

# Grammar and Writing in England's National Curriculum

## Introduction and background

The national curriculum in England, implemented from 2014 onwards, requires primary school pupils to learn about grammatical terms to improve their writing. The focus on grammar in the 2014 curriculum is far greater than in previous versions. The emphasis on grammar is clear from its first mention in the national curriculum document: "Pupils should develop the stamina and skills to write at length, with accurate spelling and punctuation. They should be taught the correct use of grammar."

This research by a team at the Institute of Education evaluated a new approach to teaching grammar and writing called Englicious. The Englicious website and its resources are designed to help teachers deliver England's national curriculum requirements for English grammar, and to prepare pupils for the Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling tests which are optional at KS1 (pupils aged 5 to 7) and statutory at KS2 (in Year 6, pupils aged 10 to 11). The Englicious intervention consisted of 10 lessons that involved explicit teaching of grammatical terms required by the national curriculum. At the end of each lesson, the pupils applied this learning about grammar to a piece of writing which they produced.

This was the first research to use a randomised controlled trial (RCT) and implementation and process evaluation (IPE) design to evaluate England's 2014 national curriculum.

## Key points and findings

### Previous research

- Learning how to compose the grammar of written sentences is a vital part of learning to write. However, in 2001 a substantial literature review of published research and other relevant evidence concluded that there was no robust evidence that traditional grammar teaching which includes a strong focus on the naming of grammatical terms had a positive effect on primary pupils' writing (Wyse, 2001). This view was backed up by a further view systematic review in 2004 (Andrews et al).
- Research using experimental designs, particularly randomised controlled trials (RCTs), has not to date shown positive effects of the teaching of grammar on primary age pupils' writing.
- A range of interventions have been devised to support pupils' written text production. These interventions span word, sentence, and text level aspects. Meta-analyses have found positive effects for sentence combining and negative effects for explicitly teaching grammar.
- Overall, the research has led researchers to conclude that traditional grammar instruction focused on developing meta-linguistic knowledge about grammatical terms and rules does not improve writing.

### Methodology

- Year 2 teachers (teaching pupils aged 6 to 7) in 70 schools were randomly allocated to either an Englicious intervention group of schools or to a control group. Test data from 1,246 pupils in 63 schools were analysed.
- The primary test measure used to evaluate the impact of Englicious was a test of pupils' narrative writing based on the Progress in English (PiE) test. The

secondary test measure, which was more focused on grammar, was a sentence generation test (SGT) which required pupils to generate as many different sentences as they could which included the 2 words given as a prompt. The SGT was chosen because it could detect an important aspect of pupils' grammatical understanding.

- A qualitative IPE (implementation and process evaluation) was carried out using questionnaire surveys of teachers, and visits to a random selection of 12 case study teachers - 6 teachers in control schools and 6 in intervention schools. Visits to schools included interviews and observations of grammar lessons.

### Key quantitative findings

- The main findings of the research show that there was effectively no impact of the intervention on pupils' narrative writing (a Cohen's d effect size of 0.04). This is consistent with previous studies in the field of grammar for writing. The study finding does not therefore offer support for grammar teaching to improve writing.
- There was a larger effect on pupils' generation of sentences, the secondary outcome measure. For this measure the Cohen's d effect size is 0.14 in favour of the treatment group, although this effect size is also not statistically significant ( $p=0.25$ ).
- Although neither of the effects were statistically significant, the effect on the sentence generation measure is nonetheless encouraging.
- To understand the impact of the sentence generation measure in more detail, researchers explored the effect of being in the treatment group on each of the 3 criteria that attracted a mark in the test, i.e., the



number of sentences with both words used, the number of grammatically correct sentences, and the number of semantically meaningful sentences. For each of these measures, scores were higher for the treatment group.

- The researchers argue that a positive effect on sentence generation could have been a result of pupils' manipulation of words, phrases and sentences, and the connections made between grammar teaching and pupils practising writing. These elements are a feature of the Englicious intervention.

### Key qualitative findings

- One key difference between intervention and control schools, as revealed by lesson observations, was that the Englicious lessons consistently included an opportunity for pupils to apply their new learning through an independent writing activity. This did not appear to be a typical approach in every lesson observed in the control schools. The teaching in the control school lessons included the use of whole class discussions which sometimes involved all pupils sitting together on a carpet area.
- The control school lessons included some physical interaction involving grammatical structures, for example through playing and experimenting with language. However, this physical interaction was not seen as frequently, nor as consistently, as it was in the intervention lessons for which manipulation of words, phrases and sentences was a key element.
- Although researchers frequently saw pupils who appeared to be engaged with the lessons in the control schools, these lessons did not appear to provide as many opportunities to physically play with language as Englicious intervention lessons.
- The end-of-intervention survey showed that most respondents (11 out of a total of 33) agreed that the intervention lessons had had a positive effect on pupils' writing.
- A range of positive comments about the intervention activities were reported by 5 of the 6 teachers in the intervention group during the first school visits. Teachers liked the interactive nature of the lessons and that these led to useful discussions; they liked that the lessons included variety, that the tasks were age-appropriate and manageable for learners; and that the pupils enjoyed the games and activities.
- The main reservations about the intervention related to the amount of content to be covered in one lesson, and the length of the teacher input session at the beginning.
- Most respondents to the mid-intervention and end-of-intervention surveys agreed that knowing grammatical technical terms is essential, and that the national curriculum requirements for grammatical terms were appropriate. Most teachers in the treatment group felt that involvement with the Englicious programme had significantly or somewhat influenced their views on grammar teaching.

### Conclusions and recommendations

- The research found that seven-year-old pupils' narrative writing was not improved as a result of grammar teaching. There was an encouraging impact

on pupils' generation of sentences, but this was not statistically significant.

- The main outcomes of this research lead to questions about whether the type of grammar content, and the amount of grammar content, in the national curriculum is the most appropriate focus to help pupils learn to write.
- The report concludes that the lack of robust research evidence to underpin the grammar requirements in England's national curriculum is a concern.
- The authors recommend that the grammar requirements in England's national curriculum should be reviewed, and that their appropriateness for contributing to the improvement of pupils' writing should be evaluated.
- There should be further research to further explore evidence-based practices for the teaching of writing within grammar and writing lessons.

**The full document can be downloaded from:**

[https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10144257/1/Grammar%20and%20Writing%20in%20Englands%20National%20Curriculum%20Report%20February%202022\\_.pdf](https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10144257/1/Grammar%20and%20Writing%20in%20Englands%20National%20Curriculum%20Report%20February%202022_.pdf)