Project English: Lessons From Curriculum Reform Past

Wayne O’Neil*
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Abstract
Project English was born in 1962, a late addition to the curriculum reform movement in the USA that grew out of the Cold War race to dominate outer space. The Oregon Curriculum Study Center, one of the initial 12 Project English centers, took as its goal the complete reformation of the secondary-school language arts curriculum and the education of its teachers. During its 6-year run, the Oregon Curriculum Study Center produced a new secondary-school curriculum in grammar, rhetoric, and literature, the result of collaborative work between the teachers in the field and members of the University of Oregon English Department. Examining the Oregon Curriculum Study Center’s work on the grammar component of the curriculum, this article describes the pedagogical (Socratic) and theoretical (transformational) bases of this component, its content, and its development, and offers some lessons to be learned in the context of explaining why this attempt to replace the old grammar with a new one ultimately failed, the result of both internal contradictions and of external forces beyond the Oregon Curriculum Study Center’s control.

1 Introduction
The English Journal, a publication of the US National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), recently issued a call for articles on the theme ‘Transforming English Teaching’ for its November 2007 issue, inviting people ‘to write about transformations in teaching English language arts in the past, present, and future [sic].’ With respect to the past, the call asks, ‘How has the profession been transformed by historical moments, such as the formation of NCTE in 1911, the Dartmouth Seminar in 1966, of the English Coalition Conference in 1987 . . .?’ Absent from the call is any reference to Project English (1962–1968), whose establishment was certainly an historical moment for the English language arts, whose 6-year lifetime ran a great deal longer than a moment. However, the English Journal’s not mentioning Project English in its call is understandable for reasons beyond a possible quibble over what constitutes an historical moment, for Project English is important for what it did not transform
or accomplish. Its demise, in fact, brought to an end what may turn out to have been the last, best attempt to introduce a serious understanding of language into general education in the USA, and to bring coherence to the other strands of English-language education and teaching as well. Why Project English has disappeared into the dustbin of history and the role that the Dartmouth Seminar and the NCTE played in its disappearance thereto make an instructive story, the story that follows.

2 Background

The origins of Project English lay in the post-Sputnik, pre-Gagarin interlude (October 1957–April 1961), during which public education in the USA was held responsible for the country's ostensibly falling behind the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in the Cold War race to dominate Earth and outer space. To win the race, reach the moon, and thwart the Russians, private and public moneys [through the 1958 National Defense Education Act (NDEA),\(^1\) for example] were pumped into curriculum development with the goal of creating a New Physics, a New Math, a New Biology, etc. to replace the old, and to produce thereby a new generation of Americans, armed with its new education, to lead the nation to victory, or at least to the moon. The fact that US astronauts were orbiting Earth by 1963 and the moon by 1968, landing on the latter in July 1969, all of this well before the newly educated had finished their high school calculus and physics, puts the lie to the notion that there was a national educational emergency in the 1960s new or different from the one that is alleged always to be with us under one doomsday view or another. (The space race did, however, serve high-tech interests and the armaments industry well – the underlying purpose, more or less.)

Reforming the teaching of the humanities and social sciences came almost as an afterthought. Although the NDEA did fund a few programs in the humanities,\(^2\) the push for a New English did not succeed until 1962, when the US Office of Education began funding Project English, the result of intense lobbying by the NCTE, not wanting to be left out of the reform movement. There was also a real sense that the teaching of English needed to change, that as with mathematics and the sciences, English in the schools and the education of teachers needed to reflect the best ideas and advances in knowledge that research universities, not schools of education, had to offer.

The Office of Education (not a department until 1980) then scattered 12 Project English centers from shore to shore, this scattering being an importantly different approach to curriculum reform from that taken for mathematics and the sciences, where reform was carried out in focused and more productive ways at a very small number of institutions.\(^3\) The New Physics, for example, was developed only by MIT's Physical Sciences
Study Committee; the New Math by the University of Illinois Committee on School Mathematics and by the School Mathematics Study Group at Yale; etc.

For English, however, it was ‘Let a hundred flowers bloom; let a hundred schools of thought contend’ (Mao 1971 [1957]: 462) – a Maoist trap, perhaps; in any case, an unintentional but successful undermining of accomplishing the task at hand, more on which later.

