

# English, Language and Literacy 3 to 19

Principles and Proposals



## Reading 3 to 7

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John Richmond

**owen**EDUCATION

# English, Language and Literacy 3 to 19

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*English, Language and Literacy 3 to 19: Summary  
Talk*

**Reading 3 to 7**

**Writing 3 to 7**

**Reading 7 to 16**

**Writing 7 to 16**

**Grammar and Knowledge about Language**

**Drama**

**Media**

**English 16 to 19**

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**John Richmond**



# Preface: English, Language and Literacy 3 to 19

## Purpose

This booklet is one of a series about the teaching of language, literacy and English to children and young people aged 3 to 19. The aim of the series is to inspire and inform debate about school strategy. The booklets draw on seminal studies and development work carried out over many years. They have been commissioned by Owen Education, an independent school-improvement agency.

Owen Education's purpose in producing the series is easily stated. There should, in the second decade of the 21st century, be a professional consensus amongst those who teach English to children and young people, or who teach those children and young people *in* English, as to how to help them most effectively to gain confidence and competence in the use of English. We observe that though this consensus *should* exist, in practice it does not. We aim here to describe a desirable, intellectually sound and practically achievable consensus around which those who teach English or teach *in* English could unite.

By 'those who teach English or teach in English' we mean three groups of professionals: teachers of children aged from three to 11 in early-years settings and primary schools; teachers of the subject English in secondary schools and colleges serving young people between the ages of 11 and 19; and teachers of a range of other subjects in those secondary schools and colleges, for whom it is essential that students have sufficient confidence and competence as readers, writers and speakers of English to access and benefit from the curriculum in those subjects.

There is a particular urgency in our purpose, in that all contemporary commentators agree that, whatever progress has been made overall in raising the achievement of learners in English, language and literacy, there is still a large gap between the highest and the lowest achievers. There are still far too many children and young people who are failing to become competent and confident users of their language, when there is no valid reason, in terms of their potential, why they *should* fail. Those most at risk of failure are learners from socio-economically poorer backgrounds.

Without false modesty, we will make a declaration about the limits of our purpose. Nothing written here is the outcome of original research. We are simply summarising and quoting from some of the best that has been thought and written about the acquisition and development of language and literacy in children and young people.

The previous sentence includes a huge value judgment. What do we mean by 'the best'?



## Key principles

We believe that the best work on the acquisition and development of language and literacy draws on seven basic principles.

1. There is no intellectual achievement more intimately connected to a child's and young person's overall sense of worth as an individual and as a social being than the achievement of competence and confidence in the use of her or his language or languages.
2. The achievement of competence in any aspect of language is prior to and more complex than the achievement of the ability to analyse that aspect of language. Learners nonetheless continually engage in acts of reflection on aspects of the language they encounter and use.
3. The achievement of competence in any aspect of language is principally owed to the enjoyable *experience* of that aspect of language. *Instruction* in an aspect of language has a secondary but nonetheless very significant role to play in this achievement.
4. The learner's brain makes dynamic generalisations from enjoyable experiences of language. These generalisations prepare the learner for new encounters with and uses of language.
5. The motivation for any productive or receptive encounter with or use of language is the desire and need to construct meaning. Producers and receivers of language are both engaged in the construction of meaning.
6. Examples of language and literacy in use in English and of potential value and interest to learners are vast in number and diversity. Some of that diversity should be evident in the selection of examples which teachers present to learners.
7. Learners' experience of language in education should both value and confirm their linguistic, cultural and social backgrounds, and introduce them to cultural and social contexts beyond those they are familiar with.

The seven principles are stated here at a level of generality and abstraction which probably seems high-flown and dry. We shall try to invest them with a living practicality later on. In the meantime, it may be asked: what is so remarkable about them? Are they not self-evident, uncontroversial? The answer is: they should be, but they haven't been. The reason why they haven't been has something to do with the history of the contest for control of the teaching of English, language and literacy in our schools and colleges over the last five decades. It also has to do with the fact that good knowledge can sometimes be forgotten, get lost, in the welter of new initiatives and changes of course – often politically driven – affecting the curriculum.

