OFSTED Research Review: English

Summary

## National Context

- The performance of pupils in English has remained constant over a long period. Girls outperform boys and pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds achieve less well than their peers. This is backed up by international studies and national data across each key stage.

## Curriculum and Pedagogy

- Foundational knowledge is key:
    - Sometimes English is viewed by modality rather than understanding the importance of foundational knowledge to each modality.
    - Knowledge of language (vocabulary, grammar, knowledge of the world etc) underpins progression in spoken language, reading and writing.
    - Pupils can use this foundational knowledge across each modality.

- The Early English Curriculum:
    - Spoken Language: Developing spoken language and vocabulary is critically important, particularly in the early years.
    - Decoding: Teaching word reading and transcription should begin in Reception – this priority continues into KS1 and onwards for pupils who need it. An SSP scheme and direct instruction is key. This should happen from entry and should not be delayed for children who cannot distinguish individual phonemes – research shows their knowledge will best develop through phonics teaching. However, they often benefit from small group or one to one teaching to support them to link sounds to letters. Extra practice should be built in for children who are at risk of falling behind – this should happen quickly and be focused on the gaps in their knowledge of the alphabetic code. Pupils need access to decodable books closely matched to their developing phonics knowledge – they need daily practice with these.
    - Comprehension: At the same time, language comprehension and composition should be developed through a literature-rich environment and learning stories, rhymes etc by heart. A wide range of high-quality books should be shared to develop language knowledge – when these are read by adults, they do not need to be decodable.
    - Fluency: Pupils need to achieve accuracy and sufficient speed in decoding to support comprehension. Repeated practice should be built in to support developing fluency.
    - Writing: Fluent transcription skills should be the priority in EYFS and KS1 so pupils have sufficient capacity in their working memory to plan, compose and review their writing effectively in KS2. Transcription may be taught separately to composition, where pupils may contribute orally and the teacher scribe their ideas.
    - Spelling: Phonics knowledge should be used to support spelling. Dictation in context, is an effective way of practising and applying their spelling knowledge.
    - Handwriting: Explicit teaching (from Reception onwards), modelling and repeated practice are necessary to become fluent in letter formation. Delaying joined handwriting allows for pupils to develop other writing skills, and should be left until unjoined letters are learned. There is evidence that forming letters accurately supports reading, and that handwriting fluency directly supports composition, as pupils can spend more time on other aspects of the writing craft.

- Spoken Language:
    - A curriculum for spoken language: There is a clear correlation between spoken language and academic, social and emotional development. Pupils must make progress in the physical, linguistic, cognitive and social & emotional aspects of spoken language – it isn't just about speech but collaboration, including the use of Standard English.

Summary

- Opportunities for developing spoken language need to be carefully planned, in English and in other subjects. Modelling of speaking and listening is key, including unfamiliar language forms and vocabulary. Pupils need regular opportunities to practise and apply their spoken language across different contexts and for a range of purposes, including collaborative conversation.
- Older pupils should build on this to study rhetoric, which will support their understanding of the interplay between speaking, reading and writing.

- Reading:
  - Skilled reading = accurate, speedy word reading + good language comprehension.
  - Pupils need to be taught a broad curriculum that allows them to comprehend increasingly complex texts. Strategies are needed but these become more useful once pupils are fluent readers – comprehension requires understanding of vocabulary, context, syntax and narrative structure, as well as reading fluently. Careful choices of text support this.
  - Progression in comprehension:
    - Knowledge, processes and general cognitive resources underpin reading comprehension. Reading comprehension is the 'orchestrated product' of all these factors – it's the mental model of the text that is created.
    - Knowledge informs comprehension – syntactical, lexical and context knowledge – all are needed for secure comprehension.
    - Text complexity and progression in comprehension: all pupils need to be taught a curriculum that will allow them to comprehend increasingly complex texts. Text complexity is affected by:
      - Linguistic features.
      - Textual references to concepts/objects and knowledge drawn from experience.
      - Cohesion.
      - Levels of meaning.
      - Text structure and sequence.
      - Style of narrator.
      - Allusions, cultural references and intertextuality,
    - Without sufficient experience and practice, fluency and comprehension may stall. Texts need to be carefully selected so that 'each text bootstraps the language and knowledge needed for the next.' Incremental exposure allows some pupils to acquire the knowledge they need to read challenging material independently but an effective curriculum should explicitly identify what exactly it is that pupils need to know in order to understand increasingly complex texts.
    - Components of comprehension and effective pedagogies to teach them:
      - Vocabulary: Pupils will learn vocabulary gradually through exposure but some vocabulary needs to be taught explicitly – when identifying these staff will need to consider pupils prior vocabulary knowledge plus the frequency, role and utility of words. An effective curriculum will also teach meaning of roots and affixes – this supports pupils to understand unfamiliar words and is useful for spelling. Understanding of morphology also supports reading comprehension. Knowledge of how meaning is changed through affixes and etymology is also helpful for vocabulary and comprehension. Older pupils need to be taught the relationships across words and the links between a word's structure, origin and meaning. Pupils need multiple exposures in different contexts for a word to enter their working vocabulary. Focus should be on teaching how words function rather than just definitions – interactive activities exploring different contexts are most helpful, with planned and spaced recall to improve knowledge transfer.

