‘Death by PEEL?’: The teaching of writing in English today

Introduction

In English and its Teachers (Gibbons, 2017) I made the probably over ambitious attempt to offer a narrative history of the teaching of English in secondary schools in England over the past fifty years. Therein, I described what I consider to be features of a typical English lesson at the end of now nearly three decades of intense central intervention in the teaching of the subject. I reproduce part of that description here:

‘When writing occurs in the classroom, this is heavily prescribed by the teacher in terms of form and content, little time if any is given to free, creative writing or for pupils to chose their own topic. Though there may be attempts made to talk about audience, these are rarely real audiences and the focus is predominantly on purpose, and even more than that, on the form that will enact that purpose. A model of writing that is genre based prevails….When there is personal response invited (to a text that is read), this is ultimately sacrificed in pursuit of a framed response governed by a point, evidence, explanation (PEE) model of one form or another that constricts pupils and insists – even implicitly – that they are searching for the right answer and that there is not only a right answer, there is, too, a correct way to express this.’

(ibid., 2017, p130-131)
I painted a bleak picture in part to provoke a response. I’m fully aware that there are many examples of excellent teachers of writing in English classrooms who create stimulating environments for their pupils and allow them to engage in a variety of meaningful writing tasks. There is much evidence, however, to support the generalisations I was somewhat provocatively making about the bulk of writing that goes on today in secondary English classes, and in particular the apparently hegemonic spread of the PEE (aka PEAL, PETAL, SPEED etc…) structure that governs so much of the writing children do in response to text in particular.

I can point to anecdotal evidence from fifteen years as a teacher educator, observing hundreds of English lessons taught in dozens of schools. Over the course of this time there is no doubt in my mind that the writing of pupils has, with relatively few exceptions, become increasingly constrained and constricted. This has taken different forms – from the writing triplets that emerged from the National Curriculum and became enshrined in national assessment criteria, to the genre model recommended through the National Strategies, to the current prevalence of PEE (or alternative) as a means to structure just about any non-fiction writing, but most often used when writing in response to text.

I can also point to more systematic evidence from research. In data gathered recently for a book comparing the teaching of English in Canada, Scotland and England, my fellow researchers and I were struck by how many of the English teachers in England we interviewed and observed talked about the way in which structures governing pupils’ writing were often dominant in the classroom, so that in the words of one, ‘often the teaching of English becomes reduced to doing paragraphs or Epi paragraphs
or Peel Link paragraphs or whatever’ (Marshall, Gibbons, Hayward and Spencer, 2018, in press). For the teachers that took part in our research there didn’t ever seem to be any great enthusiasm for these structured approaches to writing, but there did, generally, seem to be a sense that this was the way that pupils needed to write in order to be able to express themselves in ways appropriate, ultimately, to the demands of assessment systems.

This view has, of course, been highlighted by Ofsted in its own summary reports on English teaching. In *Moving English Forward*, for example, comes the following example:

‘Another lesson observed also included an inappropriate use of the PEE approach with a Year 7 class. This was their first lesson on a play script of Frankenstein and included many good features, including effective use by the teacher of film clips and visual images to engage students. However, the first task for students after they had read a mere three pages of the play was to produce a PEE paragraph on the features of Gothic horror observed in the opening of the play – of which there were, in truth, very few examples this early in the script.’

(Ofsted, 2012, p15)

My overarching sense, then, from a variety of evidence sources – some of which you might view as more reliable than others – is that, generally, the teaching of writing is in a pretty sorry state in many English classrooms.
How did we get here? A brief history of writing in English

Relatively recently I received an email from an EdD student who was conducting research on the writing of A level English students. She wrote:

> Several of my interviewees still talk about using PEE (or PEER or PEEL or PEA ...). My supervisor asked me where this structure came from and what was the basis for it. I haven't been able to find the answer to this question. I have been teaching for 25+ years, so I can remember when we didn't use it, but I can't accurately say when it started and how.

There’s something interesting in this email in that it points towards the way in which these structured approached to writing have seemingly become dominant without anyone really knowing how or why. This experienced teacher, though, ‘can remember when we didn’t use it’. As the great educationalist Brian Simon said, the value of knowing about the history of education is to know that ‘things have not always been as they are and need not remain so’ (Simon, 1991, p.92). It’s worth pausing therefore, albeit briefly and with an extremely broad brush, to consider some aspects of the way that the teaching of writing has developed in English. This might help to explain how we have got where we are, but it might also remind us of alternatives.

