

# **English Language at undergraduate level: its identity as a subject in UK Higher Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

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## **Table of Contents**

1	Abstract
2	Background
3	Research Aims and Objectives
4	Literature Review
5	Methodology
	5.1 Data selection
	5.2 Data collection
	5.3 Data analysis
6	Results
	6.1 How English Language programmes are officially named and labelled
	6.2 The relationship of English Language with other associated disciplines within the degree programme
	6.3 How these programmes are constituted in terms of rationale
	6.4 How these programmes are constituted in terms of subject content
	6.5 How programmes are structured in terms of progression between year groups
	6.6. Which teaching and learning methods are used
	6.7 How these programmes are assessed in terms of the balance between coursework and examination
	6.8 How these programmes are marketed to prospective students
	6.9 Increases or decreases in recruitment during the past 5 years
7	Conclusions
8	Acknowledgements
9	Bibliography
10	Appendix

## **1 Abstract**

This study reviews the current place of undergraduate English Language in Higher Education institutions in the UK in light of a rapid expansion of the subject. It is based on the analysis of documents available from universities (e.g. prospectuses, brochures, e-mails) and on the web. We provide an overview of 49 single honours English Language programmes considering the ways they are labelled, their relationship with other disciplines, their rationale, content and structure. We also identify and discuss the preferred teaching and learning methods, and assessment procedures in these programmes. Finally, we explore marketing procedures and recruitment trends for these degrees. We conclude by discussing the contributions of our findings towards a better understanding of how English Language is conceptualised in UK higher education.

## **2 Background**

These are interesting times for the discipline of undergraduate English Language in UK Higher Education (HE). Within the last ten years, the numbers of applicants to the subject have grown rapidly (UCAS 2007), perhaps at the expense of closely related disciplines such as Linguistics and English Literature. This reflects a surge of popularity for studying the discipline that has taken many members of the subject community by surprise.

With the growth of A Levels in English Language in schools (Goddard and Beard 2007), there is now an equivalent student demand to explore the subject at degree level. UCAS course overview data (2007) for the key words 'English Language' suggest that 'courses with applications' have grown by 33% between 2002 and 2006; and numbers of student 'total acceptances' have grown by 24% in the same period. At Reading University for example, the English Language programme has grown from an intake of 10 students in 2003, to 55 students in 2007. In contrast, it has had to close its well-established Linguistics programme. At Lancaster, in a slightly different pattern to that of Reading, there was a rapid increase in numbers entering English Language programmes in the mid-1990s, followed by some stability, apart from an upwards blip in 2002/3 and some shrinkage in the last two years. In contrast, numbers recruited to Linguistics have not increased, and today represent about 9% of the undergraduate intake across its 20 or so Linguistics and English Language programmes.

Alongside the growing popularity of the subject, there appear to be widely varying interpretations of what 'English Language' means within different Higher Education institutions (HEIs). According to LLAS (2004), at the University of Manchester, Linguistics is at the centre of English Language; at the Universities of Nottingham and Liverpool, a strong emphasis is placed on studying spoken and written language data within real contexts; at the

universities of Bedfordshire and Anglia Ruskin, English Language is partly associated with 'English as a foreign language'; and at Reading, the focus is on balancing a study of the tools of linguistic analysis with the application of these tools to real-world issues.

At present, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for Higher Education does not provide a benchmark statement for English Language, but subsumes aspects of the subject within two other disciplines: English (Literature) and Linguistics. At the time of writing, the QAA is undergoing a consultation with the subject community in order to revise its benchmark statement for Linguistics, and it remains to be seen whether minor or more radical amendments will emerge. But at present, the subsidiary character of English Language on an official level is also reflected in the subject's current allegiance to, and relationships with *two* higher education authority (HEA) subject centres, English and Linguistics. It follows that this rapidly growing subject has no official identity, and there is a considerable diversity in terms of what the subject 'means'. However, we do not wish to imply that the subject's lack of clear definition necessarily constitutes a weakness; rather this diversity may strengthen the appeal of the discipline by addressing different interests and by offering students rich possibilities for tailor-made study in the field.

In short, it seems timely to investigate the subject's identity in HE including its relationship with closely associated disciplines such as Linguistics, Applied Linguistics, English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), English Literature, Communication and Media Studies.

### **3 Research Aims and Objectives**

The main aim of our project was to conduct a mapping exercise of the identity of English Language as a subject in UK higher education. It is beyond the remit of this project to offer a comprehensive study of the diverse identities offered by English Language, but we hope to develop a more detailed study in that direction in the future. Nor is it within our scope to contextualise the place of English Language within the wider HE curriculum.

Rather, our project focussed on gathering the facts and figures to provide an overview of the subject's identity in all HEIs that offer English Language as a single honours degree. In order to do this, we considered the following nine objectives:

- (1) How English Language programmes are officially named and labelled
- (2) The relationship of English Language with other associated disciplines within the degree programme, e.g. Linguistics, English Literature, Applied Linguistics, Communication
- (3) How these programmes are constituted in terms of rationale
- (4) How these programmes are constituted in terms of subject content
- (5) How programmes are structured in terms of progression between year groups

- (6) Which teaching and learning methods are used
- (7) How these programmes are assessed in terms of the balance between coursework and examination
- (8) How these programmes are marketed to prospective students
- (9) Increases or decreases in recruitment during the past 5 years

## 4 Literature Review

We shall briefly review three theoretical influences upon the subject of English Language both in terms of its recent growth and of its diverse conceptualisations as an undergraduate programme.

