

English, Language and Literacy 3 to 19

Principles and Proposals



Reading 7 to 16

Peter Traves

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English, Language and Literacy 3 to 19

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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Peter Traves



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 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, since 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 English, 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 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 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 worthwhile professional 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

There are many connections between the booklets; in the case of this booklet, connections with *Reading 3 to 7* and *Writing 7 to 16* are especially close.

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 in the summary booklet for the whole series, and in chapters in 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 Reading 7 to 16 – summary of main points

- The ability to read well is vital in our society. It brings with it huge benefits in terms of pleasure, personal enrichment, practical value and power.
- The demands on and expectations of readers are increasing. These need to be reflected in the absolute priority given to reading as part of the curriculum from 7 to 16 and in the resources allocated to support it.
- The teaching of reading requires an understanding of the different purposes for which we read, the complexity of the task of reading and the range of reading skills needed to support learning. The varied purposes and types of text, and the different means through which text is now carried, call for different skills on the part of the reader. These skills need to be taught systematically, but not mechanically.
- Effective reading is needed for success in all subjects and ought to be encouraged, taught and reinforced across the curriculum. This calls for a coherent whole-school approach to literacy. One feature of this approach is that productive use of the school library is at the heart of the school's life. Another is that teachers and other adults in school show students that they read too.
- Reading is inextricably linked to the other modes of language: writing, speaking and listening. These links should be recognised in students' experiences of reading across the curriculum.
- Pleasure in reading is the key. Research confirms a direct link between the commitment to reading for pleasure and wider educational success.
- The interests and experiences learners bring to the classroom are one starting point for the encouragement of reading. But teachers have a responsibility to make sure that children and young people become ambitious readers, able to take on a wider range of texts outside their own immediate experience and at increasing levels of complexity and demand.
- Reading for information is a basic tool across the curriculum and in life. Students need frequent and wide experience of it and the encouragement to take on ever more challenging tasks and material.
- Students should be shown how literature and other texts achieve their effects. They also need opportunities to explore how their own perspectives, values and assumptions compare with those in the texts they encounter.
- All learners can experience the pleasure and satisfaction that reading can bring. Those who initially fail to gain the benefits or those whose interest in reading has faded need particular help, tailored to their different histories and characteristics. Underachievement in and underuse of reading by boys are by no means inevitable.



- All these principles apply with equal force to learners of English as an additional language (about one in six students in the age-group with which this booklet is concerned). However, students who have begun to read and write in another language and are learning to write in English are additionally engaged in the complex process of making comparisons between writing systems. Appropriate books in the first language and in bilingual editions can help the comparison of the writing systems of English and the other language(s), in addition to the other benefits they bring. More advanced bilingual learners can derive especial benefit from paying attention to the structures and styles of the more academic forms of writing with which their previous reading in English has not made them familiar.
- The coverage of reading for students aged 7 to 16 in the current National Curriculum for England is uneven. The alternative offered in this booklet is based on the consistent development of attitudes and skills across the board and across the phases.

