

English, Language and Literacy 3 to 19

Principles and Proposals



Writing 3 to 7

John Richmond

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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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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 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. None of our own words 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 judgement. 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. Those between this booklet and *Reading 3 to 7* and *Grammar and Knowledge about Language* are particularly close. We recommend that the three be read together.

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 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 write 3 to 7 – summary of main points

- Successful entry into literacy depends on a developing competence in spoken language. In the first years of their lives, children are learning to talk; and they are concurrently learning to recognise and use graphic systems: drawing, writing and number. They experiment with these systems while learning to talk.
- The beginning writer, to be successful, must employ all the resources of her or his retentive memory and generalising brain.
- A great deal of informal, unconscious learning about writing comes from reading and being read to. Oral and written stories, poems, songs and rhymes have a key role to play in this learning.
- While recognising the powerful forces at work in children's unconscious literacy learning, the teacher has a vital part to play through appropriately pitched conscious instruction.
- The teaching of writing requires an understanding of all the characteristics and needs of a writer at work, and an understanding of the multiple demands that adults make on children when we ask them to write.
- Teachers should encourage the confident voices of early writers.
- Teachers should provide the supports and the direct teaching necessary to bring children, without undue haste and without creating undue anxiety, to an understanding of the conventions of the writing system appropriate for their age, and to a relaxed control of the physical act of handwriting.
- The premature introduction of instruction in some of the abstract categories in which adults discuss writing (for example grammatical categories and spelling rules) can be harmful to the confidence of the young writer, and counter-productive even to the purpose – to lead the child to correctness – for which those categories have been introduced.
- Young children should have experience of writing which is active, participatory, social and collaborative. There should also be occasions for writing when quiet, reflective individual effort is required.
- Young children should be introduced to an appropriate range of the kinds of writing which exist in the world, and be encouraged to try out some of that range for themselves. The range should both confirm and represent the linguistic, social and cultural diversity of the classroom, and allow for exploration of real contexts and imaginary worlds beyond the classroom.
- The range of children's writing, and the means by which the writing is displayed and distributed, should employ digital and electronic equipment and media as well as traditional physical equipment and media.
- All 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). However, children 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. There is likely to be a conscious transfer of knowledge and skill from one written form to another. As well as the other benefits they bring, 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).