The *first* was a movement known as ‘Knowledge about Language’ (KAL), which emerged during the 1980s, and subsequently had a profound effect on the teaching of English in British schools. In light of the views of language outlined in the *Kingman* and *Cox Reports* on English Language teaching and English 5—16 respectively (DES 1988; 1989), the government-funded Language in the National Curriculum (LINC) project aimed to enhance teachers’ understanding and knowledge about language. There is arguably a link between the KAL movement and the current interest in studying language more critically in schools (Donmall-Hicks 1997), which is now reflected in the range of A Levels in English Language. Furthermore, Carter (2007: 5) suggests that the range of ‘exponential growth’ of these A Level courses over the last five years is a powerful reason behind the recent expansion of English Language in universities. In Carter’s view, the A Level version is having ‘a considerable influence, both conceptually and pedagogically’, on the ways in which the subject area is now developing in university departments. In view of this development, there is a very interesting discussion of the problems of naming and describing A Level and undergraduate English Language courses in Goddard and Beard’s (2007) recent report on transition issues, which we seek to supplement in this project.

The *second* is the broader theoretical debate about the subject of Applied Linguistics, on whether researchers should be doing ‘linguistics applied’ or ‘applied linguistics’ (Widdowson 1984). This debate has generated numerous articles (e.g. Rampton 1997; Widdowson 2000), and contributed to the publication of various introductions to Applied Linguistics in recent years (e.g. Cook 2003; Davies 1999; Schmitt 2002). The proposed study does not intend to engage in the debate about the scope of Applied Linguistics, but we recognise that departments of Applied Linguistics are often responsible for delivering English Language programmes, and thus, such discussions must have an impact on how the discipline is conceptualised. Therefore, we will consider the relationship between degrees in English Language and Applied Linguistics in this report.

The *third* influence on English Language is its actual and in some cases, folk association with the field of ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages), partly because of the ambiguity of the name of the subject itself. The fact that

the label 'English Language' is often equated with ESOL can be seen in important publications such as Howatt (1984) and Candlin and Mercer (2001), both of which have the words 'English Language Teaching' in their titles to denote 'English as a foreign or second language teaching.' The project will assess the nature and significance of the relationship between English Language and ESOL.

## **5 Methodology**

### **5.1 Data selection**

Our initial quest was to identify how many single honours English Language programmes existed in the UK, as this would serve as the basis of our study. We decided at an early point not to include the considerable number of combined courses, as it has been estimated that there are at least 692 of these (Goddard and Beard 2007).

In order to achieve this information, we commissioned a report from UCAS which searched for all instances of 'English Language' on their website. We also consulted LLAS (2007) for a list of English Language and Linguistics courses. UCAS indicated that 83 HEIs offered English Language programmes, totalling at least 116 degrees; LLAS listed 40 HEIs and 41 programmes. We then checked the websites of these HEIs for single honours programmes only, finally narrowing down our corpus to 49 programmes. Out of the 83 HEIs identified in the UCAS database, some (e.g. Liverpool John Moore, Chichester and Hull) had no relevant courses and others had more than one course. In these cases, we chose the programme labelled 'English Language' (e.g. Essex offers 'English Language'; 'English Language and English Language Teaching'; 'English Language and Sociolinguistics'; 'Language and Communication'; 'Linguistics'; 'English Language and Linguistics' and we reviewed the first course of this list). A list of the 49 HEIs and programmes we reviewed in this study can be found in the Appendix.

### **5.2 Data collection**

We created a database in two formats – electronic and hard copy – to record the relevant information for each of these 49 programmes around the following areas:

- (1) Degree title;
- (2) Rationale;
- (3) Course content;
- (4) Modules;
- (5) Teaching methods;
- (6) Assessment;
- (7) Recruitment; and

## (8) Marketing.

Most of the information we needed was available on the web, but we decided to complement this database by gathering all publicly available, hard copy information in the form of brochures, leaflets, etc. We also sent out e-mails to programme directors to gather any missing information (in particular for assessment ratios and recruitment) and to check data.

### 5.3 Data analysis

Once the database was compiled, we searched for answers for each of our nine objectives (as outlined in Section 3 above). Our data analysis combines quantitative and qualitative approaches depending on the emphasis of each question and also on the data available to address these questions.

*Quantitative* methods tended to involve counting the frequencies with which the 49 institutions were associated with key categories specified in our objectives; *qualitative* methods involved the selection and textual analysis of key words and phrases in programme descriptions.

