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Ofsted's curriculum review of English – a NATE response

Executive Summary

The Ofsted Curriculum Review of English states that it "*reflects the advice of the expert panel's working definition of subject knowledge as the 'concepts, facts, processes, language, narratives and conventions of each subject'*". This suggests that the authors of the report have developed a full and balanced view of subject English, drawing upon its foundational theory and long history of conceptual development. Unfortunately, this is not the case, although the report recognises both the functional and expressive aspects of English and the importance of oracy at all key stages. It also sets out some of the current context of English (such as the worrying decline of post-16 study of English and that 3 in 10 students are not achieving a 'standard pass'). It does not directly address how these contextual concerns might be resolved.

Some helpful recommendations are made, including:

- not teaching GCSE texts at KS3 and early GCSE entry
- that pre-teaching context is not advisable
- not using of checklists for writing, such as DAFOREST
- that teachers should be encouraged to develop their own knowledge of texts for young people
- not teaching of spellings through decontextualised word lists
- teaching of whole texts
- that the use of success criteria and exam mark scheme as curriculum is inappropriate
- viewing English as a coherent unity across primary and secondary phases
- that there should be close inter-relationship between the different components of English

The review posits a view of the subject primarily in terms of skills and processes to be taught prior to engagement in language in use. This does not align with the construction of the subject that has been developed over many years or with the practical experience of English teachers at every level. The research drawn on is limited and partial, and referencing does not always support the claims that are made. The Review also fails to recognise the place of drama, media education, language study and digital literacies within English. The Review will be found wanting by teachers who are seeking guidance in the actualities of classroom work in language and literature, and by researchers who will note the etiolated concept of the subject presented by the Review.

Introduction

This document sets out NATE's response to the key areas outlined in the review, focusing on the curriculum and pedagogy section.

The NATE view of English is that it is a *humane* discipline. As a humane discipline, NATE considers it to be central to young people's emotional, social and intellectual development and a foundation for developing an empathic understanding of self, others, cultures and modes of communication through language, literature, media and digital forms. It is a unique subject that has its own history, values, eccentricities, complexities and delights.

NATE believes that the report fails to represent adequately the complexities of English or to acknowledge the nature of its impact on learners, which goes far beyond curriculum content and assessment outcomes. Governments may define what learners have to learn, and how that learning is to be assessed. They can attempt to steer pedagogy in

the service of curriculum and assessment, but for teachers, pedagogy is a complex, shifting blend of the ideal and the practical, at all times responsive to the situational. If learners - developing human beings – are to be active participants in their own development, their individual and collective motivation and agency are major parts of classroom experience. If they are little more than recipients of a curriculum and data-inputs to an assessment process, their motivation and agency will be of secondary importance.

The early English curriculum in schools

This part of the review emphasises the importance of high-quality spoken language, but the discussion is framed almost entirely by the idea of vocabulary acquisition, using the concepts of ‘word-poor’ and ‘word-rich’ (Ofsted, 2022, p5), a deficit model which has been widely criticised (see: Carter, 1995, for example).

The review goes on to stress the importance of teaching systematic synthetic phonics but presents the method as a series of protocols which have to be acquired before attempting independent reading. If independent reading is the goal, the review suggests, it follows a transitional reading phase of decoding artificial texts based on the explicitly taught phonic patterns. This is presented as non-contestable model of progression. There is no reference here or anywhere else to what youngsters may learn from what is not explicitly taught – or to evidence from utterance which shows some embedding of understood patterns – such as ‘I singed’ as an application of perceived verb tense rules. There is also no reference to or discussion of the motivation for engaging with complexities in texts not totally reliant upon language, such as picture books, or their significance in developing inference. The comprehension (and complexity) of texts is conceived only in linguistic terms.

Spoken Language

The section on spoken language conveys the importance of spoken language in English education. The wider view of social oracy is clearly established in the review’s statement that:

The benefits of spoken language extend beyond just success at school. Becoming an articulate, effective communicator forms the basis of democratic engagement within wider society. It is important to note that spoken language is not just about improved speech. Pupils also need to develop their ability to collaborate through conversation (Ofsted, 2022, p11).

The educational value of process talk is derived from its acceptance of the work of Alexander (2012), Howe & Mercer (2013), and Barnes (1976), who have prioritised understanding of spoken English as a social activity and as a formative medium of learning.

