

REVIEW

Approaches to teaching the history of the English language: Pedagogy in practice. By Mary Hayes & Allison Burkette (eds.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. 480. ISBN: 9780190611057.

Reviewed by George Walkden (University of Konstanz) and Michaela Hejná (Aarhus University)

History of the English Language, or HEL as it is commonly called, is a staple of university-level English teaching everywhere. Its ubiquity means that the people called upon to teach it self-identify in a number of different ways: medievalists, literary theorists, historical linguists, philologists, sociolinguists, Anglicists, and more. The content of such courses, too, is extremely diverse: structuralist phonemics, early medieval palaeography, close readings of Shakespeare, and the politics of postcolonial Englishes can all find their place in HEL, depending on who's teaching it and what it is intended to achieve. This heterogeneity means that the course presents many opportunities but also many challenges, especially to the uninitiated.

The appearance of a book like this one, focusing on the pedagogy of HEL, is therefore very welcome. At nearly five hundred pages the book's size may seem daunting, but it is actually very user-friendly: the individual chapters mostly weigh in at 10–15 pages, and can be used as bite-sized chunks to provide inspiration on particular topics or areas. The contributors range from established senior scholars with long careers behind them to up-and-coming talents. At a mere £28.99 for the paperback edition, the book is also unlikely to break the bank.

The book is helpfully structured into six parts. Part One, "Reflections on teaching the history of the English language", is the least focused and the most personal. It opens with a typically engaging chapter by John McWhorter on the lessons learned by a creolist teaching HEL for the first time, followed by Thomas Cable's suggestions for foregrounding rhythm across the language's history, and a fascinating piece by Rajend Mesthrie on HEL classes in a South African context. The closing piece in this part is by Sonja Lanehart and focuses on the pedagogical concept of self-regulated learning and its application to

HEL. In Part Two, “The value of teaching the history of English: rethinking curricula”, three broad perspectives on directions in HEL are presented: Matthew Giancarlo deals with the interplay between HEL and literary theory, while Seth Lerer presents a medievalist’s perspective, and Michael Dressman speaks to the value of having students reflect on their own experience with the English language in a short essay. All three encourage a revamp of traditional structures: for instance, Lerer challenges the traditional canon of texts included. Continuing in a similar vein, Part Three is on “Research paradigms and pedagogical practices” and outlines how different theories, methods, and approaches can feed into (and be fed by) HEL teaching: historical pragmatics (in Leslie Arnovick’s chapter), Construction Grammar (in Graeme Trousdale’s), complex systems science (William Kretzschmar), corpus linguistics (Jukka Tyrkkö), the study of word classes (David Denison), and dictionaries (Michael Adams) – both as physical objects and as conceptual creations.

Part Four, “Centuries in a semester: HEL’s chronological conventions”, looks at the timespan covered by the course, starting at the very beginning in Timothy Pulju’s treatment of linguistic prehistory and ending up at the present day in Joan Beal’s discussion of English’s recent history. Along the way, Mary Hayes highlights the value of looking at a variety of translations of the same text across time, e.g., Psalm 23 (the Shepherd Psalm), and Haruko Momma discusses the differing receptions of Old English (or rather Anglo-Saxon) in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century philological traditions. Part Five calls into question the concept of “English” itself, and deals with how to include a plurality of Englishes within the scope of a HEL course and whether this can in fact make the course more immediately relevant to a wider range of students. Benjamin Saltzman reflects on the challenges and opportunities of teaching World Englishes as a medievalist; Salikoko Mufwene sketches how the whole history of the language could be retold from the perspective of language contact and creole genesis studies. Carol Percy’s chapter focuses on methods, and the transfer of skills learned in one period of the language to another. Rakesh Bhatt deals with linguistic creativity in World Englishes, and makes the case that the term “non-native speaker” should be abandoned for speakers of these varieties. Editor Allison Burkette’s rich chapter is packed with exercises and opportunities for the integration of American English into a HEL course, while Rob Penhallurick outlines a course structure intended to emphasize diversity and malleability in the history of English. Rounding off this section, Matthew Sergi addresses the needs of speakers from outside Kachru’s (1985) Inner Circle, suggesting that valuable insights can be gained if the students are allowed to take each other as the subjects of linguistic research.

Finally, Part Six, “Using media and performance in the History of English classroom”, addresses how new technologies and teaching techniques can be brought to bear on the history of English. These technologies and techniques are extremely varied: Jonathan Davis-Secord highlights the value of material culture, including digitalized manuscripts; David Crystal discusses the resurgence of Original Pronunciation (particularly in the Shakespearean context) and how to teach it; Natalie Gerber surveys a variety of online resources, including podcasts; and Philip Seargeant presents the Open University’s popular ‘History of English in Ten Minutes’ series, making a strong case for the development and distribution of open educational resources. On the whole, all contributors reflect on the inclusion of new technologies as a positive aspect of HEL pedagogy that makes the whole subject more relatable for the students. At the very end of the book, the editors have compiled an extensive list of books that can be used in HEL courses, going beyond the standard go-to textbooks. Mention could also have been made here of Ayumi Miura’s compendious collection of online HEL resources at <https://sites.google.com/site/helontheweb/>.

