story. She also offers them analytical tools such as *symbolic inference*, *close textual reading*, *textual evidence*, *implied meaning*, and invites their responses. She instructs them on what kind of 'reading' they should engage in:

You need to **scan** now, when you've read something already and you're looking for information, you scan, you're scanning now, just going through quickly, looking for where things are...

In return the students offer their opinions on the text; on the motivation of characters; and on marriage. They discuss the characters' feelings, the respectability that the characters attribute to marriage, the assumptions that 'people' in general make about marriage and happiness, and so on. The teacher weaves the students' responses back to the text, reminding them of the need to ground their response 'in' the text. The students are involved in the work of interpretation, discussion, annotation, and finding

textual evidence. The following excerpt in which the teacher focuses on the character of Agnes, sister of the bride Theresa, is typical:

- Teacher: How does she [Agnes] feel about the marriage?
 Linda: She doesn't approve.
 Teacher: Find the line that confirms...
 [Students, heads down, reading/scanning texts]
 Linda: 'It sickens you a marriage like that'.
 Teacher: Okay so 'sickens you' - underline, 'a marriage like that'
 [Students underline their texts with pencil]
 Teacher: Loaded statements. Does she like Artie?
 Students: No.
 Teacher: How does she feel about this place?
 Melinda: She don't like it.
 Linda: She left didn't she, left it
 Teacher: But how does she refer to it? 'She'll be stuck in this...?'
 Students: Dump!
 Teacher: Tells you about her feelings, so your looking for feelings as well, what the writer feels.
 Students: She wants, does she want her sister to break out of, she wants her to marry a more successful person so that maybe they can have more choice in their future and they can move out if they want to
 Teacher: Okay
 Kerry: Like I don't think she's happy.
 Teacher: You don't think who's happy?
 Kerry: Agnes even though she's married.
 Teacher: Yes, and we are told somewhere. Where are we told that [students start looking at story] Agnes isn't happy although she is in a marriage that appears to be successful? We've learned somewhere in the story that she's not happy.
 Linda: I just think she feels stable, in some way stable.
 Teacher: Okay find it. You can't... [taps on the copy of story on her desk] it has to be here. You must find textual evidence to justify your point. So where in the story could you say this is implied if not stated explicitly? Okay scan now, do not read in detail, just scan please.
 Paula: Page 57, paragraph 4.
 Teacher: Read please
 Paula: She says [reads the story] 'She'd met George Tobin at a dance in Cork and had said to Loretta that in six months' time she'd be gone from the town for ever. Which was precisely what had happened, except that marriage had made her less nice than she'd been. She'd hated the town in a jolly way once, laughing over it. Now she hardly laughed at all'
 Linda: It's a purpose I suppose, it was a convenient way to get

married rather than for love, it was more a convenience to escape I suppose.

Teacher: Yes you see you learn that now that she is married she is not a nice person anymore... page 55.

[Students all turn to page 55]

Melisa: She's turned sour, hasn't she.

From this more general discussion, the teacher returns to the text and the question of annotation and says, 'Annotate that please, put your square bracket; the reader learns that Agnes got married to get away from the place that she hates'.

The text is a constant presence, and the cyclical rhythm of the lesson serves to foreground the interpretative and discursive work of the students alongside the teacher. For her part, the teacher - while certainly taking a leading role - does not deliver ready-made interpretations of the story. This 'collective' way of working is reflected and embodied in the shared resources of the teacher and students - the story present as a material text, and a pencil. During this part of the lesson, the teacher made no use of the board, nor did she offer the students dictionaries, and she worked with her own copy of the text, a fact whose significance becomes clear when we compare Ravenscroft with Wayford. Both the teacher and the students sat at their desks throughout the lesson; they had adopted the same basic body posture and gaze, leaning on the table looking down at the story, and in their discussion they adopted broadly the same tone of voice. Irene seems interested in constructing a particular community of practice, a particular collective habit of reading.

John's Classroom, Wayford School

Our second example is from a series of lessons in which the teacher, John, deals with two short stories - Sylvia Plath's *Superman and Paula Brown's New Snow Suit* and *Kiss Miss Carol*. In the part of the lesson discussed here the focus is on the short story *Superman and Paula Brown's New Snow Suit*; he uses a mixture of whole class and small group work. If the meaning of the text was established through 'shared practice and resources' in the previous example, here annotation is used to establish an authoritative set of relationships between the teacher, the students and the text. As before, examination provides the background.