- Context knowledge: Teaching needs to provide the contextual knowledge needed for pupils to comprehend a text but pre-teaching should be focused on what is needed to access the text, rather than lots of wider knowledge. Most context knowledge comes from reading, so staff need to provide access to a rich variety of accessible texts across the curriculum and for reading independently – over time this will broaden pupils' horizons and knowledge required for comprehending texts later in life.
- Structure knowledge: Pupils also need to be familiar with the type and structure of texts – an effective reading curriculum will include a wide range of genres, styles and structures. Over time, pupils need to become familiar with structures and features, including plot, setting, character etc, through engagement with a wide range of texts. Once pupils are fluent readers, staff can draw their attention to these features and help them identify more challenging ones such as subplots, unreliable narrator etc.
- Syntactical knowledge: Comprehension also depends on knowledge of sentences and their meaning – this is what allows reading fluency and accuracy. Pupils need to be able to understand whole sentences and the connections between them, not just the meaning of individual words. Pupils need to encounter increasingly complex sentence structure through texts – they need to hear and read these texts regularly. With sentence knowledge, they will be better able to read aloud with prosody (expression and volume, phrasing, smoothness and pace). This is important as it connects pupils' knowledge of written sounds and words with spoken language, and allows pupils to read for meaning.

- Teaching reading fluency: The most important factor in good reading fluency is the amount of exposure to text – pupils need to 'read a lot'. Useful strategies include:
  - Repeated reading of texts, including for pupils with reading difficulties.
  - Simultaneously listening to and reading along with texts, once pupils have mastered the alphabetic code. However, this does require good working memory and comprehension may suffer whilst doing this.
  - Discussing wording in a text before reading it, including practising key words.
  - Provide opportunities for pupils to perform and read aloud.
- Comprehension processes and the limits of teaching comprehension strategies: Good evidence to show many aspects of these processes happen automatically but some pupils need to build the habit of making meaning as they read. Teaching comprehension strategies that direct pupils to pay attention to the meaning of the text is beneficial. When used, reading comprehension instruction should be brief and explicit, once students are gaining fluency – they shouldn't need to be an ongoing objective once children have been taught the strategies. Pupils need to read a breadth of literature to then apply those strategies – progression comes from developing the knowledge required to access increasingly challenging texts, not from comprehension strategies.
- Making inferences: Inferences depend on a reader's vocabulary knowledge, context knowledge and knowledge of language structures – it's making a mental model of the text. Pupils are likely to make successful inferences when their knowledge is adequate. Inference instruction should be focused and time-limited.
- Comprehension monitoring: Skilled readers monitor their comprehension and this monitoring correlates closely with wider comprehension. Some pupils need to be alerted to the importance of thinking about what they read and making meaning as they read.
- Comprehension strategies have an ongoing use as a pedagogical tool: Once pupils have been taught comprehension strategies, they should continue to be used as a pedagogical tool – the

primary goal is not to teach a strategy but to use one to tease out meaning. Through applying

a strategy, pupils acquire new knowledge that may support them to comprehend challenging texts in the future.

- Implications of limits to working memory: Research suggests that interventions targeted at improving working memory are unlikely to improve pupils' reading. Curriculum time needs to be used to support pupils to read fluently and develop their knowledge and vocabulary so hat working memory can be directed towards making meaning.