What is most distinctive about the review’s approach to oracy is its grasp of the inter-related aspects of language. Embedding the linguistic aspects within a context of physical, cognitive, social and emotional aspects sets up a model of spoken language as part of the greater human faculty of communication. Drawing on the research already mentioned, the report recognises that for pupils ‘to use spoken language successfully, they need to make progress in interrelated aspects of language’ (Ofsted, 2022, p12), namely:

- physical
- linguistic
- cognitive
- social and emotional

This creates a pedagogical possibility that most of the English curricular content and skills within the modalities of reading and writing may be amenable to directed and modelled classroom talk. As children develop their talk *before* they develop their reading and writing, it seems appropriate to harness the earlier skill in developing the later ones. However, it seems that this apparent acceptance of the inter-relatedness of the English curriculum components is elsewhere at odds with its insistence on a pedagogy more apt to service assessment than learners.

Reading

The review clearly places reading (and literature) as the main focus of English, both as instrumental in developing social and study skills, and as a means of expressive effectiveness and creativity. This concurs with a view of English as a humane discipline, particularly in the acceptance of the field overlap defined by Atherton, Green and Snapper (2013), which embeds the response of the reader in the history of literature, the craft of the writer and the nature of literary study. There is recognition that readers are not merely receivers but can engage with texts on the basis of their own cultural capital (Ofsted, 2022, p31).

The question of *knowledge* in English is a difficult one to navigate, (see, for example, Eaglestone, 2021) and this is not fully addressed in the review. It argues that three factors underpin reading comprehension: knowledge, processes, and general cognitive resources (Ofsted, 2022, p13) and states that it is 'difficult to disentangle the types of knowledge used in comprehension' (Ofsted, 2022, p14). Consideration of how mental models are constructed when reading – our world-building schemata – would have been helpful to reference here (see Mason & Giovanelli, 2021).

The review lists several features of 'more complex' texts that should be part of the reading progression towards a wider repertoire of text familiarity. These include obvious linguistic matters of lexical and grammatical novelty or archaism, but also stylistic matters where writers' creativity has gone beyond the simple patterns of textual craft. Particularly, these include the use of an unreliable narrator, the deliberate use of ambiguity and, perhaps, irony (Ofsted, 2022, pp15-16). Anything which recognises that readers need to be confronted with texts which use language in ways other than unambiguous recording of facts in chronological or priority sequence opens up the difference between decoding and reading, and between reading for comprehension and reading for pleasure.

It is also good to see that, although the review maintains the primacy of phonics over all other methods of engaging EYFS pupils with books, there is a recognition that decoding is only a part of reading. This is a welcome reminder that text difficulty or complexity is more than a matter of lexical density. However, the greatest weight of the document is on the discipline, presented as knowledge of English as a written system. The two main strands of this knowledge are words and grammatical patterns, particularly in sentence structures. This knowledge represents a foundation necessary for development as an independent reader. The lexical component of this knowledge can involve morphology and etymology, but in this review the emphatic priority is on phonics.

Throughout the review's detailed comments on developing children as readers there is an assumption of linear progression from a foundational skills repertoire to independent reading for challenge or pleasure. This is a convenient way of representing cognitive processing, but it is a simple mechanical model that does not account for those children who proceed unevenly, and/or in a non-linear fashion. This is a questionable notion of what happens when meaning is drawn from print or other sources and reduces a complex cognitive-affective mixture of comprehension and response to a mechanical process of reception. A significant omission from the bibliography on reading is Meek's *How Texts Teach What Readers Learn* (1987), which demonstrates that learning from print is rather more subtle than decoding or mechanical retrieval. There is, throughout, an uncritical acceptance of the role of memory in learning in English, which rests on simplifying the complex relationship between interaction, motivation, context, reception, and response.

The report makes no reference to digital or multimodal texts – ('text' is not defined) – and the vital role English plays in preparing young people for life, learning and leisure – a fundamental aspect of English teaching. There is also little acknowledgement of concerns regarding text choices and challenging notions of 'the canon', and an absence of anything referring to multicultural or multilingual texts or classrooms. A helpful report to address these issues is Penguin and The Runnymede Trust's *Lit in Colour* (2020).

