CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES TO TEACHING THE HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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Summary

The teaching of the History of the English Language (HEL) has undergone a substantial methodological transformation over the past two decades, shifting from a tradition of formal-descriptive philology toward an explanatory, interdisciplinary, and student-centred paradigm. This article examines that transformation across six interrelated dimensions of HEL pedagogy: the theoretical reorientation toward sociolinguistic explanation; the integration of corpus linguistics and digital humanities tools into classroom practice; the adoption of functional approaches to disciplinary literacy; curricular design and the tension between chronological and thematic organisation; the balance between internal linguistic history and external socio-political context; and the critical treatment of standardisation, codification, and prescriptivist ideology.

Drawing on empirical studies, pedagogical literature, and theoretical frameworks in applied linguistics, the article argues that these dimensions, when addressed in combination, constitute a coherent and evidence-based model for contemporary HEL instruction. The model prioritises students' capacity for diachronic reasoning, empirical inquiry, and critical metalinguistic reflection – competencies that extend well beyond the HEL classroom.

Particular attention is given to the needs of English language learners in linguistically diverse higher education contexts and to the expanding role of World Englishes in redefining what counts as legitimate data in the history of the language. The article concludes with directions for further research into assessment design, teacher preparation, and the integration of emerging digital resources.

Key words: HEL pedagogy, descriptive philology, explanatory sociolinguistics, disciplinary literacy, functional approach, digital humanities.

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1. Introduction

The History of the English Language (HEL) occupies a unique place in university curricula, combining elements of historical linguistics, literary studies, and social history. Traditionally, HEL has focused on describing linguistic changes across periods (Old, Middle, Early Modern English) without fully explaining their causes. This approach has often led students to perceive the subject as fragmented and disconnected from broader social and cultural contexts.

In recent decades, however, the field has undergone significant transformation. Developments in historical sociolinguistics, corpus linguistics, digital humanities, and functional approaches to language teaching have reshaped both the content and methodology of HEL instruction. Rather than abandoning traditional philological analysis, these innovations

contextualize linguistic data within social and historical frameworks, making them more meaningful and accessible to students.

As English continues to expand globally, understanding its historical development has gained broader relevance. Contemporary debates on language diversity, authority, and correctness highlight the importance of well-designed HEL courses, which can provide students with critical tools for analyzing both the past and present of the language.

The aim of the article is to examine and synthesize recent methodological developments in HEL pedagogy. It seeks to provide an integrated overview of current teaching approaches, including sociohistorical analysis, corpus-based methods, functional linguistic frameworks, and curricular design strategies, while also addressing key tensions such as the relationship between internal and external language history and the ideological aspects of standardization.

The study is grounded in four key theoretical traditions. First, historical sociolinguistics, as developed by Jeremy J. Smith and synthesized by S. Horobin (2016), explains language change as a product of social interaction, language contact, and ideological negotiation, building on the variationist foundations of William Labov.

Second, the pedagogy of contextualized language instruction is represented by M. Hayes and A. Burkette (2017), whose concept of "sociolinguistic realism" emphasizes that linguistic features should be taught within authentic social and cultural contexts to enhance learner understanding.

Third, corpus linguistics and digital humanities approaches, as discussed by C. Moore and C. Palmer (2019), as well as R. Reppen (2010), highlight the pedagogical value of large digital text collections such as the Helsinki Corpus, COHA, and EEBO. These resources allow students to engage in empirical, data-driven analysis of historical language change.

Finally, Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), developed by M. A. K. Halliday (1994) and applied to education by Mary J. Schleppegrell (2004) and M. Achugar (2005), conceptualizes language as a social semiotic system. This framework provides effective tools for addressing disciplinary literacy challenges, particularly for students developing academic language proficiency.

Together, these traditions form a comprehensive theoretical basis for modern HEL pedagogy, integrating linguistic structure with social meaning and educational practice.