- Reading independently and for pleasure: There is a clear positive correlation between pupils' engagement and attainment, motivation and self-confidence. Reading for Pleasure is highly desirable and should be encouraged but care needs to be taken so that these initiatives are not a distraction. Research suggests several strands for a Reading for Pleasure supportive curriculum:
  - Developing teachers' knowledge of children's literature and other texts.
  - Developing teachers' knowledge of pupils' current reading practices and preferences.
  - Establishing a 'Reading for Pleasure' pedagogy that includes reading aloud and time for pupils who can read fluently to read independently.
  - Creating social reading environments, and providing time for informal book talk and recommendations.
  - Supporting staff to become 'reading teachers' who read widely and reflect on their own and others' reading.
  - Creating reading communities, both in and out of school.

- Writing:
  - Effective writing curriculums give pupils opportunities to develop their proficiency in transcription and composition.
    - Transcription:
      - This is the foundation of writing. Once fluent, pupils can focus on developing and communicating their ideas, but if not, fluent pupils' working memory can become overloaded and they cannot focus on composition. Time needs to be given for transcription to be taught, particularly in early primary, but they should continue to be a focus for any pupil who lacks fluency through specific gap-focused intervention.
      - Spelling: Early spelling is focused on phonics, but should also include a focus on conceptual processes, e.g., knowledge of the alphabet, syllables, word meaning and etymology. Spelling should be taught explicitly, starting with knowledge of the alphabetic code and then applying it alongside other spelling strategies. For older pupils. Staff might support spelling by encouraging them to use phonics knowledge; relating spelling to context and content; pre-teaching spelling; giving opportunities to practise spelling; exploring etymology and word families; combining vocabulary development with spelling and teaching irregular words by grouping those with similarities. Assessment should identify which parts of words pupils find challenging, so they can focus on these. Low stakes spelling texts, such as pre tests can support recall and identify focuses for teaching.
    - Composition:
      - Grammar: Understanding grammar and exploring choices helps pupils to express themselves clearly. Unpicking the function and application of grammar within context can be helpful, including the effects grammatical choices have on writing. Pupils also benefit from being taught how to combine and construct sentences – teaching should focus on sentence recognition, construction, meaning and accuracy. Pupils benefit most from direct instruction and modelling, with extensive deliberate practice until

they are fluent. Short, focused tasks, interspersed with specific feedback may be most

supportive. Modelling different ways to construct sentences is also helpful but all activities need to link to pupils' independent writing to be effective.

- Vocabulary: Pupils need specialised vocabulary for different types of text so they can express ideas and opinions in their writing.
- Curriculum: Pupils need discourse knowledge as well as sufficient knowledge of the topic they are going to write about. Discourse knowledge can be built through exploration of texts written for particular audiences and purposes, providing models and discussing features. Staff should link writing to pupils' knowledge of the world, including through the rest of the curriculum. Over time, pupils need to become aware of: how writing can be used to share their interpretation of ideas; their reader's needs and existing knowledge and how that reader might interpret what they write.

- Subject knowledge:
  - Teaching pupils to write effectively requires: explicit teaching of foundational writing skills, aiming for fluency; a 'process' approach to writing (plan, draft, revise, edit, publish); direct instruction about writing knowledge and targeted practice; encouragement of pupils' self-regulation; opportunities to write frequently and opportunities to work cooperatively on different aspects of writing and stages of the writing process.

- A process approach:
  - Pupils need to learn to plan, draft, revise, edit and publish their writing, but this is not sufficient on its own. Foundational skills must be taught too.
  - Explicit instruction about writing knowledge and strategies can develop older pupils' writing, e.g. self-regulated strategy development:
    1. Pupils are taught the background knowledge they need to use a writing strategy effectively.
    2. The teacher explicitly describes and discusses the purpose and benefit of the strategy.
    3. The teacher models how to use the strategy.
    4. Pupils memorise the steps/components of the strategy.
    5. The teacher supports and scaffolds pupils' mastery of the strategy.
    6. Pupils use the strategy independently.
  - Model texts can also be used as worked examples. Reading and studying extracts and short stories can help support pupils to build background knowledge.
  - Discourse knowledge of text type features is important but shouldn't end up being 'feature spotting'. This can be avoided by emphasising the audience, purpose etc and encouraging pupils to tailor their language to suit.

- Motivation:
  - Motivation to write and a classroom that promotes writing is key. Factors which can support motivation include: writing for real audiences and purposes; writing collaboratively with peers; choice of topic and the desire to share ideas with an audience.

