

Teachers of Old English in Britain and Ireland (TOEBI)

Learning Practices in Old English 2009

Notes on the TOEBI survey for the association Annual Meeting

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Executive Summary

This report summarises the responses of 43 Old English language specialists to a questionnaire intended to assess any significant changes in learning practices in approximately the last twenty years. There was general agreement in noting that the methods adopted to learn and teach Old English are nowadays relatively similar to those employed in the past. Respondents unanimously expressed that the most significant innovation in the field is the introduction and use of technically enhanced learning resources, which were not available only just ten years ago, unsurprisingly given the recent technical advances of web-based technologies and their overwhelming employment in teaching and education.

Responses to the questionnaire also evidenced that the study of Old English is mostly undertaken at university, both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, particularly in English degree courses. A few exceptions to this trend were however noted including Old English being studied in medieval studies courses or in programmes combining the study of English linguistics with literature.

Overall, the survey recipients agreed that the linguistic and language background of students of Old English has progressively declined over the past years to reach very low standards.¹ Poor knowledge of foreign languages and lack of language learning practice appear to have a very negative impact not only on the students' performance and achievements in learning Old English but also and on a more general level on the students' understanding of modern English and its historical transformations. As evidenced by the respondents' similar learning and teaching experiences, these issues should be borne in mind in evaluating the current state of the subject and its didactics.

¹ A review about the state of Modern Foreign Languages in English higher education has been recently released by HEFCE; see link at http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2009/09_41/

Introduction

The following report examines the data collected through circulation of a questionnaire about learning practices in Old English aimed principally at members of the association for Teachers of Old English in Britain and Ireland (TOEBI) and more broadly at specialists in the field. 101 e-mail invitations to complete the questionnaire produced 43 total responses over approximately seven weeks for the period of time 11 July to 1 September 2009, when the data were exported. The questionnaire is still open for completion, however.² The text of the survey was organised into 17 questions and a final text box for respondents to fill in with observations on personal experience which they felt might be relevant to the overall topic and tenor of the survey. For the purpose of this report and for reasons of clarity, I have grouped the questions in six sections as follows:

Respondents' profile

Institutions

The didactics of Old English

Foreign languages and linguistic background

Teaching Old English

Comments and issues raised

Numerical details and comments provided by the survey recipients will be described accordingly. The text of the questionnaire is included at the end of the report (see Appendix A).

Respondents' profile

43 people completed the survey, of these the vast majority (40) are members of TOEBI, the rest have an interest in the subject and quite possibly connections with TOEBI without however holding membership in the association. However insignificant, the proportion of non-members taking the survey suggests that more people than just TOEBI subscribers might have an interest in surveying learning practices in Old English. For this reason, the text of the questionnaire will be disseminated beyond the

² The questionnaire can still be completed following the link <http://www.toebi.org.uk/> from the TOEBI website homepage.

association target audience in the future to call more broadly on specialists in the field of Anglo-Saxon and early Medieval studies and teachers of English in HE.

The majority of respondents studied Old English in fairly recent times: 34 people started their study after 1990, 9 in the 1980s and the remainder in previous years. These figures indicate that in answering the questionnaire respondents mostly refer to learning practices dating to the last twenty years or so.

The survey recipients indicated that their study of Old English happened at university, mainly at undergraduate level, and only to a minor extent at postgraduate and post-doctoral stages. Responses also evidenced that Old English is principally studied in English Language and Literature degree courses and seems to be overall neglected in disciplines, which like history and archaeology cover the Anglo-Saxon period.

Admittedly, this may well be due to the limited confines within which this survey has been circulated, though curiously it appears from the questionnaire outcomes that a number of people required knowledge of Old English in approaching historical documents dating to the relevant period. Only a minor percentage of the survey recipients have indicated that they studied Old English as a requirement for a course in English Philology and Linguistics or in other similar contexts.

Institutions

Fifteen pre-92 British universities or colleges have altogether been indicated by respondents as the place where they studied Old English, together with twelve foreign universities, mostly in English-speaking countries other than Britain, with the exception of four institutions situated in continental Europe. Three Irish universities/colleges, namely Queen's Belfast, TCD and University of Cork were also indicated by respondents as places where they studied Old English. The survey received an almost equal number of responses from British and foreign universities underlining that provision of Old English happens in Britain as well as in other not exclusively Anglophone countries.

