

Research Review Series: English

Introduction and background

The introduction to the national curriculum says: ‘Fluency in the English language is an essential foundation for success in all subjects.’ Through studying literature, pupils’ eyes are opened to the human experience; they explore meaning and ambiguity as well as the beauty and power of language. This review explores the research literature relating to English. Its purpose is to identify factors that can contribute to high-quality curriculums, pedagogy, assessment, and schools’ systems for managing the subject.

Key points

The importance of foundational knowledge

- There can be a presumption that English is a ‘skills-based’ subject without an identifiable body of knowledge, including vocabulary, to be learned. However, evidence on the foundational importance of different forms of knowledge, cited throughout this review, challenges this presumption.
- Knowledge of language, including linguistic knowledge like vocabulary and grammar, as well as knowledge and understanding of the world, underpins progression in spoken language, reading, and writing.
- When planning a curriculum, teachers and leaders should prioritise progression in knowledge of language and of its forms, usage, grammar, and vocabulary.

The early English curriculum

- Children with a language deficit at the age of 5 are 4 times more likely to have reading difficulties when they are adults. Spoken language proficiency has a positive effect on later economic well-being, and on happiness and mental health. Research has also shown the positive impact of early language ability, particularly vocabulary, on GCSE outcomes in mathematics, English language, and English literature.
- It is therefore vital for teachers to develop children’s spoken language as well as accurate word reading and spelling. Teachers also need to teach children fluent letter formation (unjoined handwriting). Delaying teaching joined handwriting gives teachers and children time to focus on other aspects of the writing process, such as composition, spelling, and forming letters correctly in the early years.
- Pupils should be taught to read using a systematic synthetic phonics programme in Reception and this should not be delayed if children are not already phonologically aware. Schools should identify early on any children who have not grasped the alphabetic code and intervene swiftly.
- The use of decodable books, which allows children to read books which they can decode, is recommended. Teachers should also explicitly work to develop pupils’ vocabulary.
- Carefully chosen dictation activities enable pupils to practise and apply their spelling knowledge and segmenting skill to use the content they have been

taught and to do so without having their working memories overloaded by composing sentences.

Spoken language

- Research indicates that there is a correlation between pupils’ spoken language skills and their academic outcomes, social development, and emotional development. Alexander outlines how talk can be undervalued because its function is primarily social, but talk in classrooms is cognitive and cultural as well as social.
- To make progress in spoken language, pupils need to develop in 4 key areas – physical (vocal control and body language), linguistic (vocabulary, grammar, and rhetorical devices), cognitive (knowledge of content and ideas), and social and emotional (considering the needs of different listeners).
- A spoken language curriculum should ensure that all pupils can select and use appropriate grammar and register for audience and purpose, including Standard English where necessary.
- Teachers should model language forms that pupils might not encounter away from school, as well as introducing potentially unfamiliar vocabulary, and returning to key words and phrases to embed new knowledge. This might include teachers reframing pupils’ spoken language and asking pupils to repeat back the reframing.
- There should be carefully planned opportunities for pupils to take part in both ‘exploratory talk,’ which enables the speaker to try out ideas, and ‘presentational talk,’ which focuses on accurate communication. The necessary skills for these forms of talk require direct and explicit teaching and practice in English. Teachers can support pupils in developing the ability to collaborate in conversation by providing ground rules.

Reading and writing

- There are 3 factors which underpin reading comprehension. They are knowledge (linguistic, orthographical, and general), processes (decoding, word identification, meaning retrieval, sentence parsing, and inferring), and cognitive processes such as memory.