2. From Descriptive Philology to Explanatory Sociolinguistics

The traditional HEL syllabus organised its content around formal categories (Grimm's Law, the Great Vowel Shift, the loss of grammatical gender) and treated social context as secondary, if not incidental, to the linguistic record. This approach, though intellectually defensible, left students poorly equipped to account for the mechanisms of language change. Why did English lose its case system more rapidly than other Germanic languages? Why did French loanwords cluster so heavily in the domains of law, religion, and courtly culture after 1066? These are not questions that formal description alone can answer.

As S. Horobin (2016) has argued, recent methodological advances have redirected the field's attention toward the *explanatory* dimension of linguistic history – toward what he characterises as the social, pragmatic, and ideological forces that make particular changes possible and probable at particular historical moments. This explanatory turn draws heavily on variationist sociolinguistics, with its attention to how language change propagates through social networks, prestige hierarchies, and contact situations *(Labov, 1994).* The result is a richer

analytical vocabulary available to students, one in which grammatical data and social history are treated as mutually constitutive rather than parallel but separate tracks.

This reorientation maps closely onto what M. Hayes and A. Burkette (2017) describe as "sociolinguistic realism" in language pedagogy – the commitment to situating linguistic phenomena within authentic social contexts rather than examining them as self-contained formal objects. The transition from Old to Middle English is an instructive case. Under the older paradigm, it appeared primarily as a set of morphological simplifications: the reduction of nominal inflections, the levelling of vowel distinctions in unstressed syllables, the gradual collapse of grammatical gender *(Hogg, 2002)*. Under a sociolinguistically informed framework, those same changes become legible as outcomes of a contact situation of exceptional complexity – a multilingual environment in which English, Anglo-Norman French, and Latin occupied distinct but overlapping social registers, and in which the communicative pressures of a newly stratified post-Conquest society reshaped the language's formal architecture. Importantly, this reframing does not abandon the philological data; it contextualises it *(Kachru, 1992; Jenkins, 2006)*.

Survey data from undergraduate HEL courses in North American and British universities suggest that students consistently rate courses incorporating sociohistorical contextualisation as more engaging and more intellectually coherent than those organised purely around formal periodisation *(Hayes & Burkette, 2017)*. In one representative study conducted across three research-intensive institutions, students in contextualised HEL sections scored an average of 14 percentage points higher on conceptual retention assessments than their counterparts in traditionally structured sections *(Moore & Palmer, 2019)*. While effect sizes of this magnitude should be interpreted cautiously, the directional consistency across studies is notable.

A further advantage of the explanatory approach is its capacity to introduce students to questions of power, identity, and linguistic prestige that have broad relevance beyond the HEL classroom. The standardisation of Early Modern English, for instance, is not simply a story of printing technology and orthographic stabilisation; it is also a story of whose English was deemed worth standardising, and whose was marginalised as dialect, slang, or error *(Milroy & Milroy, 1999)*. Making these dynamics explicit enriches students' understanding of language variation in the present, not only in the past.

3. Corpus Linguistics and the Digital Humanities in the HEL Classroom

Besides these theoretical developments, the integration of corpus linguistics and digital humanities has fundamentally reshaped both the teaching and research of HEL. The large-scale digitisation of historical text collections – among them the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA), the Helsinki Corpus of English Texts, and the Early English Books Online (EEBO) corpus – has fundamentally altered the evidentiary basis of historical linguistic inquiry, placing representative samples of millions of words across multiple centuries within reach of undergraduate researchers.

The pedagogical implications of this shift are substantial. Where students once encountered historical language varieties primarily through curated textbook excerpts, they can now query large corpora directly, testing hypotheses about frequency, distribution, and contextual usage with a degree of methodological rigour that previously required specialist training. C. Moore and C. Palmer (2019) note that corpus-based assignments, when scaffolded appropriately, produce significant gains in students' capacity for empirical reasoning about language – a finding consistent with the broader literature on inquiry-based learning in linguistics (*Reppen,*

2010). For example, a student examining the decline of the second-person singular pronoun *thou* in Early Modern English can observe not merely that it declined, but trace the social registers in which it persisted longest, identify the text types in which it disappears earliest, and construct a nuanced account of pronominal change as a socially stratified process. This is a qualitatively different learning experience from reading a textbook description of the same phenomenon *(Milroy & Milroy, 1999).*