The didactics of Old English

Given the disciplinary area in which Old English is taught, it does not surprise that the highest percentage of people indicated that the main reason for their study was to acquire sufficient reading knowledge to enable them to read literary texts in the original language. However, responses also revealed an interest in learning about Old English in its own right and especially about the transformations that affected the English language through time, that is, in History of the English Language modules. 11 people underlined that they required knowledge of Old English for reading historical documents, a skill often required in conducting interdisciplinary research and/or study, as it is often the case for a time such as the high Middle Ages for which primary resources are fragmentary and often difficult to interpret.

Pedagogy

Pedagogically, respondents observed that their preferred method of study was in small study groups, an approach that is still very much practised in teaching Old English at any level of the higher education. Individual study complemented classroom work in the experience of many learners of Old English. Web-interactive and web-assisted approaches, which have been very much in use in learning and teaching modern languages for example in fairly recent years, are not so widespread among learners of Old English. Response to the survey has evidenced that e-learning, learning networks, electronic forums/groups were not popular among the questionnaire recipients, nor was the use of specialised websites. This trend may well reflect a situation which is no longer current. However, websites and more generally electronic resources with a clear teaching purpose and a specific focus on the Old English language are scarce and not always user friendly, though now probably more numerous than in previous years.³ Respondents also indicated that a variety of methods were adopted in learning Old English including translation and commentary of literary texts and memorising paradigms. These were altogether the most popular ways of learning Old English which

³ There are many examples of such website-like tools, mostly available through institutional VLEs and therefore password-protected. Notably one Old English website, which gained momentum in recent times is the Old English Coursepack <http://www.english.ox.ac.uk/oecoursepack/> developed at the University of Oxford by Dr Stuart Lee and now also made available through the Open Educational Resources repository OpenJorum <http://www.jorum.ac.uk/getstarted/register.html>

respondents adopted, though other methods were also considered, especially those more traditionally focussed on grammar: these are, in order of preference, sentence parsing and syntax analysis, phonetics and analysis of morphological changes. These rather conservative and unadventurous, one might note, methods are principally due to Old English being an ancient, i. e. non-spoken though documented language, the study of which still relies very much on grammar-based approaches including practices as sentence parsing and grammatical, i. e. literal, translation; methods that are indeed no longer as popular as they used to be in the past for the study of modern languages, for instance.

Study resources

The methods adopted in learning Old English unsurprisingly perhaps entail use of resources such as readers/primers and grammar books, also most voted in the survey, together with teachers' guidance notes and dictionaries. The least used in the learning process were reckoned to be anthologies and websites. When asked what resources were found to be particularly useful, the majority of respondents indicated that they learnt Old English better through grammar books and the help of tutors. Other resources including dictionaries/glossaries and anthologies were thought to be relatively useful. Interestingly, only five people believed websites especially designed for the study of Old English to be very useful. Although surprising given the proportion to which technology enhanced materials are nowadays used in teaching and learning, the latter datum would further confirm that the study of Old English is still very much reliant on traditional methods. While specialised websites have indeed facilitated access to teaching and learning materials relevant to the Old English language, they seem however to have not exploited technology to its full potential. The use of hyperlinked texts in teaching Old English and related literature, still most popular at present, has indeed a relatively long history and goes back to Professor Patrick Conner's development of a web-based edition of *Beowulf* in 1990s. The hypertext medium was in those days used to navigate texts in relation to crucial contextual information. This approach to teaching Old English proved to be very successful with and useful for students, but somehow failed to engage the teaching and learning community in the

discussion forums, thereby limiting the growth and evolution of the resource and leaving some of its objectives unattained.⁴ Examples like these show to some extent that despite early attempts to employ web technology for the didactics of Old English, there is still a great deal of opportunities that could be explored and effectively put to use, however, and funding permitting, of course.

Practice and assessment

In the respondents' experience Old English was mostly practised through translating and grammar exercises. However, the novel datum evidenced in this section of the questionnaire is that learners kept practising Old English through teaching after they became tutors and/or through their research in the field. The respondents' knowledge of Old English was assessed through translations and grammar exercises, only a few were tested through oral examinations and through online tests.

Foreign languages and linguistic background

Most people already had an excellent background in languages while studying Old English and asserted to have knowledge of other ancient, whether classical or Germanic, and modern idioms. This however does not seem to be any longer the case as students increasingly approach the study of Old English with no previous knowledge of any modern foreign language, let alone ancient ones.

Teaching Old English

95% of the survey recipients have taught Old English in the past. This is hardly surprisingly given their affiliation to TOEBI, however 10% no longer engage in teaching activities in Old English.