Whether you’re new to History of English teaching or a seasoned veteran, this book will help you spice up your pedagogical practice. Some of the chapters (e.g., those by Lanehart, Pulju, Hayes, and Burkette) contain concrete exercises that can be deployed as-is in the HEL classroom. Just as useful are the chapters which contain suggestions on how to refocus whole segments in order to better reflect current research trends, e.g., those by Arnovick and Tyrkkö.

While the volume is impressively diverse as regards its disciplinary perspectives, the same cannot really be said for its geographical focus. Of the twenty-eight contributors, twenty-six are associated with institutions in Canada, the UK, or the US (Mesthrie and Tyrkkö are the exceptions). In particular, only a single chapter – by Matthew Sergi – explicitly addresses the specific needs of speakers of English as a foreign language (EFL) or as a second language (ESL), and of home speakers of non-standard varieties of English, and even here the focus is on these students’ experiences “at North American universities” (p. 313). This gap is understandable given the volume’s origins, but nevertheless unfortunate: worldwide, the majority of students taking HEL courses are almost certainly ESL or EFL speakers or speakers of non-Inner Circle Englishes. Both the authors of this review have some experience teaching HEL in the UK, but now teach it to audiences composed almost exclusively of advanced EFL learners (in Germany and Denmark respectively). Even restricting ourselves to Europe, countries with very strong records of HEL teaching and research include Czechia, Finland, the Netherlands, Poland, and Spain. And there is potential for novelty here too, since – as Bhatt hints in his chapter – for at least some of the Englishes

spoken in these countries the label “non-native” has become (or is becoming) inappropriate. For instance, Edwards (2016) makes the case that English in the Netherlands can no longer be regarded as simply a learner variety, given the country’s level of societal bilingualism, attitudes to English, and evidence of incipient nativisation of certain structural properties. From our own experience, Denmark and Germany both seem to be heading in the same direction, if they are not there already. Nor do such varieties fit neatly into theoretical models such as those of Kachru (1985) and Schneider (2014) which were developed primarily to explain (post)colonial contexts of English use.

Of course, for much HEL teaching it makes little difference which of these categories the students fall into. Old English, in particular, is the great leveller. It is hard to imagine that native speakers of present-day English have a substantive advantage over speakers of other Indo-European languages when learning Old English; in fact, as McWhorter ruefully notes in his chapter, German is likely to be much more useful. Still, it is important to note that the cultural ‘hooks’ that are typically used to draw students into HEL are by no means universal: fun facts about the distribution of US English dialect vocabulary items of the sort featured in Kretzschmar’s and Burkette’s chapters, for instance, are likely to be less immediately exciting for learners in Germany or Denmark (or indeed in the UK, or South Africa; see Mesthrie’s chapter). More importantly, some tasks are simply inaccessible and potentially anxiety-inducing for ESL and EFL learners. Reading Gower or Shakespeare in the original without translations or usage notes might be an interesting challenge for native speakers, but bordering on torture for those speakers whose confidence in the present-day standard language is less firm. And of course exercises calling on native-speaker intuitions will be even more problematic, for the same reason. A future volume in a similar vein would do well to address the needs of learners from outside the Inner Circle more thoroughly. What Burkette & Hayes, in their introduction (p. 4), refer to as “the class’s central paradox: an English-language class for native speakers” may be more parochial than paradoxical in the twenty-first century.

It is also the case – inevitably – that some chapters are not as useful as others. Some authors yield to the temptation of autobiographical self-indulgence. Others seem somewhat out of place: Momma’s chapter on the later reception of Old English texts, and Crystal’s chapter on Original Pronunciation, make for eye-opening reads, but the immediate classroom payoff is not self-evident. Despite these shortcomings, however, the book presents what we think is a very important step forward towards improving HEL classes taught in a number of places around the globe. The authors explicitly acknowledge the difficulty of teaching a course like HEL, which comes as comforting at least to the HEL novices, if not all HEL teachers. The

contributors crucially don't stop at identifying the problems – they also propose numerous ways to tackle the notoriously well-known issues of HEL teaching, which are bound to be useful, albeit differently so for different teachers and different sociocultural contexts. Whilst some authors provide concrete tips and exercises, others challenge our awareness of those aspects of the course we may not have been so attentive to and/or may not have exploited well enough to make this challenging course work better. The road to HEL may be paved with good intentions, but this book provides the wherewithal to put those intentions on a firm foundation, and to make the course a rewarding experience for students and teachers alike.

REFERENCES

- Edwards, Alison. 2016. *English in the Netherlands: Functions, forms and attitudes*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. DOI: [10.1075/veaw.g56](https://doi.org/10.1075/veaw.g56)
- Kachru, Braj B. 1985. Standards, codification and sociolinguistic realism: The English language in the Outer Circle. In Randolph Quirk & Henry G. Widdowson (eds.), *English in the world: Teaching and learning the language and literatures*, 11–30. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schneider, Edgar W. 2014. New reflections on the evolutionary dynamics of world Englishes. *World Englishes* 33(1). 9–32. DOI: [10.1111/weng.12069](https://doi.org/10.1111/weng.12069)