For example, the identification of degree titles lent itself well to a quantitative approach as a limited range of names and labels were used, clustering around the key words 'English Language'. In other cases, quantitative methods proved trickier. For the analysis of teaching and learning methods, we identified and enumerated the methods mentioned by the various programmes but were unable to specify the ratio between the various methods, because this information was simply not available. Some quantification was possible in the analysis of the ratio between the two most popular assessment types, namely exams and coursework. A quantitative approach was also used to analyse recruitment trends in these programmes based on e-mail responses to our queries. In contrast, however, the analysis of the rationale, course content and progression tended to take up a predominantly qualitative approach of textual analysis demanded by the considerable variation in descriptive wording across the various programmes.

It is important to emphasise that our data reflect what is said about these various programmes in public documents but there may be mismatches between what is officially stated and how these programmes are implemented 'on the ground'. Thus, our intention has been to interpret the available data in good faith, and below we provide an overview of our results. In order to illustrate our points we make reference to a wide range of UK programmes. In terms of referencing, the names of HEIs are placed in italics and the data source (i.e website, prospectus, etc) is also provided whenever an HEI is mentioned.

## 6 Results

### 6.1 How English Language programmes are officially named and labelled

From Table 1, we can see that the title, 'English Language', is central to 44 of the 49 single honours degree programmes we reviewed, with 19 of these confining themselves solely to the two key words.

Name of programme	No.
English Language	19
English Language and Linguistics	12
English Language Studies	6
English Language and Communication	5
Language and Linguistics	1
English Language and Literary Studies	1
English and Communication Studies	1
English	1
English Studies	1
Linguistics and Communication and Society	1
Applied English Language Studies	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>49</b>

Table 1: How the programmes are named

It seems that a number of these programmes wish to send out a clear message to key parties (applicants, staff, examiners, parents) that they offer a natural progression from English Language A Level. The subtext to prospective students seems to be, 'if you want a more advanced version of the A Level you enjoyed, this programme will be the one for you'. This interpretation is given some support in the rationales provided in website publicity. For example, at *Edge Hill* we are told:

The English Language programme has grown....as a response to student demand, and to cater for the increasing numbers of students who have taken English Language at A Level.

The use of dual titles (such as 'English Language and Linguistics' and 'English Language and Communication') seems on the surface to imply *combined* rather than *single* honours programmes. However, such titles are used here as umbrella terms to convey the range, emphasis or perspective given to their version of English Language. Of these dual-titled degrees, 'English Language and Linguistics' is the most common, indicating that Linguistics departments are often responsible for delivering English Language programmes, and that their discipline plays a central part in the conceptualisation of the subject at HE level.

Interestingly, our own programme at Reading is the only one in the study to utilise the pre-modifying adjective, 'Applied'. This is because the programme wishes to signify its link to the field of Applied Linguistics. However, from 2009, the degree will be called 'English Language' in line with majority practice as this is a key category for UCAS applicants with a background in A Level English Language.

In summary, the title of a programme is often a strategic choice made for marketing and recruitment reasons. Although some programmes are labelled 'English Language' only, they may well subsume other subjects and disciplines, such as Literature or Linguistics (as we shall see in the next section). Conversely, titles that imply a dual identity may simply be signifying the academic orientation of the department. What is clear is that names and labels may hide as much as reveal the way a programme has been conceptualised.

## **6.2 The relationship of English Language with other associated disciplines within the degree programme**

From Table 2 we can see that English Language is characterised as a highly inter-disciplinary subject area, associated variously with Linguistics, Applied Linguistics, Communication, Media Studies, Literature and English Language Teaching. Many programmes (such as Aberdeen or Birmingham) state a particular association with one other discipline, but 22 programmes mention an association with two or more disciplines.

Even where a programme title or document suggests to us that English Language dominates, it is often the case that interdisciplinary links are central to the conceptualisation of the subject. For example at *Cardiff*, the programme is described as 'primarily intended for students with a professional interest in the English Language' (Website, 2007). However, it also 'shares common ground' with Communication, and with other subjects such as Philosophy and English Literature, by means of its modular structure of study. At *Edge Hill*, we are told that 'language may stand as a discipline in its own right', but alternatively, 'language may form a link with literary studies' (Website, 2007).

For at least 22 of the 49 programmes reviewed, it is clear that English Language retains a strong relationship with the field of Linguistics, often because Linguistics departments have evolved their provision in order to teach the new English Language degrees. At *Aberdeen*, for example, Language is conceptualised as the subject area, linguistics as the theoretical tool by which this subject is studied:

Language is at the heart of human interaction. Linguistics teaches us how to analyse, discuss and model this singularly human attribute. In studying Linguistics you will learn to understand yourself and human societies more fully (Prospectus, 2007).

English Language dominates	Linguistics	Applied Linguistics	Communication/ Media	Literature	English Language Teaching
Cardiff	Aberdeen	Anglia Ruskin	Aston +	Birmingham	Beds +
E. London	Aston +		Beds +	Blackburn	Herts +
Edge Hill	Brighton ++		Brighton ++	Brighton ++	Lancaster +
Edinburgh	C. Lancs +		Canterbury	C. Lancs + yr 1	Swansea ++
Gloucester	Essex		Glamorgan	Glasgow	
Kent	King's College +		Herts +	Huddersfield	
Leeds	London Met		King's College +	Lancaster +	
Liverpool Hope	Manchester +		Kingston	Liverpool +	
Middlesex	Marjon		Liverpool +	Manchester +	
Reading	Newcastle		Nott Trent +	Nottingham	
Sussex	Northumbria		Swansea ++	UCE B'ham	
Bangor	Nott Trent +				
	Oxford Brookes				
	Roehampton				
	Salford				
	Sheffield				
	Sunderland				
	UWE Bristol				
	Westminster				
	Wolverhampton				
	Swansea				
	York				
	York St John				
<b>13</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>4</b>

+ associated with two others.