The first quarter of the lesson is used to give explicit instructions on how to annotate and how to draw evidence from the story. During this time the students are seated at their tables in small groups, each with an anthology opened at the story, and pens or pencils in hand or on their desks. No student speaks, and the teacher only demands a raised hand as a 'yes' in response to his questions. The teacher stands at the front of the classroom; unlike Irene, he does not have a copy of the text. He writes on

the board, and he talks. These differences between the teacher's and the students' posture, position, and their relation to the text signal the teacher as 'expert' in relation to the text and its meaning. We might say that these features are signs that 'the text is in him', or, that he is 'above the text'. He outlines the structure of the module, indicates what the homework will be, and comments on the use of quotations. He provides information regarding the examination, talks about 'evidence', describes how to annotate, and gives instructions on how to address specific questions, for instance on *setting*, and on *character*, which he has written on the blackboard. The teacher's focus is on 'evidence', the mechanics of annotation, and the examination. What is not clear is what the *content* is that is to be evidenced, annotated and examined. The focus is on 'rules of technique'. Students are urged to 'find the evidence', look for clues, 'make sure that your notes are sufficient that if I asked you to talk to the next lesson you can', and 'don't write down what you don't need'.

John starts the lesson by instructing the students to look for connections between the two stories:

You're going to go through the story and with a pencil you are going to be looking for things. You're looking for how the story is told, you're looking for quotations you can use in your exam. Now the exam question is going to be a general question comparing two stories and the two stories are *Superman* and *Kiss Miss Carol*. As you're going through *Superman* you're automatically looking at how does it fit together, how does it connect with *Kiss Miss Carol*.

The tasks set out for the students - 'look for quotations', look at 'how things fit together' or 'connect' - tend to be inexplicit and hence rather difficult. It is unclear what criteria the students might use to select a quote or decide what might be a valid connection. But the task of quote selection is foregrounded by the teacher and held up as a kind of organisational structure for responding to the stories:

That's the most important thing you should have done, find the quotations first. You don't work out what you're going to say and then find the quotes. You find the quotes first because the quotes are actually where your answers come from.

Selection of quotation, in other words, precedes analysis; students have to know what they're looking for before they have made any coherent sense of the text. This, he conveys, is what the examination demands:

May I remind you that over here
[points at poster of curriculum assessment criteria on the wall]
is the assessment criteria. Yeah?

And to meet these requirements students must produce copious annotation:

I want you to find lots of cfs, yeah I want you to have

[writes on board cfKMC] yep?

And if you're really smart you'll have a number there

[points below the 'cf:KMC']

which is the line. Yeh?

So you might have cf: KMC 204 okay?

So you need a pencil and whizz through the story.

There are difficulties here. Students are encouraged to learn a technique that seems not to depend upon prior analysis, nor on the kind of exploration of textual meaning that conversation might enable. They are urged to do so in the name of GCSE assessment criteria that seem accessible enough, yet detached from textual exploration will remain entirely obscure. The new explicitness much championed by current orthodoxy seems in this respect to be as opaque as older, much-criticised implicit pedagogies, in which students were meant to imbibe method as invisibly as they absorbed the capacity to make judgements about literary value. And the movement between the reading of the text and the writing of an answer is left under-explained.

During the next twenty minutes of the lesson the teacher organises the students into groups of four to discuss the text. This accounts for half the lesson time. The discussion is framed by a series of questions that the teacher has written on the board:

1. Who tells the story - how do you know?
2. What happens in the first paragraph? How is this a beginning? What clues to what will happen - foreshadowed?
3. What is the setting - place, time - evidence?
4. Paragraph 2 look at the description - what is described? Why is it described? Use of colours?

The students sit, pencils or pens in hand, they work a bit, talk about music, football, television, down-loading music, flick through the story-text, roll pencils across desks, and read the questions on the board. There are uncertain gazes between the students, much pencil fiddling and looking at the text; there is little or no talk. John moves around the groups and intervenes, writing in pen on the students' texts.

The students' lack of conversational focus and involvement in their writing suggests that perhaps they know that they can rely on the teacher to supply the interpretation which they are not inclined or enabled to produce. Certainly, when the lesson turns towards interpreting the text, and towards the opportunity for students to feed back their own ideas,

there is more evidence of the teacher's interpretive involvement than that of learners:

- Teacher: Frances can you tell me some information please, that your group have got from the first paragraph.
- Francis: She talks about the past.
- Teacher: Yeah, how long ago in the past?
- Francis: 1942
- Teacher: How old was she in the story?
- Francis: Fifth grade.
- Teacher: Yeah but how old was she? Information you can possibly deduce how old she is.
- Students: 10 or 11.
- Teacher: What war is it WW II; I know this because I know the story is American; America got involved in 1942. How many people had that?
- [some students put hands up, teacher counts them]
- Teacher: How old was Sylvia Plath when she wrote the story?

What is expected in this instance is information not interpretation, and what seems to be developing is a curriculum of facticity, what the students can pull out from the text in the most direct way, rather than what they might 'make of' the text through a process of interpretation. The students' contribution to this curriculum is to say *yes* or *no*. It is difficult to find evidence of *response* in the older sense of the term - that is, of a motivated engagement - and the lesson does not give us reason to think that different responses to and interpretations of the text are in play. The emphasis falls instead on the teacher's interpretive work:

Then she has this really complicated bit about a kaleidoscope... It seems to me that there is something symbolic here to do with how you look at things. And maybe its something to do with how you see the world when you're 10 and how you see the world when you're 23. When you're looking at the same thing... it seems to me that this idea of kaleidoscope goes right through the story in terms of colours. Now we've talked about light and dark that goes through all these stories. Dark is ignorance, dark is fear. Light is knowledge, light is safety and in this one we've got other colours as well.