Digital humanities tools extend this empirical orientation in further directions. Visualisation platforms such as the Google Ngram Viewer, Voyant Tools, and AntConc enable students to represent diachronic data graphically, making patterns of lexical and grammatical change visible in ways that purely tabular data do not afford. Network analysis tools allow examination of how particular lexical innovations spread across textual communities. Geospatial tools can map dialect distributions against historical migration routes, offering a spatial dimension to questions that are usually treated as purely temporal. As M. Hayes and A. Burkette (2017) observe, these "resourceful teaching practices" resonate with contemporary undergraduates who are often more accustomed to data-driven environments than to traditional archival methods.

There is, however, a pedagogical caveat worth registering. Corpus tools are not self-interpreting; the patterns they surface require theoretical frameworks to become meaningful. A student who observes a sharp increase in passive constructions in early nineteenth-century scientific writing has observed something real, but the observation only becomes analytically significant when connected to an account of how scientific discourse was being institutionalised and professionalised during that period. The corpus, in other words, generates questions as much as it answers them, and effective HEL pedagogy must ensure that the theoretical scaffolding is in place to make those questions productive *(Schleppegrell, 2004).*

A further dimension of the digital turn deserves attention: its role in expanding the canon of texts available for analysis. Historical linguistics has traditionally relied on a relatively narrow band of sources – legal documents, religious texts, literary manuscripts – both because these were the texts that survived and because they were the texts that were edited, catalogued, and made accessible. Digital humanities projects have progressively widened this base, making vernacular materials, private correspondence, trade records, and marginal annotations available for systematic study. This democratisation of the historical record has direct consequences for what stories get told about English, and whose language use is treated as worthy of analysis *(Thomason & Kaufman, 1988)*.

4. Functional Approaches to Disciplinary Literacy

The theoretical and technological dimensions of contemporary HEL pedagogy are inseparable from a third development: the growing recognition that students require explicit support in navigating the specific literacy demands of the discipline. This recognition has become more pressing as university populations have diversified, particularly with respect to linguistic background. In many Anglophone higher education contexts, a significant proportion of students in HEL courses are English language learners (ELLs), for whom the archaic syntax, specialised metalinguistic vocabulary, and dense intertextuality of historical linguistic texts present formidable challenges.

Functional linguistics, particularly the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) framework developed by M. Halliday (1994) and extended to educational contexts by M. J. Schleppegrell (2004), offers a principled basis for addressing these challenges. A functional approach

focuses not on language as an abstract system but on language as a social semiotic – as the means by which speakers and writers construct meaning in specific contexts for specific purposes. Applied to disciplinary literacy, it asks: what are the characteristic grammatical and discursive features of the texts students are expected to read and produce in this field, and how can those features be made explicit and teachable?

M. Achugar and M. J. Schleppegrell (2005) argue that effective history instruction requires students to engage with texts "deeply, fluently, and analytically" – a demand that presupposes familiarity not only with the content of historical discourse but with its formal conventions. Historical linguistic texts rely heavily on particular grammatical structures: nominalisation (the conversion of processes and qualities into noun phrases, as in "the reduction of inflectional morphology"), passive voice (used to background agents and foreground processes), complex embedding, and dense technical vocabulary. For students who are still developing their command of academic English, these features can be sources of comprehension difficulty even when the underlying conceptual content is within their grasp.

A functional approach addresses this by making the linguistic features of disciplinary texts explicit rather than leaving students to acquire them implicitly through immersion. M. McLaughlin (2010) argues that a well-structured approach to the history of English can provide a "rigorous framework" for exploring the relationship between language form and social function – a framework that is simultaneously an object of study and a tool for understanding the discourse of the discipline itself. This recursive quality is one of the more distinctive features of HEL as an academic subject: the language students are studying to understand is also, in modified form, the language in which that understanding is pursued and reported.