++ associated with three others.

Table 2: Relationship of English Language with other associated disciplines within the programme.

For at least 11 programmes, English Language is closely associated with English Literature. In the case of *Nottingham*, English Language is part of a more integrated programme entitled 'English Studies'. Here, students are introduced to 'a range of disciplines, including language, literature, medieval studies and drama', which are perceived as the four key components of the degree programme (Prospectus, 2007). At *Huddersfield*, four out of six modules offered in the first year of their 'English Language' degree appear to be literature based (i.e. Approaches to literature, Introduction to poetry and drama, Introduction to narrative, literature and film; Introduction to Stylistics), although this emphasis on literature seems less evident in the second and third years (Subject Brochure, 2007).

In only 4 cases are single degrees in English Language also associated with ESOL. *Bedfordshire*, for example, describes its programmes as suitable for 'native and non-native speakers of English', its classes as 'normally multi-national', and suggests to the potential applicant that 'if you see your future in language teaching, we have a dedicated programme for you' (Website, 2007). However, the association of 'English Language' with 'English to speakers of other languages' seems to be an exception, and we would thus argue that the discipline is primarily conceptualised in terms of the *first* language rather than the second language experience.

What appears to be common across most of the programmes surveyed is the infrequency of reference to Applied Linguistics. *Kingston* describes itself as 'an 'applied' course, so you focus on how language and communication works in the real world'. *Anglia Ruskin* is one of the few programmes explicitly to link English Language to Applied Linguistics:

[The programme] allows you to explore a number of issues in applied linguistics and language studies, and to understand ways in which language relates to society.

At *Reading*, the only university to use the term 'applied' in its title, students learn to 'analyse critically the use of English in the modern world, and to apply this knowledge to the solution of real-world problems', which draws on Cook's (2003) definition of Applied Linguistics.

Overall, most English Language programmes have a distinct preference for an associated, named discipline, and all have inter-disciplinary links, suggesting a broad range of interpretations of what a degree in English Language means.

### **6.3 How these programmes are constituted in terms of rationale**

Our survey discovered that HEIs tend to give several reasons in their public documents for encouraging prospective students to study English Language at their institutions. Consequently, we felt it would be overly simplistic to quantify the rationale of programmes, preferring to give a qualitative reading of individual 'cases' (see below). However, HEIs tend to emphasise one reason above others to characterise their rationale. These reasons generally fall into two broad categories, namely (1) *programme-centred*, i.e., reputation of the institute and/or staff and facilities; and (2) *subject-centred*, i.e., reasons why English Language is an exciting, useful, valuable area of study within the following sub-categories:

- Language as a defining human trait
- Knowledge about language in social contexts

- Applications to the learner as a communicator
- Global dominance of English
- Language as a structure
- Language variation (historical, geographical, social).

*Essex* is perhaps typical of institutions that mention the reputation of their programme:

Linguistics and English Language are taught within the department of Language and Linguistics, which was ranked first in the UK among departments of its kind in the 2005 National Student Survey. It has an international reputation for its research in theoretical and descriptive linguistics. (Website, 2007)

The majority of programmes in contrast are predominantly subject-centred, and aim to capture the 'unique selling point' of the subject itself, although there is a range of interpretations of what that USP is, exactly. A number of programmes identify language as a defining human trait (see above). For *Aberdeen*, for example, 'language is a human trait which sets us apart from all other species' (Prospectus, 2007), and for *Sheffield*:

Language is a vital part of human life. Work or play, political or private life, childhood games or multinational business – virtually everything we do involves the use of language in one way or another (Website, 2007).

In terms of the next sub-category, knowledge about language in social contexts, *Sunderland* 'introduces you to the nature and functions of language in society, both on global and national levels and on the level of interpersonal communication', while at *Roehampton*, the question is put much more directly:

Why don't BBC broadcasters speak like Vera Duckworth from Coronation Street or even like Alan Partridge? (Website, 2007)

In similarly direct spirit, *Reading* suggests that the student 'will explore language-related problems: at work, at play, in relationships, in the media, in education, in politics' (Website, 2007).

Many programmes alternatively emphasise the practical and vocational applications to the learner as a communicator. At *Central Lancashire*, 'you will develop an excellent command of English' (Prospectus, 2007). *Bedfordshire* suggests that their course is 'an excellent choice where high level communications skills are required', and *East London* says their course will 'help you develop English Language competencies for a professional career.'

Other programmes propose that the global dominance of English is a key reason why students should apply for the subject. *West of England* begins its rationale with the proposition, 'English is one of the main languages spoken in the world with some 375 million native speakers' (Website, 2007), while

*Christchurch* (Canterbury) contends that:

English is the main language of international communication, and with increasing globalisation it is important to have a refined understanding of the nature and structure of English, of how and why it is used in the world and of how language plays an important part in our definition of ourselves as people and in how we communicate with others (Website, 2007).

