



# Analysis: Pie Corbett examines the New Curriculum for English

## Not the Department of Education's finest hour.

Pie Corbett examines the good and bad features of the new National Curriculum for English.

Is the first draft of the new National Curriculum for English a 'gold standard' vision of English in the 21st century? Well, let's start with some of the real strengths. It specifies:

- English as 'a subject in its own right';
- an appreciation and love of reading;
- a strong focus on vocabulary;
- familiarity with key stories, traditional tales, etc;
- having 'conversations about books';
- discrete teaching of handwriting;
- oral rehearsal of ideas and sentences prior to writing;
- 'showing the skills and processes essential to writing';
- explicit grammar teaching, applying this to 'real-language examples such as their own writing or books they have read'.

In the draft, spelling and grammar are highly detailed whilst the main body is less specific. A systematic programme for spelling/phonics is essential. However, the spelling focuses on knowledge (rules and guidelines) rather than spelling strategies (dictionaries don't appear till year 5/6). There are spelling lists that exemplify patterns that have been taught so presumably their place is to act as a test. Whoever wrote the spelling strand has focused on children learning rule after rule. A trick has been missed by not including a commitment to specifying that every child should learn the 300 most common words needed for 75% of writing.

Grammar is similarly detailed. The programme contains the basics but many aspects that are unnecessary. There are omissions, e.g. no 'imperative' (taught for instructions) or 'rhetorical questions' (useful to hook a reader). Speech does not appear till year 3 (speech bubbles are usually introduced in year 1). Year

1 is unambitious, e.g. in writing only using 'and' to write short narratives (a dire habit)! Apostrophe for ownership appears in years 3/4 when it is too difficult conceptually for most children. Verbs and adverbs are taught in different key stages. Whilst subordinate clauses are mentioned, the notion of simple, compound and complex sentences as a way of considering sentence control has been dropped.

In order to raise standards, do primary children really need to know about possessive pronouns, relative clauses, modal verbs, parenthesis, determiners, cohesion, active/passive, subject/object, fronted adverbials, verb inflexions, the subjunctive and the perfect form of verbs? Of what use is knowing about the subjunctive? It is an archaic form and you can only wonder who on earth imagined that it would help improve children's reading and writing.

Apparently, the future tense has disappeared (an important concept when learning other languages). Whilst I understand that English has no future tense comparable with the present and past tenses, we can refer to future time by using a present tense verb (I will visit tomorrow). Surely, there is a difference between laying down basic grammatical understanding that will help young children and the finer points of linguistics? There is insufficient link between the grammar strand and the main section. It appears as if this is a case of grammar for grammar's sake, bolted on so that it can be tested.

For instance, the informal term 'connective' suits primary age children. However, to drop it in favour of distinguishing between conjunctions, prepositions and adverbs (all can be used as connectives) is a recipe for confusion. Year 1 children can be taught 'connectives' and use them in writing. However, there is a point in grammar teaching when abstract definitions become overly complex and pointless. For instance, 'down the lane, the man ran' starts with a prepositional phrase that performs an adverbial function. The draft points out that genuine understanding of grammar is developed in



relation to reading and writing (rather than by exercises) but already publishers are churning out reams of deadening grammar exercises.

Some of the definitions are so complex that it will be impossible to explain what might be made fairly simple (such as what a noun is) to children. Whoever wrote this may be a linguist but you have to wonder about their primary teaching experience. Crucially, the wording about what has to be learned must be clarified. Currently it is unclear what children should actually know. I fear that such a detailed programme, pitched at such a high level, will lead to a drop in writing standards? I wonder what the children will be doing at key stage 3 – early preparation for a PhD in linguistics, I suppose.

The focus on decoding/ transcription is not matched by a detailed progression in composition and comprehension. This would have been a really helpful addition. There are a few useful pointers about narrative but nothing much on poetry. Non-fiction is skimpy, e.g. no mention of 'topic sentences', skimming and scanning or the ability to generalise. The specific commitment to children experiencing language to instruct, explain, discuss, persuade, inform or recount has been dropped. This is strange because to prepare for key stage 3, children need to be able to write in different forms to enable success across the curriculum. Indeed, one suspects that non-fiction was an after-thought.

Most teachers believe that understanding assists decoding. In year 1, it states, 'ensure that pupils practise their reading with books that are consistent with their developing phonic knowledge and that do not require them to use other strategies to work out words'. My oldest child, Poppy, was reading 'Charlie and the Chocolate Factory' in year 1 – so does that mean that we should have held her back? Many of us have already seen from the phonics check that children who read fluently did not always fare well. The issue with an over-emphasis on phonics is that it may well lower standards by holding children back, not allowing them to develop the full range of strategies that they need to develop as readers.

As a National Curriculum, the document has massive gaps. 'Speaking and Listening' is barely mentioned and lacks breadth. The focus is on learning poems, performing plays, making formal presentations, discussions, debates and

explaining ideas. However, a great chance to grab teachers' imagination and raise standards has been missed by not including 'story-telling', let alone linking reading to writing and speaking non-fiction. 'Talking like a book' helps children internalise vocabulary and sentence structure, developing an elegant turn of phrase. Oral learning of written texts stretches back as far as Aristotle!

Drama is virtually non-existent and there is no mention of ICT – either as a tool for writing or in reading. In the 21st century, children should be taught how to read screen-based material in an effective and discriminating manner as well as using a computer to communicate. If we are to develop the skills children need to be effective in the world marketplace, ICT has to be central to English teaching. It seems to me quite extraordinary not to include ICT and again, you have to wonder who can have thought that ICT was not worth including.

No doubt a second draft will be an opportunity to tighten up on all these loose ends but I am not holding my breath. There are so many aspects that have been poorly thought through. For instance, the commitment to using texts as 'models' for writing at key stage 2 is specified but not so obviously at key stage 1. Pleasure in reading is highlighted but not in writing. There is a commitment to an ambitious read-aloud programme and this might benefit from exemplification. The appendices could provide a few models from successful schools. A commitment to literature from 'other cultures' only gets mentioned in years 5/6 which has to be a backward step.

I do wonder if education benefits from these continual shifts? Doesn't a country need a professional body that oversees the development of teaching, curriculum and assessment linked to research and practice, informed by inspection evidence? Compared to the original national curriculum (a broad and rich entitlement), the original strategy (a termly framework) and the revised framework (detailed end of year objectives), the draft fails to match its predecessors, seeming uncertain of its purpose. It is a sad day to see the words 'Department of Education' attached to such a poor effort.

Personally, I think that those responsible should start all over again. First of all by deciding what they need to produce. For myself, I would prefer



a developmental programme that leads from assessment into what needs to be taught next.

Flexibility within the programme is encouraged so maintained schools will need to devise their own versions of the final document. Indeed, the writers lack so much confidence that they say that you can move from one key stage to another or one year group to another so the order they have created doesn't really matter. Independent schools, academies and free schools are not obliged to follow the new curriculum. Indeed, the idea of a National Curriculum that sets out a rich and broad entitlement – something visionary for the 21st century – has been abandoned. Personally, I think that this is a grave disservice to children because a national curriculum should act as an entitlement to protect children against the vagaries of different educational ideas.

Of course, writing a national programme is a thankless task as you can never please everybody and I would not wish to criticise anyone for 'having a go' but involving a few more genuine Primary English experts might have been a good idea..... To summarise, as a teacher of mine wrote in a report, many years ago, 'rather erratic – flashes of excellence but plenty of work to be done'.

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