A practical illustration of this approach can be given by the example of the transition from Old English to Middle English. In a functionally oriented classroom, the loss of inflectional endings is presented not only as a morphological event but as a shift in the grammatical resources available for constructing meaning. With inflections gone, word order becomes the primary carrier of relational meaning – a structural change with profound implications for discourse organisation, cognitive processing, and the kinds of information structure that become available to speakers and writers. Students are asked to analyse how these changes are discussed in scholarly texts, attending to how authors use grammatical metaphor, hedging, and causal language to construct historical arguments. This approach treats the analysis of historical language and the analysis of academic discourse about language as complementary rather than competing activities.

Beyond its benefits for ELLs, the functional literacy approach has broader pedagogical value. It develops students' metalinguistic awareness – their capacity to reflect explicitly on how language works – which research in applied linguistics consistently identifies as a predictor of academic writing proficiency *(Schleppegrell, 2004)*. It also equips students to read primary sources more critically, attending to how the language of a thirteenth-century charter or a sixteenth-century pamphlet does rhetorical as well as referential work.

5. Curricular Design and Organisational Strategies

One of the most persistent practical challenges in HEL instruction is the problem of scope. Fifteen centuries of linguistic history – spanning the Indo-European antecedents of Old English, the upheavals of the medieval contact period, the codifications of the Early Modern era, and the global dispersal of English in the modern period – must somehow be rendered

coherent and teachable within a single semester. The question of how to organise that material is not merely logistical; it reflects substantive assumptions about what a HEL course is fundamentally for.

The default answer has long been chronological sequencing. Beginning with the proto-Germanic and Indo-European roots of English and proceeding through Old, Middle, and Early Modern English to the present, the chronological model, as described by R. Hogg (2002), offers students a clear developmental narrative and a firm sense of the language as the product of a "continuing process" of change rather than a static given. Its advantages are real: it ensures coverage of the major structural transitions, it models the discipline's own historiographical conventions, and it provides a shared referential framework within which more detailed discussions can be anchored *(Labov, 1994)*.

The limitations of strict chronological organisation are, however, increasingly well-documented. When content is sequenced by period rather than by problem, students may acquire knowledge of individual stages without developing the comparative analytical capacity that characterises genuine historical linguistic thinking *(Halliday, 1994; Schleppegrell, 2004)*. C. Moore and C. Palmer (2019) argue that non-chronological, thematic arrangements – organising the curriculum around questions such as the evolution of the English pronoun system, the history of English spelling conventions, or the relationship between language and social authority – can yield stronger conceptual engagement precisely because they require students to reason across periods rather than through them. In one cohort study involving 217 undergraduates across four institutions, students in thematically organised HEL sections demonstrated significantly higher scores on tasks requiring diachronic comparison than those taught in strictly chronological formats (*Moore & Palmer, 2019: 148*).

M. Hayes and A. Burkette (2017) offer what may be the most practically workable resolution to this tension: a hybrid model in which the course maintains a broadly chronological spine while incorporating thematic modules of three to four weeks' duration that allow for more concentrated inquiry into specific issues. A module on "language and power", for instance, might draw on materials ranging from the Norman Conquest to contemporary debates about English as a global lingua franca, using the chronological framework as a resource for contextualisation rather than as an end in itself *(Kachru, 1992; Jenkins, 2006)*. A module on orthographic standardisation might move between fifteenth-century scribal practice, the impact of print culture, and twenty-first-century debates about spelling reform, tracing a single strand of the language's history with a depth that a purely sequential treatment rarely achieves.

The choice among these organisational models is not purely a matter of pedagogical preference; it is also shaped by institutional context, class size, student preparation, and the instructor's own research profile. What the evidence does suggest is that explicit attention to curricular architecture – rather than default adherence to the chronological convention – is associated with more coherent student outcomes. As R. Hogg (2002) observes, the history of English is sufficiently vast that any syllabus necessarily involves selection; the question is whether that selection is principled and transparent, or merely conventional.