Language as a structure is proposed as a key reason for studying the subject by a number of institutions. *London Metropolitan* suggests that, 'exploring the structures and effects of non-literary language....will develop your powers of analysis and reflection' (Website, 2007), whilst *Newcastle* draws on areas of theoretical linguistics to ask:

What is a language? How do languages in general and English in particular work? What sorts of structures do sentences have, and how does that determine their meaning? (Website, 2007)

Finally, the sociolinguistic perspective on language – how language varies geographically, historically and socially – is cited by various programmes as the most attractive selling point of the subject. At *Brighton*, 'the interplay of language in social, political and cultural contexts is examined to appreciate the diversity and power of language' (Website, 2007), whereas at Cardiff, a principal aim of their English Language and Communication degree is to appreciate the subject 'as a means of communication in different cultural settings, to explore variation in the use of language and other communication codes in social settings' (Website, 2007).

In summary, programmes differ considerably in terms of their rationale, some preferring to emphasise the reputation of the department, others aiming to capture the subject through diverse characterisations. Almost all offer a range of commonly shared reasons for studying the subject. It is the order and priority given to such reasons that tend to differ. Clearly, prospective students will benefit from this diversity, enabling them to select a programme which highlights their primary interests and skills.

## **6.4 How these programmes are constituted in terms of subject content**

Is there any sense of a common core within English Language? What is the focus of the core modules?

It is difficult to make generalisations in answer to this, given the diverse interdisciplinary links of many programmes. In addition, a number of HEIs do not make the exact nature of their programme explicit within available publicity materials. For this reason, we have not produced a quantitative answer to these questions, but rather, a list of the most commonly stated components of an English Language programme, based on a detailed reading of our range of sources.

English Language programmes are likely to feature many of the following elements in their core content at various levels of knowledge, understanding and skill:

- Descriptive linguistics: phonetics, phonology, grammar, syntax, lexis, semantics, morphology, etc
- Historical linguistics: including the history of the English Language in the British Isles, the globalisation of English
- Language variation and change: various levels of study within Sociolinguistics such as 'language and society' within the first year, dialectology, world Englishes, languages in contact, language planning, intercultural communication; language and gender
- Real world applications: information technology, the media, workplace communication, education, interpersonal and family, play, public institutions, clinical settings, forensics
- Psycholinguistics: also related areas including cognitive linguistics, language and the mind and language and meaning.
- Discourse analysis: spoken and written discourse
- First and second language acquisition
- Independent research inquiry: research methods, linguistic ethnography.

In terms of options, certain programmes offer unusual or highly individualised modules and course content that are not routinely found in other programmes. While it is unlikely that any of the following are unique to the institution, these modules stand out as interestingly different!

- What makes us laugh: analysing humour (Kent; website, 2007)
- Language regulation and informalisation (Lancaster; website, 2007)
- Verbal art and language play (Marjon; prospectus,2007)
- Hands-on language (Roehampton; website, 2007)
- Disprogrammes of the Victorian period/Understanding disprogramme (Salford; website, 2007).

In sum, there is a predictable range of modules constituting a common core in most UK English Language programmes. There is little doubt of the debt to both theoretical and applied Linguistics that English Language owes. The difference between HEIs again lies in the degree of focus that institutions seek to place on the more or less applied elements, as well on the interdisciplinary links with associated disciplines.

## 6.5 How programmes are structured in terms of progression between year groups

Our research shows that there are clear patterns in the way English Language programmes manage progression between year groups. However, this is probably because there are generic ways of organising degree programmes within HEIs in the UK. We will now consider some of these patterns.

First, the majority of the 49 programmes reviewed have a three-year structure, the exception being the standard four-year structure of Scottish programmes and the optional fourth year abroad offered by Aston. Some HEIs such as York St John offer optional work placements within the three-year structure.

Secondly, almost all programmes have a foundation year for first years, offering a broad introduction to the key elements of their programme, which will be developed in more advanced forms in the second and third years. For many, this means an introduction through core modules to both descriptive linguistics (such as grammar, phonology, lexis, semantics), and to aspects of applied linguistics (language in use, human communication, the media). Where a programme specifies a strong association with another discipline, this will be reflected in the introductory content. For example, at *UCE Birmingham* where English Language is linked to Literature, there are core modules in 'Fiction, Drama, Language and Cultural Study', alongside core modules in Language Description and Sociolinguistics (Website, 2007). Very few universities mention academic study skills as part of Year 1 provision, although this changes in Years 2 and 3. This might suggest that study skills are deemed to be less important than foundational subject content in the first year, but that they become more important as research training takes precedence in Years 2 and 3.