- Progression in reading should come from reading a broad range of increasingly challenging texts. Reading these texts can gradually increase pupils' 'readiness' for reading the ambitious literature that is the end point of the national curriculum.
 - Most new vocabulary will be encountered through reading since most words and language patterns occur far more often in written texts than in spoken language. Teachers cannot rely on pupils' experience of spoken language for vocabulary learning.
 - In teaching vocabulary, teachers may consider the frequency of words and may opt to focus on 'tier 2' words - high-frequency words which pupils are likely to encounter across written texts and in more formal situations than in everyday conversation. They may also focus on prefixes and suffixes, and on knowledge of the history of words (etymology).
 - Morphology helps pupils recognise that similar-looking words might be related in meaning, even if they are pronounced differently – such as 'inquire' and 'inquisition.'
 - Research has found when pupils encountered and used new words in a variety of contexts, this produced bigger gains in vocabulary development than just reading or adding definitions to the words.
 - Planned and spaced recall helps pupils to retain the new vocabulary they have learned.
 - Teaching needs to provide the contextual knowledge that pupils need to adequately comprehend a text.
 - In a high-quality curriculum, teachers encourage pupils to read for pleasure – this is particularly important for pupils from homes where little reading takes place. Strategies may include a 'reading for pleasure pedagogy' that includes reading aloud and time for pupils who can read fluently to read independently, or the creation of a community of readers
 - The 2014 national curriculum, unlike the 1998 National Literacy Strategy, does not require pupils to be taught to write particular genres or text types. It focuses on writing for different purposes: 'to describe, narrate, explain, instruct, give, and respond to information, and argue.'
 - If spelling and handwriting are not fluent, pupils' working memory is overloaded and it becomes difficult to focus on composition. Pupils' accuracy and automaticity in transcription (spelling and handwriting) should be secured by lower key stage 2.
 - Teachers need to directly teach sentence construction and control of grammar and syntax so that pupils can use them with accuracy, confidence, and increasing flair. Research also suggests that explicit instruction about writing knowledge and strategies can develop older pupils' writing.
 - Reading requires the same phonic knowledge for all children. Teachers can help pupils overcome difficulties by ensuring that they learn grapheme-phoneme correspondences (GPCs); pupils with SEND are highly likely to need much more frequent repetition. Research shows that pupils with SEND do not generally benefit from differentiated teaching, activities, or resources to achieve a curriculum goal.
- history and development of literature, the craft of the writer, the response of the reader, and the nature of literary study.
- Over time, teachers should build pupils' 'readiness' for future encounters with texts and critical views. An example of text choice for curriculum readiness might be reading 'The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time' to create readiness for Perkins Gilman's novella, 'The Yellow Wallpaper,' because one is more accessible than the other, but both use unreliable narrators.
 - A high-quality curriculum includes a range of ambitious whole texts in different forms and genres, which have been carefully chosen using subject-specific criteria. All pupils have the opportunity to read texts which are distanced from their own reality.
 - Ideas about writers' intentions can be over-simplified if they are viewed solely through the prism of the current political landscape or contemporary issues. This is reductionist. It can lead to significant, influential texts being removed from the curriculum, or texts being included only because they address contemporary issues rather than due to literary merit.

Assessment

- A high-quality curriculum breaks learning down into component parts, which are assessed formatively. This enables teachers to identify precisely pupils' misconceptions, gaps, and errors. Pupils could, for example, answer a series of questions on a particular section or aspect of a text or undertake targeted practice activities, focused on areas where they need to improve, such as specific spellings or learning to use particular punctuation, embed a quotation or conclude an essay.
- Effective feedback provides 'a recipe for future action.' It should be specific rather than general, such as 'Can you add the key terms "anaphora" and "hyperbole" to your response?' instead of 'You need to use more sophisticated vocabulary.'
- A multi-tiered approach to assessing reading problems leads to accurate identification and diagnosis of difficulties and pupils receive targeted support. Teachers may first identify pupils who may be struggling through a general reading test and then move onto further one-to-one diagnostic testing to identify specific gaps or issues.
- Mark schemes do not identify the range of curriculum content that pupils need to learn incrementally to succeed in the specific written tasks they are set. Treating them as a 'progression model' means that pupils may not acquire the very prior knowledge they need for final summative assessments.

Systems at school and subject level

- Leadership of English begins with primary school headteachers making sure that the youngest pupils grasp the basic knowledge and skills of reading, including phonics.
- The effectiveness of middle leaders depends on their knowledge of the subject and of effective pedagogy, and the extent to which they have autonomy and control over the curriculum, drawing on their subject expertise.

Literature

- A high-quality curriculum is designed to enable pupils to deepen their understanding in Atherton's 4 domains or fields of knowledge in literature. These are: the

The full document can be downloaded from:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/curriculum-research-review-series-english/curriculum-research-review-series-english>