

Let's Think in English: Response to Ofsted's consultation on its new Education Inspection Framework

Let's Think in English is one of three cognitive acceleration programmes developed at King's College London on the basis of research by Philip Adey and Michael Shayer (Adey and Shayer 1994; Shayer and Adey 2002).

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Proposal 1

To what extent do you agree with the proposal to introduce a 'quality of education' judgement?

Strongly agree

COMMENT

We strongly agree with Ofsted's overall intentions as regards 'the quality of education' (i.e. the curriculum) because it focusses attention for the first time on the quality of *what* is taught as well as *how* it is taught. The new framework also declares that Ofsted will not look at schools' internal data. As indicated by HMCI in speeches, this is intended to persuade SLTs to reduce the amount of assessment they require. As a response to continuing concerns about teacher workload, this is highly desirable.

However, we have two concerns about Ofsted's proposals as they relate to the teaching and learning of English.

1 A discrepancy between Ofsted's proposals and the National Curriculum in relation to reading for pleasure.

Statutory requirements

The National Curriculum and its programmes of study are statutory so that schools are required to comply with them. As mentioned above, academies are required to follow a comparable curriculum. *The National Curriculum in England: complete framework for key stages 1 to 4 for teaching from September 2016* includes the following requirements.

“6. Language and literacy

1.3 Reading and writing

Teachers should develop pupils’ reading and writing in all subjects to support their acquisition of knowledge. Pupils should be taught to read fluently, understand extended prose (both fiction and non-fiction) *and be encouraged to read for pleasure*. Schools should do everything to promote wider reading. They should provide library facilities and set ambitious expectations for reading at home... (emphasis added)

“7. Programmes of study and attainment targets

English

Purpose of study

English has a pre-eminent place in education and in society. A high-quality education in English will teach pupils to speak and write fluently so that they can communicate their ideas and emotions to others and through their reading and listening, others can communicate with them. *Through reading in particular, pupils have a chance to develop culturally, emotionally, intellectually, socially and spiritually. Literature, especially, plays a key role in such development...* (emphasis added)

Aims

The overarching aim for English in the national curriculum is to promote high standards of language and literacy by equipping pupils with a strong command of the spoken and written word, *and to develop their love of literature through widespread reading for enjoyment*. The national curriculum for English aims to ensure that all pupils:

- read easily, fluently and with good understanding
- *develop the habit of reading widely and often, for both pleasure and information*
- acquire a wide vocabulary, an understanding of grammar and knowledge of linguistic conventions for reading, writing and spoken language
- *appreciate our rich and varied literary heritage ...* (emphasis added)

Reading

... Good comprehension draws from linguistic knowledge (in particular of vocabulary and grammar) and on knowledge of the world. Comprehension skills develop through pupils' experience of high-quality discussion with the teacher, as well as from reading and discussing a range of stories, poems and non-fiction. All pupils must be encouraged to read widely across both fiction and non-fiction to develop their knowledge of themselves and the world in which they live, *to establish an appreciation and love of reading*, and to gain knowledge across the curriculum. Reading widely and often increases pupils' vocabulary because they encounter words they would rarely hear or use in everyday speech. *Reading also feeds pupils' imagination and opens up a treasure-house of wonder and joy for curious young minds...* (emphasis added)

Key stage 1 – Year 1 and Year 2

The attainment targets for Reading comprehension begin:

Pupils should be taught to develop pleasure in reading, motivation to read, vocabulary and understanding by... (emphasis added, pages 22 and 29).

The primacy of teaching pupils to “develop pleasure in reading” should be noted.

There is a similar emphasis in Lower key stage 2 – Years 3 and 4.

Upper key stage 2 – Years 5 and 6

... [Pupils] should be able to prepare readings, with appropriate intonation to show their understanding, and should be able to summarise and present a familiar story in their own words. *They should be reading widely and frequently, outside as well as in school, for pleasure and information*. They should be able to read silently, with good understanding, inferring the meanings of unfamiliar words, and then discuss what they have read....

... During years 5 and 6, teachers should continue to emphasise pupils' enjoyment and understanding of language, especially vocabulary, to support their reading and writing. (emphasis added, page 42).