Thirdly, a dissertation or independent study supported by research training is a common feature for the final year of English Language. For example, *Kings College* places a strong emphasis on the importance of research skills in terms of 'how to describe, analyse and research' language (Website, 2007), and there are core modules in research methods in both Years 2 and 3. **At Reading, a Part 2 core Research Methods module leads to a conference at the end of the year, where students present a mini research study in groups.**

Fourthly, most HEIs appear to have a programme structure based on core (compulsory) and optional modules, although the ratio between the two varies considerably. In some cases, programmes offer core modules but no options in the first year, and introduce a range of options alongside core modules in the second and third years. In other cases, there are very few compulsory modules. For example, *Cardiff* and *Swansea* have core modules in Year One, but no compulsory modules in the second and third years. Programmes also vary considerably in the number and range of options offered. *Lancaster* stands out as offering a vast menu of at least 33 optional modules in the second and third years (Website, 2007).

While there are clear patterns across programmes in terms of managing

progression, inevitably there is some variation. For example, a minority of programmes provide quite structured methods of progression, or 'pathways' through an English Language degree course to allow students to specialise in a particular branch of the discipline. At *Brighton*, students are given the opportunity to select one of three separate routes: English Literature, Linguistics or the Media, each of which is supplemented by a range of options. At *Birmingham*, students are asked to commit to a particular pathway at the start of their programme. Pathway 1 allows students to study mainly literature with some language, whereas Pathway 2 permits them to study both disciplines in equal proportions, either of which constitutes an English degree. The pathway approach to progression has the advantage that students can specialise in subject areas that they most enjoy, but the disadvantage that they may experience a more restricted version of this interdisciplinary subject.

Overall, a review of the practices of the 49 programmes suggests that while the structure of progression has many common elements, the sequence and range of modules can vary considerably from one HEI to another.

## **6.6. Which teaching and learning methods are used**

Data is available for 38 programmes as regards their teaching and learning methods. Most programmes report the use of a range of methods, including the following:

- Lectures
- Seminars
- Workshops
- Group work
- Tutorials
- Presentations
- Virtual learning environments
- Field trips
- Practicals
- Lab work
- Debates.

Lectures and seminars seem to be the most popular methods, being mentioned by 39 and 32 HEIs respectively, and in most cases these two methods are said to be deployed sequentially, with the former preceding the latter. *Nottingham Trent* is typical in this respect:

Teaching principally takes place through a combination of lectures (where

tutors introduce the key ideas) and seminars (organised on the basis of smaller group discussion of those ideas). (Website, 2007)

Across the data, variation in teaching and learning methods tends to be justified as above (on the grounds that more active application and/or discussion of ideas should follow a more theoretical introduction to a particular topic), but it is also justified by *Liverpool Hope* in terms of addressing learning styles:

We offer a range of teaching methods and learning support so that you can work with a style that suits you. For English Language, teaching methods include lectures, seminars, workshops, tutorials and presentations. (Website, 2007)

Other programmes (e.g. *Wales Swansea*, as illustrated below) justify this variation in terms of module specificity:

Most modules centre on a series of lectures supported by smaller group work and seminars. In some subjects, such as Field linguistics, this approach is not suitable, and practical work is arranged by the tutor for students who work in small groups. (Prospectus, 2007)

Our data suggest an emphasis on the importance of active participation and independent learning. Indeed, seven institutions mention 'research' as a teaching and learning method including *Glasgow*, whose description of research as a 'special feature' is worth noting:

Special feature: Research projects, such as the internationally famous historical Thesaurus of English, the SCOTS project, the Glasgow Accents Projects and the Middle English Grammar project, have a direct impact on teaching. (Prospectus, 2007)

The general importance given to active participation and independent learning may seem at odds with the dominant role of lectures in these programmes. Interestingly, a few HEIs provide a justification of the usefulness of lectures (e.g. *Newcastle* describes lectures as 'an extremely efficient way of communicating lots of information to a large body of students'). Other HEIs seem to mention the use of lectures with caution: e.g. *Central Lancashire* points out that 'there are few large lectures on [their] course' and both *Bedfordshire* and *Middlesex* highlight the fact that their lectures are 'interactive'. There is arguably a link between the need for these characterizations and the point made by Goddard and Beard (2007:48) that lecturers who teach first year undergraduates usually felt that 'lectures needed to be "interactive" in order to sustain the interest of large groups.' In other words, lectures may be perceived to have negative connotations.

In sum, English Language at undergraduate level is taught and learnt through a wide range of methods. Lectures appear to be a very popular choice for the introduction of topics and ideas, and they tend to be associated with follow-up seminars in which learners can take on a more active role. This common format (i.e. lectures followed by seminars) may suggest a preference for a deductive approach to developing disciplinary knowledge. However, the few

mentions of ‘interactive lectures’ indicate that there may be variation in the way lectures are delivered and therefore in the way students learn new concepts and ideas.