- Pedagogical Approaches for Pupils with SEND:
  - Pupils with SEND do not generally benefit from differentiated teaching to reach a curriculum goal. Differentiation is not the same as targeted teaching.
  - Assessment should be used to diagnose children's gaps and support put in place.

- Literature:

Summary

- A strong curriculum develops pupils' epistemic knowledge including literary knowledge: the history and development of literature; the craft of the writer; the response of the reader and the nature of literary study. These areas draw on contextual knowledge and aesthetic knowledge. This will progress best through the exploration of carefully chosen and sequenced texts.
- Appreciation of English literature and key components:
  - Specific component knowledge is needed for comprehension and pupils need to learn these. By late KS2, pupils have the capacity to understand different interpretations of texts – they need the opportunity to accept, adapt or reject these. Different worked examples of interpretations need to be explored with pupils, alongside the necessary component knowledge required.
  - Book talk and exploring texts from the very start will support pupils to understand how texts are structured.
  - To build towards analytical writing, pupils need opportunities to write across subjects using the components, e.g. embedding evidence, using appropriate terminology etc.
  - Spacing and interleaving should be used so that pupils create a schema of how texts work and how they are linked. Over time, texts should become increasingly complex in style and content/theme, but care should be taken that archaic texts are not just moved higher up the school. Texts can be used to support curriculum readiness but all must be able to be read fluently and understood by pupils. Whole texts, read aloud and at a faster pace than usual are important, including for weaker readers. Extracts do have a place in the curriculum when carefully chosen for specific reasons. Texts should be relevant, but also broaden pupils' horizons and give them the chance to experience rich language – relevancy is not just being exposed to familiar situations. A greater range of perspectives needs to be evident in the choice of texts used, so that pupils see themselves in what they read, but literary merit should win out over learning about particular issues.

- Assessment:
  - Formative assessment: Effective formative assessment allows staff to identify gaps in knowledge and adjust teaching to support these. However, grade descriptors should not be used alone for this, as they do not unpick the specific knowledge and skills needed. Giving a narrow formative task is more useful, e.g. questions, using a particular piece of punctuation.
  - Effective feedback for pupils: Staff feedback has the most impact but older pupils may benefit from self-assessment, with a clear rubric. It needs to be a 'recipe for future action' and be specific and challenging. Feedback is most effective when it helps pupils to understand their mistakes, know why they made them and how to avoid them. For new knowledge and skills, instant feedback is preferable but when applying concepts, delayed feedback is shown to be more powerful. The immediacy and frequency of feedback should be dependent on the pupils' level of expertise. Worked examples are useful before using success criteria, but success criteria should be used with a pinch of salt – it should not be differentiated and using it can run the risk of oversimplifying the task, e.g. feature spotting. Oral feedback is an effective alternative to written feedback, particularly when models of excellent work are used.
  - Summative assessment: criterion-referenced assessment can be limiting, and comparative judgement is suggested to have higher reliability. Mark schemes should not be used as a progression model as they are limited in scope. When assessing reading standardised tests are not always effective as diagnostic tools as they do not identify the reasons for pupils' reading difficulties. However, they can be useful to identifying which pupils need a diagnostic test, with additional assessment put in place afterwards.

- Systems:

Summary

- o Leadership: headteachers and SLT must ensure the youngest pupils grasp the basic knowledge and skills of reading, including a complete SSP programme and resources. Subject leads need to have strong knowledge of their subject and effective pedagogy, as well as understanding how much control they have over the curriculum – this autonomy needs to be given to them by SLT.
- o CPD: Teachers' CPD is most effective when it considers staff's needs and capabilities. It should be focused on building deep and flexible knowledge and understanding of content; how content is best sequenced; understanding curriculum tasks, assessments etc and knowing and addressing pupils' misconceptions. Research is beginning to show that fortnightly or monthly CPD/support packages may be most effective, rather than one off sessions.

- • Conclusion:
  - o Strong foundational knowledge for reading, writing and spoken language are essential aspects of the early years' curriculum.
  - o Vocabulary is fundamental to pupils' progress.
  - o An effective reading curriculum ensures that pupils read large amounts of text and it focuses on providing pupils with the knowledge they need for comprehension.
  - o A reading curriculum is supported by the careful choice of increasingly challenging texts.
  - o The English curriculum for novices is structured differently in many aspects from the curriculum for experts.