If we can generalise and say that a traditional approach to the teaching of writing dominated in English (mainly grammar school) classrooms in the first half of the
twentieth century, then a significant shift began in the immediate post war years in the work that grew from those involved in the London Association for the Teaching of English. The work of this Association (see Gibbons, 2014) essentially inspired a reformation of English that ultimately led to the growth model of the subject that many teachers continue to identify with (Goodwyn, 2016). Central to the Association’s work was a rethinking of writing. In fact LATE’s first research project was based on the production and assessment of written composition (LATE, 1950) and fundamental to their campaign to reform examinations was a thrust to offer young people the chance to write on topics important to their lives and relevant to their experience (Gibbons, 2009). James Britton’s work was central to LATE, and he went on to develop more conceptual theories around writing that situated writing as part of a broader notion of language and learning. Britton’s ideas on writing were enshrined in the Bullock Report (Department for Education and Science, 1975). Central to these ideas was the notion that children should write from experience and that, essentially, writing was a process that should involve thought, talk, drafting, editing and redrafting. The work that began with LATE and was continued by NATE undoubtedly heavily influenced Schools Councils’ projects that ran in the 1970s and into the 1980s, the most well known of which is probably the National Writing Project. Whilst this work was ongoing, the work of Donald Graves (see, for example, Graves, 1983) contributed to what might be seen as an orthodoxy in the teaching of writing that developed into the 1980s that might broadly be seen as a process approach.

When the first National Curriculum appeared in 1989, these ideas certainly contributed to the Orders for writing, but as subsequent rewrites of the Curriculum
appeared there was a shift towards the identification of particular non-fiction writing genres that pupils ought to undertake in English. These, certainly for the purposes of national assessments, were constructed as ‘writing triplets’ – with apparently similar non-fiction genres grouped together (for example argue, persuade, advise). The increasing focus on assessment and the rapidly intensifying accountability around performance in writing certainly led to more structured approaches to the teaching of writing, where generic features of these different types of text were identified and pupils helped to produce writing through a reproduction of such features. Whilst there was still coursework as part of the assessment process, however, there was still a sense that drafting and redrafting were prevalent in English classrooms as part, perhaps, of an alliance between process and genre approaches to the teaching of writing.

The advent of New Labour’s Literacy Strategy heralded a further shift in pedagogies around the teaching of writing. The Strategy placed even greater emphasis on non-fiction writing and strongly advocated a genre pedagogy. The Strategy, unlike the National Curriculum, promoted a fully fledged writing pedagogy. In this model for the teaching of writing, teachers would enable pupils to identify the generic features of different text types, and then – using strategies like modelling and guided writing – pupils would be supported to reproduce texts in given genre. Although the ‘official’ evidence for the efficacy of this approach was offered in *Roots and Research* (Harrison, 2002), a consideration of the model for teaching writing in the Strategy, both at primary and secondary, would suggest it had its roots in the work of the Australian genre theorists (see, for example, Cope and Kalatzis, 1991).
There are arguments as to how much traction the Strategy gained in secondary English classrooms; Goodwyn’s work (2003, 2011) suggests that English teachers resisted the policies. For the leader of the Strategy, Sue Hackman, however, the promotion of the genre model was a key feature in helping to narrow attainment gaps in writing at key stage 3 (see Gibbons, 2017). I would argue that strategies such as modelling writing are more common now than they ever were pre-Strategy and there is an overall genre based approach to writing in many classes I see, even if it is usually simply the flagging up of certain generic conventions of different types of writing, rather than a pure genre based pedagogy. Within the Strategy there was also a focus on ‘grammar for writing’ and post-Strategy this work has been continued by Debra Myhill and colleagues (see, for example, Myhill, Lines, Watson and Jones, 2012).

