

James N. Britton

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James Nimmo Britton (18 May 1908 – 29 February 1994) was an influential British educator at the Institute of Education, University of London, whose theory of language and learning helped guide research in school writing, while shaping the progressive teaching of language, writing, and literature in both England and the United States after the Dartmouth Conference (<http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/374999?uid=3739832&uid=2&uid=4&uid=3739256&sid=21101120540881>) (1966) of Anglo-American English educators.^[1]

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Biography

Britton was born in Scarborough, England, on 18 May 1908. He graduated with a B.A. honours degree in English from University College London, where he held the Campbell Clarke Scholarship and the John Oliver Hobbes Memorial Scholarship. From 1933–1938, he taught English at Harrow Weald County Grammar School, in the state educational system.

In 1938, Britton left his teaching post to become education editor for the publishers John Murray of London. Soon afterwards, he joined the RAF in World War II. *Record and Recall: A Cretan Memoir* (1988) details an episode in his war experiences when he escaped being captured by German paratroopers who invaded the island of Crete where he helped to staff a radar station in 1941. Returning from overseas, Britton worked at John Murray for several years before completing his M.A. at the University of London. From 1948–1952 he also taught education at the Birmingham College of Art.

In 1954, Britton joined the English Education Department at the University of London Institute of Education where he spent the rest of his career, becoming Reader in Education, head of department, and eventually the Goldsmiths Professor. During the 1970s, he headed a major research group (including colleagues Nancy Martin and Harold Rosen) for the British Schools Council, which examined the instructional role of writing in the British Schools. This led to the publication of *The Development of Writing Abilities, 11–18* in 1975 and the refinement of his theory of language use, which distinguished between *participant* and *spectator* language roles.^[2] This work helped teachers to see the importance of having students use *expressive* language and foregrounded the crucial role of audience in the development of language abilities. At this time, Britton was also an active member of the Bullock Committee, which issued its influential report, *A Language for Life*, in 1975.

Britton's classic study *Language and Learning* (1970; 2nd Ed., 1992), contains his most fully developed statement about the relationship between children's active language use and their learning. Drawing on extensive samples of actual speech and writing done by his two daughters when they were growing up (Celia Britton, formerly Professor of French, University of Aberdeen, Scotland, and Alison Britton, one of England's leading ceramic artists), Britton showed how individuals use words to make both practical and moral sense of the world. He also helped to introduce, and make accessible, important psychological thinkers in the area of language, identity, and society, from the American George Kelly to the Russian Lev Vygotsky.

In 1982, his selected essays appeared in *Prospect and Retrospect*; and finally, with his last academic book *Literature in Its Place* (1993),^[3] Britton focused on the importance of poems and stories in people's lives.

Owing to his wide international reputation, Britton served as a visiting scholar in numerous institutions around the English-speaking world. In 1963, he worked with teachers in South Africa and later he travelled to Australia to advise and consult. In Canada, he was especially associated with the University of British Columbia, the University of Calgary, and the Ontario Institute of Education. In the United States, he spoke at numerous National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) conferences and held many visiting professorships, notably at Bread Loaf and New York University. The University of Calgary awarded him an honorary LL.D., and he received NCTE's David H. Russell award (<http://www.ncte.org/college/awards/russell>) in 1977 for Distinguished Research in the Teaching of English. A collection, *The Word for Teaching Is Learning*, was published in 1988 to honour his eightieth birthday. In addition, the Conference on English Education recognises Britton's important influence on English teachers throughout the world by annually selecting a winner of the James N. Britton Award for Inquiry in English Language Arts.^[4]

Britton also worked hard at establishing professional networks for teachers of English. In 1947, he helped found the London Association for the Teaching of English (<http://www.late.org.uk/>) (LATE), which eventually led to the founding of the National Association for the Teaching of English (<http://www.nate.org.uk/>) (NATE) in the UK in 1963. His commitment to helping initiate and sustain an international conversation among teachers of English began with his role as a member of the British delegation to the Dartmouth Conference of 1966.^[5] In 1971, at the University of York, Britton was a key supporter of the first grassroots International Conference with its call for language and writing across the curriculum. In 1984, he edited *English Teaching: An International Exchange* for the International Federation for the Teaching of English (IFTE).

See also

- Clare Britton

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2. <http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/40171022?uid=3739832&uid=2129&uid=2&uid=70&uid=4&uid=3739256&sid=21101114113951>
3. Hardy, Barbara , 10 September 1993, Secret life of books, (review of *Literature in Its Place* in Times Educational Supplement).
4. James N. Britton Award (<http://www.ncte.org/cee/awards/britton>)
5. Dixon, John. (1967). *Growth through English*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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