Given its scope and its length, surprisingly little has been written about Project English, most of it during or too soon after the fact. See Slack 1964 for a very early description of the project. For critical discussion at some distance but not enough, see Shugrue 1968: 33–73 and Bowen 1970: 55–7; at greater distance, see Donlan 1972: 59–145, where there is also extensive discussion of the Dartmouth Seminar.

3 Project English: Oregon

What was Project English up to? To answer this question, let us consider Project English at the University of Oregon, the Albert R. Kitzhaber-directed Oregon Curriculum Study Center, based in the Department of English – this center because Kitzhaber was one of the main authors of the Project English proposal, and more importantly because this was the center that I worked at and kept in touch with after leaving. Moreover, Kitzhaber had already written the definitive study of freshman composition in the USA (Kitzhaber 1963); thus he had a good understanding of how the schools were failing to prepare students for writing at the college level – one piece of the problem.

Established late in 1962, the Oregon Curriculum Study Center had as its goal the complete reformation of the entire secondary-school English curriculum, for it was a fact that language arts at the secondary level, perhaps at all levels, was a mess, having become a dumping ground for what did not fit elsewhere in the school curriculum – letter writing and basic etiquette, for example.

In pursuit of total reform, the Oregon Curriculum Study Center enlisted the support of several school systems in the Northwest: Eugene and Portland, Oregon; Seattle, Washington; and points in-between. Project English personnel visited schools in all the participating systems, from which teachers were selected for summer-school education in linguistics, rhetoric, and literature. Then, after less than a year of planning, school–university teams, working more or less collaboratively, produced classroom materials for trial in fall 1963. The basic ideas for the materials came from above, from the professorate, but the teachers in the schools provided the development and trial of the curriculum with the necessary checks and balances – the age-appropriateness of the material, for example.

Beginning with the seventh and eighth grades, the idea was to rebuild the 6-year secondary English curriculum in 3 years, 2 years at a time:
piloting the materials, revising them, evaluating them, and finally publishing them for general dissemination.

3.1 PHILOSOPHY

Oregon’s pedagogy, on the linguistics side most insistently, was Socratic – the notion that through careful questioning and introspection, human beings can come to an understanding of the world about them that they have only tacit, unconscious knowledge of – an idea to be pursued with some caution because there are limits as to which natural phenomena can be fruitfully explored in this way. (For discussion of this point, see, for example, Chomsky 1980: 241–4).

The pedagogy was also under the influence of Jerome Bruner’s contra-Piagetian ‘[spiral of learning] hypothesis that any subject can be taught effectively in some intellectually honest form to any child at any stage of development,’ that a ‘curriculum as it develops should revisit [its] basic ideas repeatedly, building upon them until the student has grasped the full formal apparatus that goes with them’ (Bruner 1960: 33, 13).

With respect to the grammar part of the Oregon curriculum, of which I was the architect and on which the remarks that follow will concentrate, these ideas supported the belief that students – all students, not simply an elite set – working in interaction with their instructors and with one another, could move beyond their intuitions and school-induced prescriptions about the nature and structure of English and construct an interim, working grammar of a substantial piece of the language, spiraling to ever-higher levels of sophistication in the course of their secondary education. There would be some attention to sociolinguistics and historical linguistics as well, but the central goal was the development of a formal, scientific understanding of linguistic phenomena that was based in an early 1960s form of transformational grammar – not so much a specific knowledge of the theory, but rather a sense of how to go about reaching a tentative explanation of one’s unconscious knowledge of language, of mental grammar (to use a term now current for that tacit knowledge).

In the education jargon of the day, grammar was to be studied ‘for its own sake’ in Oregon and Washington, not for any effect that grammatical understanding might have or not have on language use. Thus, at Oregon, the three strands of the language arts trivium (grammar, rhetoric, and literature) were quite separately and distinctly developed.

3.2 TEACHER EDUCATION

In the summer of 1963, the first set of teachers studied linguistics, as well as rhetoric and literature, at the University of Oregon. On the basis of
their work in the summer session, a few of the teachers were selected to work on the curriculum materials that would be piloted by all of the project’s teachers. Another set of teachers studied linguistics in summer 1964. So it was to proceed, summer-by-summer, school year-by-school year. Over the 6-year course of the Oregon project, 150 teachers were trained ‘to pilot test the experimental materials on some 50,000 students, located in seven school districts in Oregon and Washington’ (Donlan 1972: 132).