Writing

The review's emphatic view that transcription skills must precede compositional skill (Ofsted, 2022, p24) overlooks the fact that some learners can be compositionally adept and motivated as writers by opportunities for compositional communication – and may have their enthusiasm restrained by being held to the insistence of linear progression. It ignores the fact that some writers who have not yet mastered the foundational content may still enjoy telling stories which have a sense of structure, purpose and audience. The issue is that youngsters need to be given scope for communication that goes beyond the literacy agenda. There is a lack of understanding here of the

pedagogical subtleties of learner motivation and linking motivation with skills. Teachers will be aware that some children can accept and welcome composition before or alongside transcription skills.

In the summary statements for the section on writing, the review seeks to establish that developing, organising, composing, and planning are higher order skills and, as such should be taught later and after securing the lower order skills of transcription. This seems to ignore the previous acceptance of links between the components of English, especially the importance of oracy in developing thinking and collaboration. More importantly, it assumes that the higher order skills are necessarily attainable, and therefore teachable, as progression from the lower order skills. NATE considers that cognitive processes such as organising, composing, planning and revising exist at an early age and may, as part of developing communication, be a motivation for later acquisition of the transcription and presentational features of the writing repertoire.

Throughout the review's detailed comments on developing children as writers there is an assumption of linear progression through a foundational skills repertoire leading to independent writing. This notion draws its confidence largely from US documentation such as the work of Graham and others. The over-reliance on US research omits significant UK-based studies, including Barrs & Cork's (2001) seminal work on the study of literature and writing at KS2, *Learning to Write* (Kress, 1994) or the National Writing Project (see Smith & Wrigley, 2016).

Literature

This section of the review is problematic, in that it states that 'because the empirical literature is more limited... we have... drawn on a wide and diverse range of sources including opinion pieces and theoretical articles' (Ofsted, 2022, p29). Additionally, one source cited in this section was misrepresented in the first version of the review (see: Atherton, 2022). Subsequently, (on 15th July 2022), Ofsted released an updated version (see: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/curriculum-research-review-series-english/curriculum-research-review-series-english>). Others have also criticised the misrepresentation of Applebee (2008) (see: EMC, 2022), with the review mistakenly suggesting that Applebee claims that there has been 'a narrowing of the literature curriculum for some groups of pupils, who only access texts that reflect their own lives rather than different times or settings' (Ofsted, 2022, p33).

The notion of knowledge in English and how it functions in the study of literature is not clearly addressed. English is different from other disciplines in terms of its ontology, integration of knowledge and knowledge generation: how learning might be sequenced is not presented (See Ashbee, 2021, for a helpful overview). The review's notion of increasing complexity of texts – with complexity largely equated with older texts and assigned to older readers – is also problematic, appearing to be predicated on the heavy emphasis on 19th century texts in the KS4 curriculum.

The single reference to diversity of text choice is made here: 'teachers and critics advocate a greater range of perspectives in the choices of literature that pupils study' (Ofsted, 2022, p. 33). However, this reference to the need for greater diversity is then undercut when the review claims that 'it can also lead to significant, influential texts being removed from the curriculum or texts being included only because they address contemporary issues rather than due to literary merit' (Ofsted, 2022, p33). This point is not substantiated with any evidence that schools are removing 'significant, influential texts' (which are not defined) from their curricula or that schools include texts *only* due to their contemporary themes. Even if there were a consensus on what counts as essential (canonical) texts that should be taught at school level – Shakespeare is the only named writer in the National Curriculum – it can certainly be argued that 'texts' has a broader meaning than is defined here and that the study of English *should* include contemporary texts which may touch upon 'contemporary issues'.

Perhaps the most significant absence in this section of the review is any mention of the role of the pupil as a reader, who *brings* knowledge, experience, reactions to the texts that they read and study. Rosenblatt's (1994) notion of the reading of a text as a dynamic process, in which readers take an active part in the comprehension and analysis of texts, is sadly lacking in the review. Rosenblatt's ideas underpin many of the more recent cognitive theories of reading, her work providing a way of accounting for, on the one hand, textual input and a modelled sense of authorial voice and, on the other, readerly background knowledge and how these interconnect.

Conclusion

Whilst the review does make some helpful recommendations, as outlined in the executive summary, these must be seen in the context of its many obfuscations and gaps, and its inconsistent and partial use of and reference to research in English education. Indeed, the process through which the report was produced raises many questions. For instance, NATE would be grateful for clarification of how the expert panel was devised and whether there was a consultation document or draft shared with the English teaching community (NATE included) before the publication of this review.

For further information about NATE and its values please visit <https://www.nate.org.uk/about/what-nate-does/>, where you can also read our latest position papers and reports.

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