In the lesson, generally speaking, the students are called on more to listen than to participate in a conversation. There are exceptions, but even here the 'balance' of conversation tends to be in several senses unequal, shaped by the teacher's strong sense of the (in)capacity of students, their inability to enter the mysteries of textual interpretation:

- Teacher: What else is mentioned in the title?
Jim: Superman, a fictional character with special powers.
Teacher: Is Superman going to come into the story in a significant way? How?
Jim: I think its going to be that that's what the snow suit is like
Teacher: You haven't read the story.
Jim: Yeah I have, I've read a bit of it.
Teacher: Oh. Homework four weeks ago was reading a four page story!
Joanne: Flying.
Teacher: Some one's saying something about flying - can we leave that bit! Superman is in the title, therefore it seems to me that Superman is important. Superman is not in the story therefore Superman must be symbolic? Do you think you need to write symbolic next to superman at the top, unless you already have? How many people were going to say symbolic to me?
[Some students put their hands up, including Jim.]
Teacher: About four? Well no, Jim, you didn't say symbolic and you had your chance!

Of course, questions of individual teaching style (and experience) are important in shaping the teacher's way of addressing the class. But it is difficult to overlook a wider set of influences, that relate to the distance between many students and the demands of the formal curriculum. The sorts of expectation that John reveals could be read as signs of a familiar and well-established relationship between some teachers and students, in the context of a long history of working-class academic failure, and mutual disenchantment. In the Superman lesson, these serve to underpin a curriculum presented to students as something beyond their reach. In this context the do-able routines of annotation come to stand in for those more conceptually-orientated activities of which these students are led to believe they are incapable.

Discussion

We can organize a sense of what goes on when annotation is being done through a number of connected categories and issues: *First*, there is that of *agency*: what kinds of capacity to act and to make meaning are available in the English classroom, and to whom are they (made) available? In what ways do practices of annotation relate to forms of *agency*? And to what extent they are underpinned by covert notions of ability? *Second*, there is the question of the *text*: What notion of text is produced in the different practices of annotation and what consequence do they have? There is, *third*, the idea of a *pedagogic practice* and its immediate purposes: does pedagogy take as its main objective the preparation for examinations, an accumulation of skills, or some other collection of purposes related to

intellectual or moral or cultural development? Fourth there is the question of *knowledge* - what counts as knowledge? With whom does knowledge reside? With the teacher as authority or with the class understood as a group-in-dialogue? And, fifth and last, there is the question of the *larger* pedagogic and educational purposes of English, the question, to put it starkly: '*What is English for?*'

The two classrooms show distinctly different approaches to questions of agentic capacity. In the one, students are encouraged to participate in the production of the meanings of the text; and the text is subject to negotiations between teacher and students. In the second case, the 'rules' of the classroom suggest that agency lies with the teacher who is the authoritative source of access to the text, and the students are relatively unskilled. The status of the text also varies from classroom to classroom. At Ravenscroft, it is the centre of a process of enquiry and 'cross-referral' between story and world. In Wayford, the text is not so central to discussion. Its meanings are not matters for discussion, only for teacher elucidation. It supplies more a series of facts that, at best, can serve as the basis for an effective examination answer. To put it another way, the text is something to be mined. And what the text-as-mine affords is the valuable ore of 'quotes'. The value of the ore lies in achieving the real purpose of the text, namely allowing students to succeed in the examination. This utilisation of the text is closely allied to the issue of annotation as pedagogic practice. Allied, too, to the issue of classroom knowledge, either as the product of a collective labour, or of the lonely work of the teacher, with annotation as the record of one or other of these processes.

This brings us to our final question: What is English for? In the first example, English consists among other things (including the meeting of examination requirements) of the making of meanings that connect the text with the world in exploratory ways. It aims to offer tools necessary to record and elaborate these meanings, in this case the tool of close reading fostered by annotation. Our other example provides a sparser view of English, although, paradoxically, it rests on an appeal to certain kinds of sophisticated textual expertise. Here, it turns out, that despite the teacher's professedly different views, English is a subject like other subjects, a means for passing or failing; except that here the tools for achieving success are largely left implicit, and are therefore particularly difficult for students to access.

These differences - between explicit and implicit, dialogue and instruction, participation and disengagement - seem to us to relate to more than just the orientation and capacities of particular teachers. They raise questions about selection and grouping, national curricula and 'local' cultures whose exploration, ultimately, requires a broader frame than we have presented

in this article. But by looking at the classroom actualisation of English, and by beginning to connect it to larger questions of policy and social circumstances, we hope to contribute - here, and in further publications - to the discussion of questions that are fundamental to rethinking English, in what remain hard times.

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