Also during summer 1964, as part of extending the teacher preparation program and developing public understanding of the center’s work and also because I was taking leave from the project for the academic year 1964–1965, the Oregon center made a series of movies for Oregon educational television: *Kernels and Transformations: A Modern Grammar of English*, distributed in 1965 accompanied by a text of the same title, with problem sets by Annabel Kitzhaber (O’Neil and Kitzhaber 1965), tools for at-distance teacher education.

### 3.3 CURRICULUM

Linguistics at the Oregon center followed along the lines of Chomsky’s *Syntactic Structures* (1957): Phrase structure was first ‘abduced’ [from *abduction*: ‘[S]elfdesign, i.e., learning, seems pretty much like what [Charles Sanders] Peirce called “abduction,” a process in which the mind forms hypotheses according to some rule and selects among them with reference to evidence and, presumably, other factors’ (Chomsky 1980: 136)].

From a consideration of phrase structure – sentence parsing, essentially – a sentence was reformulated as a hierarchical set of nested phrases, binary in structure; thus sentences like

(1) *Emma looked up the number*

(2) *The FBI will harass Emma*

came to be represented in tree graphs (here somewhat simplified) as follows:

(3) 

```
S
  |   |
Emma Verb Phrase
  |   |
Verb Noun Phrase
  |   |
looked up the number
```
Bringing students to the discovery that phrase structure and the rules for generating it were adequate for the description of only a small set of ‘kernel’ sentence types motivated the introduction of transformations, some of them rules that simply tidied-up kernel structures [to get tense morphemes, not represented in the simplified trees of (3) and (4), properly connected to verbs, for example]; other transformations were more significant: tree-structure-changing rules that formally captured the structural relationships between pairs of sentence such as the following:

(5) Emma looked up the number. → Emma looked the number up.  
(6) The FBI will harass Emma. → Will the FBI harass Emma?

The sentences on the right-hand side of the arrows could be separately generated by phrase structure rules, but to do so would proliferate rules, ignore the obvious kinship between structures, and miss the fact that looked up and looked . . . up, for example, are the same lexical item and that the sentences in (5) express the same thought using the exact same words. Thus, students came to understand that it was better to reduce the number of phrase-structure rules and capture the structural and meaning relationships between these pairs of sentences by transformations, formal operations on phrase-structure trees, informally stated as follows:

(7) a verb particle transformation that optionally moves a particle like up to the right edge of the structure;
(8) an auxiliary verb transformation that derives a yes/no question from a declarative structure by moving the auxiliary verb to the left edge of the structure.

Assuming an optional transformation like (7), a puzzle emerges: why is (9) – in which the pronoun it is substituted for the number – not well formed?

(9) *Emma looked up it.

As they arise, such questions lead off into a discussion of the interaction between movement and phonology (pronominal stress, in this case).
Another puzzle, this one involving constituent structure, presents itself when students are asked why (10) is ambiguous while (11) is not.

(10) Emma looked over the fence.
(11) Emma looked the fence over.

These and other puzzles that can naturally emerge or can be made to emerge in the course of analysis then became further problems for students to solve as their understanding of the grammar of English advanced.

Another type of transformation (generalized transformations) was abduced in order to capture the relationship between pairs of sentences and embedded structures such as the following, with (16) deriving from (15) by relative clause reduction:

(12) The FBI captured the anarchist. The anarchist lived in Chicago. → (13) The FBI captured the anarchist who/that lived in Chicago.
(14) Emma gave a book to Alex. The book was entitled *Living My Life*. → (15) Emma gave a book that was entitled *Living My Life* to Alex. → (16) Emma gave a book entitled *Living My Life* to Alex.

Students were asked to apply and extend their formal understanding of phrase-structure analysis and transformations by working through problem sets, parsing sentences, generating them, and determining why a sentence was ill-formed, or ambiguous, and so on.

3.4 PUBLICATION

The seventh- and eighth-grade linguistics materials, which the examples given above fairly represent, were published as the language (grammar) part of Kitzhaber (1968). For a review of these materials, see Stordahl 1969, the last sentence of which, although perhaps too polite, is pretty much on the mark: ‘For my tastes, the structure is a bit too rigid, and the fun factor is a bit too slow’ (463).