⁴ Further details on two recently completed projects similar in their aims and intended audiences to Conner's may be found following the links <http://www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/projects/archive/technology/tech19.php> (*The Old English Coursepack* University of Oxford 2006; see in particular the sections Background and Learning Outcomes) and <http://www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/projects/archive/oldenglish/oldeng1.php> (*Learning and Teaching with the Thesaurus of Old English* conducted by the University of Glasgow and completed in 2007)

Comments and issues raised

Respondents were overall keen to comment on their own experience as both learners and teachers of Old English, which was altogether very useful to raise an awareness of how the learning experience has changed through time. People recurrently commented that web resources for teaching and learning Old English are very much in use nowadays than they were in a relatively recent past, rather predictably one might say, as in the last ten years web technologies, and most notably second-generation web technologies, have been increasingly adopted in universities in the UK but also almost everywhere else, as a means of enhancing the students' learning experience. However, concurrently with this innovation, which most respondents felt to be a positive advance in the pedagogy of Old English, it was largely observed that the average linguistic knowledge of students who approach the study of Old English has seriously declined through the years. Worryingly, most people among the questionnaire recipients remarked that at present the language and linguistic background of students is rather poor. For this reason, many believe that small study groups and a student-friendly, basic approach to learning Old English are still very useful teaching and learning methods. In this context, web resources can only function as a complement and support to teaching and learning, but are by no means substitutive. Frustratingly, some people found that students, unlike in the past, do not respond too well to textbooks like Mitchell and Robinson (though now in its seventh edition!) or Cable and Bough.⁵ Indeed, despite their authority, these 'milestone' books are perceived as difficult. Hence, the teacher's guidance and other support materials, such as web-based grammar exercises, are often used to facilitate the students' comprehension of the topics covered. In some institution Mitchell and Robinson is no longer adopted and has been replaced with rather more modern texts, which offer a basic approach to the study of Old English or an overview of texts in their literary context such as anthologies or facing-page translations of key texts, for example. Indeed, a few respondents underlined that most students find that studying Old English in its proper literary context, that is, concurrently with textual and critical analyses of the literary panorama of the epoch in which the language was in use, helps to demystify Old English. The innovations brought about by new web

⁵ T. Cable and A. Bough, *A History of the English Language*, 4th edition (Routledge: London, 1993); B. Mitchell and F. C. Robinson, *A Guide to Old English*, 7th edition (Blackwell: Oxford, 2007)

technologies (so-called Web 2.0), especially those offering a ‘radically’ interactive experience, i. e. VLEs, multimedia sharing tools, but also software enabling the design and creation of interactive learning objects, were overall felt to have improved enormously the students’ accessibility to resources which only ten years ago were scarce and not easy to find and use.⁶

Although the Old English language is taught in principally literary contexts/courses, a few people noted that in comparison with what happened in the past, nowadays more emphasis is put on the linguistic/philological aspects of Old English and on etymology, especially when Old English is taught in degree programmes with a clear focus on the English language.

When asked whether or not the teaching practices now in use are similar to the way in which Old English was studied in the past, the majority of respondents answered that their teaching methods are not too dissimilar from what they experienced as students. However the developments and introduction of web-based tools has required teachers to adapt to new ways in which students learn that were not even thought of ten years ago. Although teaching through web-based tools has by no means superseded more traditional methods (small study groups, teacher’s guidance, learning paradigms and grammar, etc.) has however proved to be advantageous for acquiring knowledge of Old English, the study of which is increasingly undertaken with no previous linguistic knowledge and/or experience of studying a foreign language.

Conclusion

This survey has demonstrated that similar practices in learning Old English are employed now as they were in the recent past, with the vast majority of respondents expressing that study of the subject still relies on traditional didactic techniques, including grammar analysis and translation.

While technological advances in education have made resources more widely accessible and shareable perhaps both within and across institutions, poor language skills among students make the study of Old English overall less approachable. For this reason,

⁶ P. Anderson, *What is Web 2.0? Ideas, Technologies and Implications for Education* (JISC, 2007) <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/techwatch/tsw0701b.pdf>

acquisition of the Old English language still requires a great deal of input on behalf of teachers and considerable efforts from students. Although traditional teaching and learning practices are still perceived as valuable didactic techniques, there is scope for exploring the potential of modern web technologies (especially web 2.0 second generation technologies, such as interactive networks, blogs, shared resource repositories, interactive open courses, to name a few) for Old English, as hopefully this survey will have shown. Not only would appropriate use of such technologies complement learning and teaching practices currently in use, especially though not exclusively for classroom and individual study, but could also facilitate and enable interaction, sharing and communication within the learning and teaching community, thereby enhancing the students' experience in learning Old English.