In the years since the Strategy’s demise, there has been the rise of the structural supports of PEE, PEA, PETAL and the like. Though there may not be an obvious evolution from writing triplets, to genre theory to PEE, there do seems to be clear links in the ways that these approaches seek to forefront structure over content and, intentionally or not, make students’ writing assessable in more straightforward ways. I was unable to answer my colleague as to where approaches like PEE came from. My own sense is that they have a root in the kind of work done on the writing of history essays, where pupils would begin each paragraph with a topic sentence (the ‘point’ being made) before detailing the evidence to support and explain the point in the subsequent sentences of the paragraph. Translated into English, and specifically when writing in response to a text, this became point, evidence (normally a quotation) and explanation. In truth it may well have been people generally constructed lit crit essays
in this way, but the acronyms brought a highly formalised structure. PEE may have initially been a ‘joke’ mnemonic, encouraging students to back up their points by telling them to ‘Pee in their books!’'. However, what has followed has been numerous ways of extending the structure, almost it seems for the purpose of creating a longer, or more supposedly amusing, acronym. A casual internet search will offer thousands of resources and worksheets for English teachers to use these structures in their lessons. Some of these resources offer bold claims, ‘the PEEL paragraph writing approach is a proven way to help students’ writing process by providing a structure for their writing’ (the Virtual Library at https://www.virtuallibrary.info/peel-paragraph-writing.html accessed on 1st March 2018).

There’s no evidence to support this bold claim, but even if some were provided that doesn’t actually address the issues that have now arisen given what seems to be the omnipresent use of PEE. The problem has become that it no longer seems to be a support system which is there to enable students to write what they think. It seems to be that often the purpose of a lesson or particular activity is to write the PEE paragraph. The quality of what is included is almost irrelevant – as the example shown earlier from the Ofsted report demonstrates. If we were to present a positive argument for the increasing dominance of more structured approaches to the teaching of writing then it is clear that such approaches are designed to offer students more control over language and to offer support to allow them to express themselves more clearly in the written form. The original work of the genre theorists in Australia, for example, certainly seemed to empower particular groups of young people and its easy to see how this was a tempting approach for policymakers to adopt in the 1990s when faced with data suggesting many young writers were simply not making progress.
Having mastery of a particular genre in order that one might subvert the conventions and be freed to be creative must be a laudable aim. Equally using a strategy to empower students to genuinely express their views on text must be a positive thing. However, the problem comes when the structured approach to writing isn’t used as a foundation, from which students build to be competent, creative, independent writers. Here, mastery of the structures becomes the end, not the means to an end.

My overall sense, then, is that in the thirty years since the first National Curriculum, genre approaches to writing have been increasingly more common, and the ways in which both language and literature have been assessed have created a climate in which highly structured approaches have been seen to be necessary. There is an argument that the very latest revisions to GCSE examinations in English, with some focus on creativity and an emphasis on global understanding of texts, may lessen the focus on highly structured approaches to the teaching of writing, but I’ve yet to see evidence of this myself. Perhaps the effect of the changes have yet to take hold, or perhaps the pressure on schools and teachers to produce results is so unremitting that tried and trusted approaches like PEE remain the ‘safest’ way to try to guarantee positive outcomes. The kinds of approaches to writing advocated through initiatives like the National Writing Project have dwindled, and writing in English classrooms now is heavily teacher-directed, highly structured, assessment objective-driven, leaving little space for pupil choice. Creative writing is marginalised; real audiences are illusory. It would be interesting to explore whether this was symptomatic of a wider marginalisation of creativity and the arts in the secondary curriculum, though this is a question beyond the scope of this article.
Some views from the classroom

Of course, perhaps my view is too bleak. It is true that I tend to see certain types of writing, taught in certain types of ways in nearly all the lessons I observe. However, if it is indeed some type of collective professional wisdom that this type of work needs to be done by students to negotiate high stakes assessment systems, and is, therefore in one sense effective practice, then it is not surprising that this is what I see. No matter how many times I tell every cohort of trainee teachers that my observations of their lessons are intended to be supportive, I’d be naïve not to think that many of them undoubtedly feel pressured by my presence and plan lessons that are highly structured and orthodox. Perhaps I have been given a very skewed picture of what actually happens given my unusual position as an observer in a position of authority. Perhaps in my absence the teaching of writing that is going on in the departments I visit is very different to the snapshots I so often see.