## 6.7 How these programmes are assessed in terms of the balance between coursework and examination

English Language programmes are assessed through a wide range of procedures and in fact most programmes highlight this variation. The two excerpts below, from *Huddersfield* and *Northumbria*, respectively, are typical of the type of information about assessment given on the web:

Assessment varies across a range of types, including a small number of formal examinations, essays and projects, log books and commentaries, oral presentations and writing portfolios. (Website, 2007)

Assessment is by a range of methods including course work, projects, oral presentations, essays, and examinations. (Website, 2007)

According to the data, variation in assessment may be linked with the structure of the overall programme, as in the case of *Wales Swansea*:

Assessment for most modules is by a combination of assignments and examinations. As you progress through your degree programme, more emphasis is put on assignment marks. (Website, 2007)

An initial overview of the data led us to conclude that preferred assessment procedures could be roughly categorised as ‘examination’ and ‘coursework’ and we decided to explore the balance between these two types of assessment across the various programmes. Table 3 summarises our results:

No. of programmes	Coursework %	Examination %
5	100	0
2	90	10
3	80	20
1	75	25
1	67	33
2	60	40
8	50	50
1	40	60
1	33	67
17	Combination - no details	
6	Combination - weighted toward c/w	
2	No details	
<b>49</b>		

Table 3: Assessment as percentage of coursework and examination

As seen above, none of the programmes uses examination only as a means

of assessment but 5 programmes claim to use coursework only. Most programmes, however, show a preference for some combination between coursework and examination, and when information about weighting is available there is an indication that coursework is preferred over examination. It is hard to calculate the exact proportion between these two types of assessment given that this relationship is likely to vary across modules in the same programme. When asked about the percentage balance between coursework and examination in their programmes, most of our respondents expressed caution in their responses through the use of hedges such as 'roughly', 'approximately', and 'probably.'

A final point to be made regarding assessment types in the programmes reviewed involves a lack of emphasis on formative assessment. Out of the 49 programmes, *Salford* is the only one that touches upon this issue by arguing that 'most modules incorporate some form of diagnostic assessment in order to allow you to identify your strengths and weaknesses prior to undertaking your final exam or essay.'

To sum up, there was a tendency in the reviewed programmes to use a combination of assessment types, with 'exams and coursework' being a very popular choice. The weighting given to coursework varies considerably, and so does the interpretation of what counts as coursework. Overall there appears to be an emphasis on summative assessment but there is no evidence of programmes using exams only.

## **6.8 How these programmes are marketed to prospective students**

HEIs vary in their ways of marketing their programmes to prospective students. We received the following publicity materials (the range and format of which varied across HEIs):

- Prospectuses accompanied or not by standard letters
- Course and/or departmental brochures
- Open day brochures
- Visitor's guides
- Additional follow-up in the form of e-mails or newsletters.

What all these 49 programmes have in common is a website. These websites differ considerably in their format and in the type and amount of information they provide, and arguably this variation reveals important aspects of the identity of these programmes.

Information about course content could be found on the website for most of these institutions. This tended to be less true for information on teaching methods and assessment. However, information on recruitment could not be

found on the web and these details had to be sought by e-mail.

In terms of course content, it is common practice for these websites to list core modules of their respective programmes. Some HEIs (e.g. *Sheffield*) also provide summaries of these modules; others (e.g. *Essex*, *Gloucestershire* and *Lancaster*) provide more detailed module descriptions, including their teaching and learning methods, assessment and bibliography. *Newcastle* gives this type of information through 'Stage Manuals', i.e., documents explaining in detail the aims and content for each year of their programme.

Our analysis of these websites indicates that some HEIs may offer individual types of information. For example, *East London* explains how they monitor the quality of their programme; *Reading* highlights the research component of their degree by listing a few recent dissertation topics; *Nottingham* adds a personal touch by having a link to a student profile.

In sum, the programmes reviewed in this study are marketed in various ways, but their common element (i.e. their websites) seems to be the central vehicle for dissemination of information for prospective students. This information, in turn, may vary across programmes, but 'content' seems to be a common topic for marketing purposes, whereas recruitment data is not.

## 6.9 Increases or decreases in recruitment during the past 5 years

UCAS course overview data (2007) for the key words 'English Language' suggests that 'courses with application' have grown by 33% between 2002 and 2006; and numbers of student 'total acceptances' have grown by 24% in the same period. We sought to confirm this trend by asking representatives of the 49 programmes the following question by e-mail: What increases or decreases in recruitment have you experienced during the last five years?

Table 4 shows our overall results, based on a total of 29 responses to our questions (reflecting perhaps that recruitment is perceived in some cases as confidential information):

Recruitment figures	No. of programmes
Increasing	17
Decreasing	4
Consistent	2
First year forthcoming	1
Promise to reply	3
Information is not available	2
No response	20
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>49</b>

Table 4: Recruitment figures over time

It is clear from the data collected that recruitment to English Language is generally increasing rather than decreasing.

It was beyond the scope of this study to investigate the likely reasons orienting this trend. Nevertheless, we can gain some insights from the explanations volunteered by our respondents by email. For one HEI, increases in applications are believed to be at least partially associated with a change in the title of the degree. Decreases in recruitment are associated with the establishment of lower targets in one HEI, and with the demotion of the department and consequent loss of staff in another one.

In sum, it seems that our data does confirm UCAS course overview data (2007), which offers a strong indication that there is indeed an overall growth in recruitment in English Language degrees in the UK. Where there are decreases, these seem to be related to internal, political factors within departments and universities.