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Text Books

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The Higher Education Academy, *Old English Projects*

<http://www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/projects/archive/technology/tech19.php>
<http://www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/projects/archive/oldenglish/oldengl1.php>

TOEBI

<http://www.toebi.org.uk/>

University of Oxford, *The Old English Coursepack*

<http://www.english.ox.ac.uk/oecoursepack/>

University of Manchester, OpenJorum (Open Educational Resources)

<http://www.jorum.ac.uk/getstarted/register.html>

Appendix A: Text of Questionnaire

Teachers of Old English in Britain and Ireland (TOEBI): A Survey about Learning Practices in Old English, July 2009

TOEBI (Teachers of Old English in Britain and Ireland; <http://www.toebi.org.uk/>) is a professional organisation which promotes and supports the study of the Old English language and related culture in the academia in Britain and Ireland. The following questionnaire aims to survey learning practices in Old English in recent times, in order to see whether the study of Old English, and by implication its didactics, have been subject to any significant changes and in what respect. A full report based on the results provided by the survey will be presented at the society's annual meeting taking place in St Andrews, Saturday 24 October 2009. The main theme for the forthcoming meeting is 'Old English: Past and Present', we would therefore be very grateful if you could answer the following questions and thereby offer your personal experience to the project. For any query regarding the survey please contact:

Dr Erika Corradini

erikacorradini@btinternet.com

[Note on questionnaire: please select all that apply whenever possible]

Are you a member of TOEBI (Teachers of Old English in Britain and Ireland)?

Yes

No

When did you start learning Old English?

Please choose one option from the drop-down menu

before 1950

1950-60

1960-70

1970-80

1980-90

1990-2000

2000 till now

Where did you learn Old English?

School

University: undergraduate

University: postgraduate

Post-doctoral level

Other:

Please specify university or college where you studied Old English

In what degree programme or area of research did you study Old English?

English Language and Literature

History

Archaeology

English Philology and/or Linguistics

Other:

What was the purpose of your study of Old English?

to acquire reading knowledge, for the study of literature

to acquire knowledge of the language

to acquire knowledge of the linguistic changes affecting the English language through time

to acquire an ability to read historical documents

Other:

How did you approach the study of Old English?

Individual approach

In small study groups

Web interactive approach (e. g. through specialised web sites, etc.)

Web assisted approach (e. g. through learning networks, e-learning, electronic forums and/or groups)

Other:

What learning methods did you adopt?

memorising paradigms

analysis of syntax and sentence parsing

practising pronunciation

translation of Old English literary texts

reading and commenting on Old English literary texts

analysis of sound change

analysis of morphological change

Other:

What kind of resources did you use?

Grammar books (e. g. B. Mitchell and F. C. Robinson, etc.)

Readers (e. g. R. Marsden, P. S. Baker, etc.)

Primers (e. g. Sweet's Primer, etc.)

Anthologies (e. g. E. M. Treharne, etc.)

History of the English Language books (e. g. A. C. Baugh T. Cable, D. McIntyre, etc.)

Dictionaries (e. g. Bosworth-Toller, Clark-Hall, etc.)

Teacher's handouts/notes and guidance

Electronic resources (e. g. on-line courses, specialised websites, VLE/Blackboard materials and support, etc.)

Other:

Which of the following resources did you find particularly useful in learning Old English?

Grammar books

Dictionaries

Anthologies

Teacher's help

Websites especially designed for the study of Old English

Glossaries

Other:

How did you practise your Old English?

translating

through interactive, web-based exercises

through grammar and/or linguistic exercises

reading from literary texts with facing-page translations

through teaching Old English

through conducting research on Old English

Other:

How did you practise your translation skills in Old English?

translating from Old English into Modern English

translating from Modern English into Old English

translating from Old English into your native language (non-native speakers of English only)

Other:

How was your knowledge of Old English assessed?

through translation of literary passages

through grammar exercises

oral examinations

on-line tests

Other:

What other languages have you been studying alongside Old English?

Modern languages (French, German, Spanish, etc.)

Classical languages (Latin, Greek, etc)

Old Norse and/or Old Icelandic

Old Germanic languages other than Old Norse (e. g. Old Saxon, Gothic, Old High German,

etc.)

Other:

Do you currently teach Old English?

Yes

No

Have you ever taught Old English?

Yes

No

If yes, how similar are your teaching practices to the way in which you learned Old English yourself?

Please, rate on a scale from 1 to 5

1 2 3 4 5

Not at all similar

Very similar

Please feel free to add any comment on your teaching practices that you think might be relevant to the previous question or to this survey

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