To begin to examine this optimistic possibility I recently conducted a piece of, admittedly very small-scale, research into the teaching of writing as it is experienced and practised by a current cohort of twenty PGCE trainee teachers. Two forms of
data were collected; I set up a short online multiple-option questionnaire that I invited the cohort to complete and this was followed by a group interview with three volunteers from the cohort. The questionnaire was designed to garner an overview of the teaching of writing as these new English teachers were experiencing it at the end of their first block placement, with questions asking about the types of writing they had done with pupils, and the sorts of scaffolds and resources they had used to support children with their independent writing.

The results of this questionnaire were in many ways unsurprising, and supported my anecdotal evidence about the way writing in English lessons is being approached. The literary criticism essay was by far the most frequently cited type of writing done in English lessons, with ‘analytical writing’ cited as the most frequently tackled genre. Encouragingly, two thirds of respondents indicated that creative/imaginative writing went on in their lessons, though only one respondent claimed to have allowed students to undertake free writing – with control over topic and form. This one example aside, it was clear from the survey results that the teachers were in control of the topics and tasks set. The responses did indicate that a wide range of forms of writing were taking place – diaries, letters and stories, for example, but these kinds of traditional forms dominated; almost none of the respondents indicated that the writing of storyboards, scripts or blogs had taken place in their lessons.

In terms of the kinds of teaching strategies and scaffolds offered to pupils, the most popular answer was the use of PEE (or similar) with all but two respondents using this strategy. Interestingly, two thirds of the cohort indicated that they had been taught PEE themselves whilst in school. The use of modelling writing – much promoted by
the National Strategy – rated highly too, although one of the free texts responses is worth considering here:

‘I find model answers particularly useful, especially when different parts have been highlighted to show how you’ve progressed from your point to your explanation etc. I also think it’s useful to do a 'whole class model' where one student thinks of the first sentence and this gets written on the board, then another student suggests a quote which supports the first sentence, then another student explains it etc. This step-by-step method has really helped some of my students see how the process can be broken down and how they can approach an essay question.’

Although offering support for structure can be a function of modelling writing, it’s probably true to say that the real value of the approach is in making explicit the thoughts and choices a writer has and makes in the process of composing text. Those who model writing well think aloud so that the complex and secretive art of writing is exposed for all to see. The response here seems to be more about demonstrating the PEE structure so one might want to question whether this is indeed modelling writing.

The questionnaire, then, provided a small snapshot of the experience of this new group of English teachers. A far more extensive survey of practising teachers, both new and experienced, would be needed to draw firmer conclusions about just how widespread the use of structures like PEEL are; it’s highly possible that a broader, more representative sample would produce more varied results.
Data like that gained from a small survey like mine raises more questions than it provides answers, of course, and in part to probe these questions further a follow up group interview was carried out with three of the cohort. The group interview was a fascinating and revealing experience. Much as I wanted to join in, I endeavoured to keep my interventions to the occasional prompting comment or question, as my aim was to allow these three new teachers to have as free a discussion as possible about their experience of teaching writing in the secondary school. To kick-start the conversation in what I hope would be a positive way, I asked the trainees to talk about some of the successful writing lessons they had seen or taught. It was striking, however, how quickly the conversation turned to the dominance of structural and procedural approaches to the teaching of writing. Talking about the value of using controversial statements about a text to generate writing in students’ own voice, Ruby seemed almost apologetic about the unstructured nature of the activity, almost as it she was suggesting she’d been doing something she thought she shouldn’t. This prompted talk about structured approaches:

Ellie: I find that when you take it away they get confused about when they have to use it. Every single time I do anything it’s like ‘is this PEEL?’ They don’t know anything different

Olivia: And they get so into that frame of mind that they can’t do anything else-