What Stordahl detected was the sea change that the Oregon curriculum had undergone as it went from being experimental material into textbook form. As teacher training would no longer be available to support the use of the material, the books had to be teacher proofed so that they could run on their own. And the complex working relationship between the schools and the university, between teachers and students that underlay the development and use of the material (the source of ‘the fun factor’) also came to an end, putting an end to revision, to deleting material that did not work well in the classroom, to modifying the material as linguistic theory and/or pedagogy developed, and so on. What remained was the inert product of that interaction, the rigidity that Stordahl commented on.
Project English suffered from internal organizational problems: the task of reforming the language arts curriculum was huge but the large number of centers designed to take it on ensured that carrying the task to completion was too decentralized, resting on a very small number of people at each location.

The project was also deadline driven, exacerbating the effects of decentralization: too few people scattered among too many centers rushing to complete their work before the funding disappeared.

There were internal problems at the Oregon center as well: the contradiction between how the materials were developed and how they came to be deployed was partly responsible for the failure of the Oregon center's innovations in grammar instruction and teacher education. A never-ending process of teacher education and of material development and revision, a university–schools partnership, moved beyond reach. Had such a partnership continued, what began largely, and I believe necessarily, as a top-down process would have come into balance as the teachers in the schools became linguists and the linguists became classroom teachers. Such an outcome would require much more than what a summer course in linguistics, a film or even a set of them, or brief appearances in a classroom allowed. A generation, at least, was needed. But the Oregon center’s innovative partnership ended when the project and the funding ended and the materials became the marketing property of a major textbook publisher.

But other, perhaps more telling blows came from elsewhere, (i) from the undying sense that the study of grammar ought to be good for something beyond itself; (ii) from the view that emerged at the 1966 Dartmouth Seminar, that Project English and the Oregon curriculum in particular were too content centered and not sufficiently student centered – as if the two are necessarily in contradiction. Nevertheless, this odd and false dichotomy dominated discussion at Dartmouth.

4.1 Grammar not for its own sake

There is always this intuition crowding in: that knowledge of grammar ought to lead to better use of the language, that it ought somehow to do something for students besides open their minds to a partial explanation, a scientific one, of how one faculty of the mind works. This is, of course, part of a general problem in education: that students should study this or that subject in school for some extrinsic effect that it has rather than for the thing itself.

Moreover, there is the recurring promise (or hope) entertained by some teachers and others in English education, as well as by some linguists, that whatever is linguistically fashionable at the moment will solve all the old ills of the English curriculum: that an understanding of grammar will
result in better users of language, better writers and better readers – a promise that has never been realized, as demonstrated in this instance by the devolution of the transformational analysis of complex sentences into sentence-combining exercises that succeeded in making students write more complex though not necessarily more interesting, nor more carefully analytical sentences and essays (see Mellon 1969, for example).

### 4.2 The Dartmouth Seminar

And then there was the Dartmouth Seminar, co-sponsored by the NCTE, the Modern Language Association, and the (UK) National Association for the Teaching of English. The Dartmouth Seminar and its several terminological variants (the Dartmouth Conference, the Anglo–American Seminar on the Teaching and Learning of English, etc.) are used to refer to the month-long, late summer gathering in 1966 of British and American educators at Dartmouth College to discuss the possibility of pooling ideas from both the UK and North America and of moving toward a joint solution to the problems of English education, whatever these might be.

With hindsight, one might have predicted that something like the Dartmouth–influenced, NCTE-based overthrow of the New English, of the New Grammar in particular, would have to have happened. Problems for the New Grammar ran deeper than the traditional promises dressed up in transformational clothes, for outside of mathematics and the sciences, and even there it is not easy, consecutive thinking – the idea that what is going on in today’s or this afternoon’s class should have anything to do with yesterday’s or this morning’s, that an education is about explanations and their limits – is a hard sell in the schools of this country. Better to meander from one unfathomable issue to another.