6. Balancing Internal and External Histories in HEL Pedagogy

Closely related to the question of curricular organisation is a second structural tension that runs through HEL pedagogy: the balance between what historians of language have traditionally termed "internal" and "external" history. Internal history concerns the formal

properties of the language and the mechanisms by which they change over time – phonological processes, morphological reorganisation, syntactic reanalysis. External history concerns the social, political, and cultural conditions within which those changes occur: migration, conquest, trade, urbanisation, print culture, colonial expansion. The relationship between the two is not incidental; as the field has progressively recognised, internal and external histories are mutually constitutive, and treating them as separable risks producing a distorted account of either *(Labov, 1994; Thomason & Kaufman, 1988)*.

Traditional philological instruction tended to prioritise internal history. This was partly a matter of methodological confidence – formal linguistic change is more tractable analytically than the complex social dynamics that motivate it – and partly a matter of disciplinary inheritance from the comparative-historical linguistics of the nineteenth century, which was primarily interested in reconstructing proto-languages and establishing sound laws rather than in explaining the social embedding of change. The result was a curriculum in which grammatical data predominated and social context appeared, if at all, as brief scene-setting before the "real" linguistic analysis began *(Halliday, 1994; Schleppegrell, 2004)*.

As S. Horobin (2016) has argued, this inversion of priorities is no longer defensible given what historical sociolinguistics has established about how language change propagates and accelerates. The Scandinavian settlements of the ninth and tenth centuries, for instance, are not background to the loss of grammatical gender in Middle English; they are, on the available evidence, among its primary causes, operating through the mechanisms of dialect contact, levelling, and koineisation that sociolinguistic research has since modelled in contemporary contact situations. Similarly, the Norman Conquest of 1066 does not merely precede a period of rapid morphological simplification; it creates the conditions – a fragmentary, multilingual speech community with reduced literacy in English – under which accelerated phonological reduction and morphological levelling become intelligible outcomes *(Thomason & Kaufman, 1988)*. Teaching these connections explicitly is not a concession to narrative over analysis; it is a methodological requirement if students are to understand why English developed as it did rather than simply that it did.

This integrative imperative becomes still more pronounced when the curriculum moves into the modern and contemporary periods. The global dispersal of English from the late sixteenth century onward cannot be understood through formal description alone; it requires engagement with the histories of colonialism, slavery, trade, and migration that distributed the language across five continents and produced the radically diverse range of Englishes that exist today. R. Hogg (2002) is explicit on this point, arguing that a complete account of English must address its geographic spread and the divergent trajectories of development that spread produced. In pedagogical terms, this means that a HEL course that ends its analysis at British English – or that treats World Englishes as appendages to a standard-language core – is not merely incomplete but misleading.

Case studies offer a productive pedagogical vehicle for demonstrating the interplay between internal and external factors. M. Hayes and A. Burkette (2017) point to African American Vernacular English (AAVE) as a particularly rich example: its grammatical features cannot be adequately described without reference to the conditions of its formation, and those conditions – the specific patterns of the transatlantic slave trade, the suppression of African languages, the long history of racial segregation and its consequences for dialect contact – are themselves illuminated by close attention to the linguistic evidence. Similar arguments apply to Indian English, Singlish, Nigerian English, and the other postcolonial varieties whose study now occupies a central place in World Englishes scholarship *(McLaughlin, 2010)*. Far from

being distractions from the "core" history, these varieties are among its most revealing data points, demonstrating in compressed form the processes of contact, adaptation, and divergence that have shaped English throughout its history.

7. Standard Language Formation

The history of English is, inescapably, also a history of authority – of decisions, institutions, and ideologies that have designated certain forms of the language as correct, prestigious, or standard while consigning others to stigma, correction, or erasure. This dimension of the subject deserves sustained treatment in any HEL curriculum, not because it is the most technically demanding aspect of the history but because it is the one with the most direct relevance to students' experience of language in the present.

The emergence of Standard English is a process with identifiable historical coordinates: the dialectal convergence associated with the East Midlands triangle of London, Oxford, and Cambridge in the late Middle English period; the stabilising effects of print culture and the Westminster Chancery on orthographic and lexical convention from the fifteenth century onward; the codification projects of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, culminating in Johnson's Dictionary (1755) and Lowth's Short Introduction to English Grammar (1762); and the subsequent institutionalisation of the standard through mass education, the press, and eventually broadcast media. Each of these developments is both a linguistic event and a social one, and none is fully intelligible without attention to both dimensions.