Ellie: Yes they can’t write unless –

Olivia: And you get thirty paragraphs exactly the same

Ruby: The risk of that and with the sentence starters is they don’t have a voice. It’s just work.
Many of the 45 minutes of the conversation were dominated by discussions about how so much of writing in English was generated in response to text, and how much of this was highly structured with the use of PEE or similar. There were some comments about the value of offering pupils this kind of scaffold to help them structure their writing: Ellie, for example, said that the pupils, ‘like it that they know what they’re doing’ and there was a general acceptance that to some degree the approach was helpful. There was debate about when the approach should be used, with Ruby likening PEE to ‘stabilisers’ that should come off, while Olivia thought it was introduced ‘way too early’ in key stage 3. The problem seemed to be that if the point of doing this with pupils early in their secondary English career was to wean them of it, this weaning off process didn’t seem to be happening. The pervading sense was of the negative impact of the over reliance on these approaches. One interesting exchange pointed to the perhaps ironic impact of scaffolds like PEE on the overall quality of an essay:

Ruby: This is the problem with it. When they get to A level they’ve been told you’ve got to do PEE and then they are not able to make points that actually link-

Ellie: Each paragraph is different and then it doesn’t-

Ruby: And they only ever talk about quotes in isolation and they’re not able to talk about themes and how they change through the play. They’re so used to looking at quotes in isolation.

Olivia: Or they’ll be able to link that quote back to the question but the next paragraph is absolutely unrelated.
Perhaps more significant than simply the effect on writing, however, was the perception this group conveyed about the overall impact on pupils’ views of English that were being shaped by the heavy emphasis on structured approaches to written response. Ellie talked of her year 8 pupils experiencing ‘death by PEEL’; Olivia claimed that by year 9 pupils were ‘so sick of it’; Ruby said, bluntly, ‘they don’t like English’.

For this group the over riding reason for this structured approach was the focus, from the very first years of secondary schooling, on the demands of the GCSE examinations and the pressure on teachers to deliver results. Ellie’s school has ‘ridiculous Progress 8 scores’ which she attributed to the structured approach to teaching writing that made sure that the pupils had ‘got all the tools. Especially the weaker ones’. Ruby pointed to the additional pressures brought to bear by performance related pay, specifically in the context of academy schools that have more freedom to dictate staff renumeration. For this group, at least, it seemed to be that in the context of terminal examinations with closed book or unseen texts, the reliance on structures like PEE were what might be termed a necessary evil. As Ellie put it, ‘I can see the value of it, it’s just a shame their eyes don’t light up’.

If this group is representative then there is little in the way of creative writing going on in key stage 4, with Olivia suggesting there is ‘a lack of time for extended creative writing’. All three remembered how, for them, the extended writing they undertook as part of coursework or controlled conditions English work in key stage 4 had been the most rewarding. Undertaking extending writing, drafting, editing and redrafting was,
in Ellie’s words when you ‘feel like an author’. The impact of examinations and the perception that certain types of writing had value in the system meant that now, for Olivia at least, ‘children don’t take creative writing seriously’.

There is much that could be said about this group discussion. To what extent it is representative is of course arguable, and there is also the question with interviews such as these as to how much they were moderating their views as a result of my presence and the recording machine. It did seem to me, however, to be a conversation that was marked by a frank and honest exchange of views (two of the members of the group subsequently emailed to say how ‘therapeutic’ they felt the experience had been). And it was a conversation that revealed a frustration at what they were experiencing in the name of writing in the English classroom; a sense that they felt there were many things they would like to be doing but that the various aspects of the system were working to constrain them. Not to say this group were anti-structured and scaffolded approaches; they saw benefits, but felt the balance was far too skewed. Ruby suggested that there has ‘got to be a middle ground’. Observations of these teachers in the classroom, and an examination of the writing produced by their students would provide fascinating additional sources of evidence. Teachers’ own views of their practice may not necessarily be the best indicator of the reality of what is happening (see Bousted, 2002, for a fascinating example of this). Further research on the real impact of approaches like PEE would profitably seek to synthesise teachers views and practices, alongside the views and writing of the students taught.

Conclusions
I began this article with an extract that painted a bleak picture of a very particular approach to the teaching of writing in the English classroom. This approach is highly structured, governed by the teacher voice and teacher choices, and involves pupils writing in set forms using set structures in order to formulate written work and responses to texts that are seen to fit the needs of external assessment frameworks. It is a world where writing for pupils becomes PEE-ing, or PEEL-ing or SPEED-ing.