Moreover, although the pieces of the language arts curriculum (grammar, rhetoric, and literature) are not entirely unconnected, they certainly do not constitute a natural class – the misconception to the contrary being, however, what we are stuck with. Linguistics does fit well, however, with the parts of the science curriculum concerned to explain natural phenomena, but not at all well with either the utilitarian burden under which much of US education labors, nor with the narrowed rationale of the English curriculum, which – after a brief flirtation with the field – rejected linguistics in the late 1960s in favor of the Anglophilia that emerged from Dartmouth, the notion that the English classroom should be restricted to ‘an intimate study of the complexities, potentialities, and essential conditions of human nature’ (the position of F. R. Leavis, see Day 1996: 160). Moreover, this notion fit neatly with similar views that had emerged on this side of the Atlantic, with the ‘student–centeredness’ of, say, James Moffett’s Universe of Discourse (see Moffett 1968).

The conclusion at Dartmouth: concentrate only on the questions ‘that we can only stare in puzzlement at’ as we ‘seek solutions to [them],
always failing’ (Chomsky 1993: 45; 2000: 145). And, we should set aside the study of grammar, which merely introduces students ‘into the marvelous world of inquiry in which one learns to wonder about the nature of what seem, superficially, to be obvious phenomena, and to ask why they are the way they are, and to come up with answers’ (Chomsky 1984: 166).

5 Conclusion

Somewhere, in his Aims of Education perhaps (1929), A. N. Whitehead writes that an education should involve getting to know what one already knows, a version of the Socratic notion that ‘there is no teaching, only recollection’ (Plato 1949: 38). Sounds nice, but a lot of what one knows unconsciously is wrong – perhaps all of it (see Bloom and Weisberg 2007). We appear, for example, to be innately both flat-earthers and Skinnerian behaviorists. Although folk science and folk psychology are certainly interesting topics to explore, I find it more interesting to follow the thoughts and direction of the philosopher of science and of explanation Sylvain Bromberger:

We start out with little prior information about [our] world, but we are endowed with the ability to come to know that there are things about it that we don’t know, that is, with the ability to formulate and to entertain questions whose answers we know we do not know. It is an enormously complex ability derived from many auxiliary abilities. And it induces the wish to know the answer to some of these questions (1992: 1–2).

In Oregon, I was determined to induce in students and teachers the wish to know the answer to some of the questions they might have about their unconscious knowledge of language, about mental grammar.

Unless thinking about the language arts curriculum can break from the prevailing, narrowly conceived ideas about what an education can be, it will forever be moving on to the next crisis, to conferences and events designed to deal with crises, and away from entertaining important questions and seeking their answers.

Short Biography

Wayne O’Neil is Professor of Linguistics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Instructor in Human Development at Wheelock College (Boston). His current work is centered on linguistics in the school curriculum and second-language acquisition, both the theory and relevance of the latter to the revitalization of indigenous languages. With Maya Honda, he is co–author of Understanding First and Second Language Acquisition (Indigenous Language Institute, 2004) and of Thinking Linguistically (Wiley–Blackwell, 2007). At the University of Oregon, from 1962–1966, O’Neil directed
the language strand of the curriculum development at the Oregon Curriculum Study Center. He was also present at the Dartmouth Seminar and wrote about that experience in the *Harvard Educational Review* (39.359–365) and the *Times Educational Supplement* (2842.4) – both of these published in 1969.

**Notes**

* Correspondence address: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 32-D808, 77 Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02139-4307, USA. Email: waoneil@mit.edu.

1 During the Cold War, the word *defense* (as *terrorism* is today) was routinely included in US legislation to justify a great deal of the federal government's funding; the interstate highway system, for example, was initiated through the National Interstate and Defense Highways Act of 1965. In keeping with the origin of its funding, the system is officially called the Dwight D. Eisenhower National System of Interstate and Defense Highways.

2 For example, there was an NDEA-funded program in medieval studies at the University of Oregon: Old and Middle English and Old Norse/Icelandic, in preparation for the next Viking invasion, perhaps.

3 The scattering grew wider and worse, for eventually Project English would foster 23 centers and numerous spin-offs, the centerpieces of the English Program of US Office of Education (Donlan 1972: 82).

**Works Cited**


Mao Zedong. 1971. On the correct handling of contradictions among the people (February 27, 1957). In *Selected readings from the works of Mao Tsetung*. Beijing, China: Foreign Languages Press.