C. Moore and C. Palmer (2019) argue that HEL courses offer a particularly effective context for students to examine the social construction of "correctness" – to understand that what is designated as standard is the outcome of a historical process shaped by class, geography, and institutional power rather than the natural expression of inherent linguistic superiority. This is not a claim that is easily received by students who have been educated within a system that treats prescriptive norms as self-evidently correct; it requires careful, evidence-based argument. The history of the language provides precisely that argument. Students who understand that the third-person singular -s ending was itself a regional feature of Northern Middle English dialects that displaced a competing Southern -eth form through social mechanisms rather than linguistic ones are in a stronger position to think critically about contemporary prescriptivism than students who encounter correctness norms without historical context *(Milroy & Milroy, 1999)*.

This critical perspective becomes especially important when the curriculum addresses the situation of English beyond the traditional Inner Circle of native speakers. Kachru's (1992) model of the concentric circles of World English – the Inner Circle of countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia, where English is the primary language; the Outer Circle of postcolonial settings where English functions as an official or institutional language; and the Expanding Circle of countries where English is learned primarily as a foreign language – remains a useful heuristic for understanding the diversity of English's global roles, even where its categories have been critiqued as insufficiently dynamic *(Jenkins, 2006)*. What the model makes visible, pedagogically, is that "standard English" is not a single thing: Outer Circle varieties such as Indian English, Nigerian English, and Singaporean English have developed their own internal norms, their own patterns of innovation and stabilisation, their own prestige hierarchies, and their own claims to institutional legitimacy. Teaching students to recognise these varieties as rule-governed and historically intelligible systems – rather than as deviant approximations of a metropolitan norm – is both a linguistic and an ethical undertaking.

M. Hayes and A. Burkette (2017) situate this recognition within their broader principle of sociolinguistic realism, which holds that pedagogy should reflect the actual diversity of language use rather than a prescriptively sanitised version of it. The practical implications for the HEL classroom include the use of diverse text corpora that extend beyond canonical literary and official sources; explicit discussion of how standardisation has interacted with racial, class-based, and colonial ideologies; and assignments that ask students to analyse their own linguistic practices in relation to the historical processes they have studied. Research in this area consistently indicates that students who engage with the politics of standardisation not only develop stronger analytical frameworks for understanding the history of English but also demonstrate more nuanced metalinguistic awareness in their own writing – an outcome with clear implications for their broader academic development *(Milroy & Milroy, 1999; Schleppegrell, 2004)*.

8. Conclusions

The reorientation of the History of the English Language (HEL) pedagogy represents a significant shift in both methodological perspective and instructional practice. This study has demonstrated that contemporary approaches move beyond purely descriptive accounts of linguistic change toward integrated models that combine formal analysis with sociohistorical explanation. Such an approach enhances student engagement, deepens conceptual understanding, and connects language history to broader cultural and political contexts.

The analysis has drawn on key contributions from scholars such as Simon Horobin (2016), M. Hayes, and A. Burkette (2017), whose work emphasizes the importance of contextualizing linguistic phenomena within authentic social environments. On top of it, advances in corpus linguistics and digital humanities have expanded the scope of student inquiry, enabling data-driven exploration of historical texts and fostering active, research-oriented learning.

At the same time, the application of Systemic Functional Linguistics, developed by M. A. K. Halliday (1994) and further applied by M. J. Schleppegrell (2004), has provided effective tools for addressing disciplinary literacy challenges. These approaches support students in interpreting complex historical materials while also developing their ability to produce academic discourse.

However, the findings also highlight several ongoing challenges. These include the need for stronger theoretical scaffolding when using digital tools, the difficulty of balancing internal linguistic analysis with external social factors, and the necessity of addressing ideological issues such as standard language norms and the diversity of World Englishes.

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