Key stages 3 and 4

Reading and writing

Reading at key stages 3 and 4 should be wide, varied and challenging. Pupils should be expected to read whole books, to read in depth *and to read for pleasure* and information... (emphasis added, page 81)

Key stage 3 subject content

Reading

Pupils should be taught to:

- *develop an appreciation and love of reading, and read increasingly challenging material independently through:*
- *reading a wide range of fiction and non-fiction, including in particular whole books, short stories, poems and plays with a wide coverage of genres, historical periods, forms and authors...”*
(emphasis added, page 83).

Again it should be noted that “appreciation and love of reading” is placed first in the description of content.

With its repeated references at all key stages to the need to ensure that pupils read for pleasure, the National Curriculum recognises that enjoyment of reading is essential to motivation and that, without this, pupils are unlikely to develop as proficient readers.

Ofsted’s proposals

In contrast to the National Curriculum, there is a single mention of enjoyment in reading in the Draft Education Inspection Framework at the final bullet of Quality of education, Implementation (page 11, paragraph 25).

Enjoyment in reading is mentioned only once in the Draft Inspection Handbook: at Grade criteria for quality of education, Good, Implementation of curriculum, bullet 8: “A rigorous and sequential approach to the reading curriculum develops pupils’ fluency, confidence and enjoyment in reading.”

There is no mention of reading for pleasure or enjoyment in reading in the Ofsted’s Overview of Research or Curriculum Workshop presentation.

The National Curriculum is a statutory obligation on schools by regulations under Education Act 2002, section 87, with comparable obligations on academies under Academies Act 2010, section 1A. Ofsted’s proposals do not adequately reflect the statutory requirements of the National Curriculum in relation to reading for pleasure. They should therefore be revised to ensure that inspectors’ judgements of ‘the quality of education’ at a school give primacy to the effectiveness with which the school encourages enjoyment of reading.

Related matters

This issue also relates to several matters of current and deepening public concern:

- evidence of a decline in reading for pleasure and its possible relationship to declining literacy. DfE (2012) summarises the research on this.
- evidence that people read and understand text on screen less well than printed text, with long-term implications for understanding and learning (Mangen et al 2013)
- evidence of a decline in take-up of English at A Level and of English and other humanities subjects at university (English and Media Centre 2017; British Academy 2018).

The statutory National Curriculum and public policy therefore both require Ofsted's proposals to be revised to give appropriate primacy to the encouragement of reading for pleasure. Without this, there is a risk that Ofsted will promote a reductive functionalist curriculum and pedagogy which deter learners from reading.

2 Misrepresentation of research on acquisition of vocabulary.

Ofsted's position

Ofsted's view on vocabulary, given in its Overview of Research, begins as follows:

“There is clear and consistent evidence about the importance of vocabulary development. In addition, a range of studies highlight the extent to which there can be a vocabulary gap between children from disadvantaged families and their peers (e.g. Huttenlocher, 2010 and Gilkerson, 2018). While some older studies have been challenged (e.g. Hart and Risley, 1995; Sperry et al., 2018), the majority of studies, including a recent study surveying teachers in English schools (OUP, 2018), suggest a strong relationship between vocabulary and social background, in addition to finding similar differences related to other communication and language skills, such as turn-taking during talk (Romeo, et al., 2018). (page 22)

This view is supported by Ofsted's Curriculum Workshop presentation, slides 27 – 34, which gives Hart and Risley (1995) as one of two references.

We fully accept that acquisition of vocabulary is essential for understanding the world and for learning, and we have no objection to the citation of Hart and Risley despite the technical limitations of its investigatory process and apparent racial bias in its choice of subjects. This is because similar results have been obtained, as cited, by Huttenlocher (2010) and Gilkerson (2018), and by Romeo et al (2018).

The essential finding of Hart and Risley, Huttenlocher and Gilkerson is that children's vocabulary acquisition is closely related to the number of words, especially adult words, that they experience in their families and that this in turn is related to the socio-economic status (SES) of the family. Hart and Risley estimate that children of professional families experience 30 million more words by age 3 than children of families on welfare. The task of educators is therefore to find ways of closing this socially-determined gap.

Research by Romeo et al

This finding has been confirmed in relation to SES but overturned as regards causation by more recent research by Romeo et al (2018). This high-quality research at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology is the first to investigate the neurological basis of different rates of language acquisition in young children. Children aged 4 years 6 months to 6 years 10 months used the Language Environment Analysis (LENA) system to record their language experience for 16 hours per day. They also underwent MRI scans while being read to and answering questions on what they heard.