## The booklets

The series sets out and illustrates a comprehensive and rigorous basis on which learners are enabled to gain confidence and competence in the use of English. The booklets are entitled:

*English, Language and Literacy 3 to 19: Summary*

*Talk*

*Reading 3 to 7*

*Writing 3 to 7*

*Reading 7 to 16*

*Writing 7 to 16*

*Grammar and Knowledge about Language*

*Drama*

*Media*

*English 16 to 19*

## The learning and teaching of early literacy

In other booklets in this series, we consider reading and writing as they concern children and young people from about age 7 upwards. One of the tenets of the series is that, in essence, there is far more continuity than difference in the development of language from the earliest stages through to adult competence. In this booklet and in an equivalent booklet on writing, we are concerned with literacy learning by young children from about age 3 until about age 7. There is a very good argument for considering the two facets of early literacy – reading and writing – within the same booklet. Although the two facets are always mutually interpenetrating and interactive, they are particularly so as young children come to understand for the first time what the written language is and what it can do for them. However, partly for reasons of length and partly because there are interesting and significant differences in the ways that young children come to be readers and come to be writers, we have decided to deal with the two facets in separate booklets. We urge the reader to read this booklet and the booklet *Writing 3 to 7* consecutively.

## The National Curriculum

We believe that the new National Curriculum for English, taking effect from September 2014 or September 2015, contains so many ill-judged requirements, so much legally binding content which runs contrary to the way in which children and young people most effectively learn English (whether as their first or additional language), that we have been driven to offer an alternative. This is set out in its entirety towards the end of the summary booklet for the whole series, and in appropriate chapters towards the end of each of the booklets dealing with any part of the 5 to 16 curriculum.

At some point in the future, government and the profession will have to sit down together and make something better than has been made now, because significant sections of the new orders will prove to be unworkable.

We welcomed the original principle of the National Curriculum, introduced in 1989 and 1990, which was to offer a broad statement of the knowledge, skills and understanding to which all students in state schools in England and Wales were and are entitled. We lament the absurdity of the current situation, whereby a majority of state secondary schools and a growing minority of primary schools – those that are academies and free schools – are not bound by the National Curriculum. Why go to all the trouble of designing a legally enforced National Curriculum and then abandon the principle of general entitlement? This is an incoherent and inequitable position.

*John Richmond*

*Peter Dougill*

*Mike Raleigh*



# 1 Learning to read 3 to 7 – summary of main points

- Successful entry into literacy depends on an existing competence in spoken language. The beginning reader, to be successful, must employ all the resources of her or his retentive memory, generalising brain and propensity to make meaning.
- Much of a beginning reader's learning takes place unconsciously, just as does virtually all of a beginning speaker's learning. However, while allowing full play to the powerful forces of children's unconscious literacy learning, the teacher has a vital part to play through appropriately pitched conscious instruction.
- Pleasure in reading is an essential prerequisite to success in reading. This principle applies at all levels of encounters with writing, from word recognition up to full-scale comprehension of continuous texts.
- Learning to read is learning to infer and construct meaning from writing. To do this effectively, beginning readers need a range of ways of grasping meaning. This range includes the recognition and retention of whole words, to which beginning readers have been introduced by the teacher or other experienced reader. It includes the making of links between the semantic and syntactic patterns and structures of spoken language, of which most beginning readers already have substantial experience, and their equivalents in written language. It includes the recognition of grapho-phonetic correspondences in written English in the many contexts where they exist.
- Beginning readers need full access to a wide range of books, crucially including books which have been composed using the natural patterns, usages and rhythms of English.
- The support of parents and other experienced readers at home is of enormous importance in the development of successful young readers.
- Successful teaching of reading does not depend on allegiance to a particular method, but on an overall understanding of what it is that the beginning reader does in successfully encountering a text.
- These principles apply with equal force to learners of English as an additional language (about one in six children in the age-group with which this booklet is concerned). EAL learners are engaged in the complex process of sorting differences and recognising equivalences between their first and additional language(s). The appropriately pitched conscious instruction by the teacher to which we refer above will have a particular application to EAL learners who have some level of literacy in their first language, where there is likely to be a conscious transfer of knowledge and skill from one written form to another. Appropriate books in the first language and in bilingual editions should be provided, so that the writing systems of English and the other language(s) can be compared.
- Current government policy and statutory requirements in the area of early reading are based on a simplistic view of the reading process, which fails to do justice to the diversity of strategies which young children in fact use to become successful readers.