## **7 Conclusion**

This study set out to explore the subject identity of undergraduate English Language in higher education in the UK. Our motivation for the study came from witnessing first hand the growing popularity of English Language degrees. We felt that there was an unclear picture of how these various degrees are conceptualised across different programmes, and how they relate to associated disciplines such as Linguistics and English Literature.

Our study shows that while there is some commonality across the 49 HEIs reviewed, there is also considerable diversity of conceptualisation. Most English Language programmes share similarities in content, especially in terms of core modules, teaching and learning methods, progression and assessment procedures. For example, it is usual to find versions of the following theoretical areas within course content: descriptive linguistics (e.g. grammar, phonetics), historical linguistics, sociolinguistics, real world applications of language, psycholinguistics, first and second language acquisition, discourse analysis and linguistic research methods. While this does not amount to a common core, it does suggest that most degree programmes in the UK have developed an unspoken consensus about what English Language broadly 'means'. Moreover, there is also a strong emphasis across programmes on 'real-world issues' in which English Language plays a role, and these applied linguistic connections are another important conclusion of our study – one that gains a special overtone given that the very label 'applied linguistics' does not seem to be central to the data we have reviewed.

This is not, however, the whole picture. Our project has revealed that 'English Language' is interpreted in multiple ways by the 49 HEIs, often governed by the interdisciplinary links and research specialisms of the administering

department. Prominent in our findings is an association with Linguistics, and relatively strong links with English Literature, Media and Communication Studies. However, such interdisciplinary connections are not always evident to potential applicants from the names and labels of programmes. These often hide as much as reveal the way a programme is designed and taught. Often such links can only be identified through close scrutiny of the programme content. Unless an applicant reads the publicity information very carefully, they may well find themselves on an 'unsuitable' programme!

Arguably, this rapidly evolving discipline is a site of contestation, with different versions of the subject competing for ascendancy, sometimes within the scope of a single programme. It seems that diverse theoretical paradigms inform English Language; for example, Linguistic Science traditionally adopts more deductive, positivist, empiricist approaches to research inquiry and teaching methods, whereas English Literature and Media Studies offer more inductive, hermeneutic, interpretivist and social constructionist approaches. This is an area beyond the scope of this project, which could certainly benefit from further investigation.

At present, the QAA does not provide a benchmark statement for undergraduate English Language, but subsumes aspects of the subject within and across two separate subject areas: Linguistics and English (Literature). This suggests that the subject does not currently have an official identity, which means that stakeholders (staff, students, parents, examiners) have few reference points in order to make comparisons and evaluations of first degree English Language programmes. Does this matter? On one hand, the multiple versions of English Language across the UK potentially allows prospective students to benefit from this diversity, where they are carefully guided, enabling them to select a programme that highlights their primary interests and skills. On the other, the lack of a clearly articulated set of benchmark statements for English Language means that stakeholders will struggle to engage in principled planning and decision-making.

In conclusion, there is no question that this project has opened up new avenues for further exploration, and it is hoped that further research in this field will be stimulated by our endeavour.

## **8 Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank Lynda O'Brien, our research assistant, for her hard work in compiling our database and for her insightful comments on the data analysis. Also, our special thanks go to all the programme representatives who responded to our queries and enabled us to get a more complete picture of the data.

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## 10 Appendix: The 49 programmes reviewed in this study

1	Aberdeen	Language and Linguistics
2	Anglia Ruskin	English Language
3	Aston University	English Language (joint & combined)
4	Birmingham	English
5	Blackburn College: East Lancashire	English Language and Literary Studies
6	Brighton	English Language and Linguistics
7	Canterbury Christ Church	English Language and Communication
8	Cardiff University	English Language
9	Central Lancashire	English Language Studies
10	East London	English Language
11	Edge Hill University	English Language
12	Edinburgh	English Language
13	Essex	English Language
14	Glamorgan	English Language & Communication
15	Glasgow	English Language
16	Gloucestershire	English Language
17	Hertfordshire	English Language & Communication
18	Huddersfield	English Language
19	Kent	English Language Studies
20	King's College London	English Language & Communication
21	Kingston University	English Language & Communication
22	Lancaster University	English Language
23	Leeds	English Language
24	Liverpool	English & Communication Studies
25	Liverpool Hope	English Language
26	London Met	English Language Studies
27	Luton, Bedfordshire	English Language Studies
28	Manchester	English Language
29	Marjon	English Language and Linguistics
30	Middlesex	English Language
31	Newcastle	English Language
32	Northumbria University	English Language Studies
33	Nottingham	English Studies
34	Nottingham Trent University	Linguistics and Communication and Society
35	Oxford Brookes	English Language and Linguistics
36	Reading	Applied English Language Studies
37	Roehampton University	English Language and Linguistics
38	Salford	English Language and Linguistics
39	Sheffield	English Language and Linguistics
40	Sunderland	English Language and Linguistics
41	Sussex	English Language
42	UCE Birmingham	English Language
43	Wales, Bangor	English Language
44	Wales, Swansea	English Language Studies
45	West of England	English Language and Linguistics
46	Westminster	English Language and Linguistics
47	Wolverhampton	English Language and Linguistics
48	York	English Language and Linguistics
49	York St John University	English Language and Linguistics