The study found that:

There was great individual variability in language exposure measures, including the number of adult words per peak hour, the number of child utterances per hour and the number of conversational turns per hour. Higher parental education and income correlated significantly with more adult words and more conversational turns, but neither SES measure was significantly correlated with child utterances. If these peak-hour measures were extrapolated, children in the top and bottom SES quartiles would experience an annual adult word gap of 5 million words, which would accumulate to approximately 30 million words by age of enrolment

in this study, similar to the gap originally reported by Hart and Risley (1995). However, SES explained only a moderate share of the variability in language exposure (11% - 17%), indicating that there was a wide variability of language exposure within families of similar SES. (page 6)

While confirming the association between children's vocabulary and their family's SES, Romeo et al demonstrate more fully than previous studies that there is a wide variation of language exposure *within* SES groups. It is not simply the case that lower socio-economic families speak less with their children.

Romeo et al then calculate the effect of three measures of language experience – conversational turns, adult words and child utterances – in relation verbal composite score and SES factors.

All three measures of language experience correlated with children's scores on behavioral language assessments, although conversational turns most strongly predicted the verbal composite score. Multiple regression models were constructed to predict verbal composite scores as a function of parental education, family income, and each of the three language experience measures. In all three models, parental education significantly predicted verbal scores, whereas income did not. Only conversational turns significantly predicted additional variance in verbal scores after education and income were partialled out. *Thus, children's composite verbal score increased by 1 point for every additional 11 conversational turns experienced per hour, independently of SES.* The relation between conversational turns and verbal scores remained significant when adult words or child utterances were added to the model, suggesting that the number of conversational turns was not just a proxy for adult speech or child talkativeness. (emphasis added – page 7)

Finally Romeo et al related the children's acquisition of language to their brain function by means of MRI scans.

Whole-brain correlations with the three LENA measures were conducted to detect individual differences in activation related to language exposure. While there were no significant correlations with the number of adult words or child utterances, the number of conversational turns correlated positively with activation in a single cluster spanning left pars triangularis (Brodmann's area 45) extending into pars opercularis

(Brodmann's area 44), which together comprise Broca's area. This cluster remained significantly correlated with conversational turns after controlling for parental education and income, verbal and nonverbal composite scores, adult words and child utterances counts, and all of these covariates together, indicating that this relationship was not driven simply by any of these factors. In other words, the more conversational turns children experienced, the greater their activation in Broca's area during language processing, independent of the child's SES, cognitive ability, or sheer numbers of adult words and child utterances. There were no clusters exhibiting significant correlations with any demographic variables (age, gender, parental education, income) or cognitive variables (verbal, nonverbal scores). (page 9)

The evidence is conclusive that children's acquisition of language depends primarily on the frequency with which the child converses with others, whether adults, siblings or peers. This process is paramount and is unrelated, for example, to the number of adult words that the child hears or to their socio-economic status. The central finding of Romeo et al confirms common experience that children who are frequently spoken with gain language and gain understanding of language (vocabulary) more readily than those who are not.

This obviously has great significance for the education of young children, but there is no reason to assume that 'conversational turns' have less effect with learners aged more than 6 years 10 months. The central finding of Romeo et al is confirmed for older learners by the meta-analysis of educational interventions conducted by the University of Durham for the EEF Teaching and Learning Toolkit (2018) which finds that collaborative learning and peer-tutoring are among the most effective interventions.

The findings of Romeo et al are misrepresented in the first paragraph of Ofsted's discussion of vocabulary quoted above (Overview of Research, page 22). These findings are presented as "similar differences" as in previous research supporting "a strong relationship between vocabulary and social background". In fact, Romeo et al demonstrate that vocabulary acquisition is not chiefly related to social class nor to the number of adult words heard, but rather to the number of 'conversational turns' that a child experiences.

Ofsted should accordingly amend its reference to Romeo et al and revise its discussion of the acquisition of vocabulary in its Overview of Research and

Curriculum Workshop presentation in the light of their findings. Ofsted should also revise its view of group activities and paired work (Overview, pages 13/14) in the light of Romeo et al's finding about the central importance of conversational turns and relate this to those of EEF's Teaching and Learning Toolkit regarding high impact interventions (feedback, metacognition, peer-tutoring and collaborative work). This would give a much fairer and more accurate account of the relevant research.

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