This picture, intentionally provocative, was painted in response to my own frustration at what I saw as the increasingly dominant approach to the teaching of writing in many different English departments in many different schools. Whilst I understand the intended benefits of such structured approaches and appreciate the good intentions that accompanied their initial advocacy, the reality – from my experience – is that there are genuine problems. The questionnaire and interview that I undertook with members of my current cohort of new English teachers have done little to persuade me that my broad generalisations are essentially inaccurate, and whilst I am happy to concede that a heavily teacher-led, structural, procedural approach to writing does not of course go on in every classroom, I think it is right to say that for many pupils this is what writing is to them. Whether this approach to the teaching of writing is a curiously English disease is an interesting question. We did not see anything like such a structured approach in our observations of English lessons in Scotland or Canada (Marshall, Gibbons, Hayward and Spencer, 2018, in press); the situation in other international jurisdictions, particularly those subject to the same standards driven agenda that features so prominently in England, may well be different.

I should be clear that I am not holding English teachers responsible for what I see to be an overly structured, stifling writing pedagogy and curriculum. The pressures are
very real, and when an approach to teaching writing seems to offer pupils a structure that will allow them to successfully negotiate assessment frameworks it is entirely understandable that it becomes part of an English teacher’s weaponry. I would however, at the very least, want to echo Ruby’s call for a ‘middle ground’ and perhaps in order to strive for that there needs to be a collective acknowledgement that things have indeed gone too far – an acknowledgement that there needs to be a revaluation of structured approaches to writing to see them as means to an end, rather than an end in themselves. If I sound over-critical then it is perhaps in a bid to provoke that acknowledgement. No matter what the pressure, no matter how rigid the assessment criteria and no matter how terminal the examinations, there is surely no need to reduce English to a state where students only view PEE-ing as proper writing and where enjoyment and creativity are apparently gradually sucked out of the subject from the very first days of year 7.

I am not, however, entirely downhearted; there are some reasons to be optimistic. Although the use of PEE and its derivatives seems all pervasive, I would warrant that there are few English teachers who view this as fundamental to their vision of the subject. As with my trainees, my sense would be that while there may be some powerful advocates, the majority see this type of scaffolding work as something that is necessary to arm pupils in their battles with assessment systems. Many English teachers would very likely argue that there is a ‘middle way’ that harnesses the scaffolding benefits of the PEE approach whilst not stifling pupil choice and voice. That such a structured approach appears to spiral out of control and dominate pupils’ experience is, I would guess for very many, an unintended and regrettable consequence of the pressures they face. Most English teachers have a vision of the
subject and its importance in children’s lives that is much bigger than equipping pupils to write essays in certain assessment friendly ways. And whilst English teachers have a wider vision, there is always fertile ground for change to occur. Doubtless the examination system will change and when it does and the pressures alleviate (or are at least different) then it’s unlikely that teachers will be philosophically or ideologically wedded to PEE as part of their overall notion of English. Ten years ago everyone talked of ‘writing triplets’; these have been consigned to history’s waste bin without much in the way of lamentation. PEE may have the same fate, and be seen by future researchers of English as a curious historical phenomenon. And already research is emerging (see, for example, Enstone, 2017) that suggests that, even on its own terms, the approach is falling short.

The relatively recent emergence of a new National Writing Project, spearheaded by Jeni Smith and Simon Wrigley is further cause for optimism. This project (see Smith and Wrigley, 2015) is not directly about the teaching of writing in the classroom, rather it concerns teachers as writers themselves. However, the approach taken to writing is far removed from what happens in many English classrooms and the project’s growing popularity points to a thirst on the part of English teachers for writing to be so much more than a structured, recipe based activity.

This article may suggest that the teaching of writing in English classrooms now is, for many pupils, a less than fulfilling experience and that optimism for impending change may be slight. My research into the history of English and its teachers, however, sustains the belief I have that as a profession we are committed to ideas and philosophies about the subject and its importance to children that will outlast policy
shifts and pedagogical fads. The exasperation my trainees expressed at the kind of teaching they find themselves doing reinforces this belief. The heavily structured approaches to writing, typified by the use of PEE techniques, are certainly prevalent today and the teachers who are undoubtedly working in other ways may well feel themselves to be swimming against the current tide. Tides turn; times change. For the moment I am going to stick to the belief that ultimately, for PEE, the writing will be on the wall.

References


