

Research and analysis

Telling the story: the English education subject report

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Context

English holds a unique place in our curriculum. Not only does it combine different elements, such as literature, language and linguistics, but it also gives pupils a foundation of spoken language, reading and writing that enables them to think, talk and write about their world. This foundation is essential for all that pupils will go on to learn during their formal education and throughout their lives, including in subjects beyond English.

In this report, we evaluate the common strengths and weaknesses of English that we have seen in schools across the country. We recommend ways for school and subject leaders to further improve their English curriculum. Our findings should also be of use to policymakers and others working in the education sector.

The report builds on our English research review, published in 2022.^{[\[footnote 1\]](#)} It includes findings from primary schools and secondary schools, including evidence from Reception classes and sixth forms. Our methodology is described in the appendix.

Each section explores the following topics:

- curriculum
- pedagogy
- assessment
- school systems
- the impact of the above on what pupils learn

During inspections, we evaluate schools against the criteria in the school inspection handbook. Inspectors will not use the findings from this report as a ‘checklist’ when they are inspecting schools. Indeed, there are many different ways that schools can put together and teach a high-quality English curriculum.

Our 2009 report, ‘English at the crossroads’, found that English was highly valued by leaders for the vital contribution it made to pupils’ learning.^{[\[footnote 2\]](#)} As both the gateway to the wider curriculum and an object of study in itself, English had an eminent position within schools. We noted this again in our 2012 report ‘Moving English forward’ and, in the visits we carried out for this report, we found that English remains central to all school curriculums.^{[\[footnote 3\]](#)}

While English remains at the heart of the school curriculum and there is much to celebrate, there is more to do if we are to make sure that all pupils achieve well.

The Year 1 phonics screening check (PSC) assesses whether children can accurately decode a selection of words that include common grapheme–phoneme correspondences (GPCs): the first step in word reading. Performance overall in the PSC has improved substantially since 2012, the year of its introduction.^{[\[footnote 4\]](#)} Results for 2023 show outcomes close to pre-pandemic levels.^{[\[footnote 5\]](#)} There is also a positive correlation between performance in the PSC and performance in PIRLS (Progress in international reading literacy study) 2021. Successive PIRLS reports also show a reducing gap between the lowest and highest scoring pupils, which seems to be the result of an improvement in the performance of the lowest attainers.^{[\[footnote 6\]](#)}

However, over 1 in 4 pupils still move to secondary school without having met the expected standard in the key stage 2 national reading test.^{[\[footnote 7\]](#)} This hinders them in secondary school, both in English and more widely across the curriculum.

COVID-19-related disruption has particularly affected the trend of improvement in key stage 2 writing attainment, most of all for disadvantaged pupils.^{[\[footnote 8\]](#)} By the end of Year 11, pupils’

performance in English continues to compare well with other EBacc subjects.^{[\[footnote 9\]](#)} Despite a declining trend in A-level English entries, overall it is still the fifth most popular A-level subject.^{[\[footnote 10\]](#)}

Overall, these national measurements also show that girls continue to outperform boys, and that pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds achieve less well than their peers across all measures.^{[\[footnote 11\]](#)} It is therefore important to make sure that all pupils are taught the basics well from the beginning.

Key terms used in this report

Components and composites: A component is any form of knowledge identified as necessary for understanding or doing something more complex – a composite. For example, writing a story is a composite task that requires secure knowledge of components such as letter formation, spelling and sentence structure. Pupils are more likely to be successful in learning composites if the components are broken down and sequenced over time, with sufficient practice to reach automaticity.

Decodable books: This refers to books that have been written so that they only present words that include the GPCs that pupils have learned and the common exception words they have been introduced to. As these words are consistent with pupils' developing phonic knowledge, pupils know how to decode them and do not need to guess what they say.

Foundational knowledge: In this report, foundational knowledge refers to the basics of reading and writing that pupils need to be able to do automatically in order to carry out more complex tasks. In word reading, this means acquiring both accuracy and automaticity. In writing, it means developing transcription skills (spelling and handwriting) that are accurate and can be performed automatically. Knowledge of language, including vocabulary, grammar and syntax, is part of the foundational knowledge needed for reading, speech and writing.

Modalities: Our research review discussed the different modalities of English. These are reading, writing and spoken language. They are the 3 main areas identified in the national curriculum, and align with the early years foundation stage (EYFS) programmes for communication and language, and literacy. In addition, the review explored the study of literature.

Oral composition: In this report, oral composition refers to pupils practising composing sentences orally. This helps pupils to develop their knowledge of vocabulary, grammar and sentence structure, and so prepares them for written composition.^{[\[footnote 12\]](#)}

Working memory: the finite and small amount of information that can be held in the mind and used to perform cognitive tasks. Working memory is limited. For example, in English, pupils need to be able to decode accurately and automatically to help make cognitive space available to consider meaning. Similarly, fluency in transcription frees up working memory to focus on composing writing.^{[\[footnote 13\]](#)}

Summary conclusions

The teaching of reading has improved markedly

- Schools prioritise reading and make sure that the curriculum develops pupils' reading.
- Schools have invested in phonics programmes and training so that teachers know how to teach pupils to read.
- Once pupils are able to read accurately, schools are less clear about how to build fluency and comprehension.
- Some secondary schools do not do enough to help weaker readers catch up with their peers.

The curriculum for writing and spoken language is less effective

- Schools (often) do not consider spoken language well in their English curriculum, although they understand that spoken language underpins pupils' reading and writing development.
- The writing curriculum often introduces complex tasks too early, before many pupils are equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills that underpin these.
- Primary pupils are not given sufficient teaching and practice to become fluent with transcription (spelling and handwriting) early enough.

Schools are sometimes confused about the purpose of English

- English is not always valued as a subject in its own right. English has an important role as a distinct subject, as well as being a medium for teaching and serving other subjects. However, schools sometimes only focus on its supporting role, and this results in a weaker and less coherent English curriculum.

External assessments unhelpfully shape the curriculum

- Schools expect pupils to repeatedly attempt complex tasks that replicate national curriculum tests and exams. This is at the expense of first making sure that pupils are taught, and securely know, the underlying knowledge they need.
- Some pupils are given considerable help to access these complex tasks, wasting precious time and resources on activities that do not result in them making progress.

Main findings

Curriculum and pedagogy

Primary

Leaders understand the impact of being able to read fluently, and choosing to read, on pupils' future academic success and life-long well-being.

An increased emphasis on reading (through government policy and Ofsted's focus on how well schools teach pupils to read) has helped leaders to understand the importance of teaching systematic synthetic phonics.^{[\[footnote 14\]](#)} Compared with our findings in previous reports, this represents an overwhelmingly positive shift towards having all children reading by the end of key stage 1.^{[\[footnote 15\]](#)}

- All primary schools visited teach pupils to read using a consistent systematic synthetic phonics programme.
- Most teach phonics daily to all pupils from the beginning of Reception to the end of key stage 1.
- Pupils practise word reading using decodable books that match the sounds they know.

However, when there are weaknesses in phonics teaching, some pupils in Reception and key stage 1 struggle from the beginning. Schools do not always identify or address this.

Some schools are effective in continuing to develop pupils' reading fluency once they can decode. They provide pupils with lots of opportunities to read aloud and be read to, so they learn how to control the pace and intonation in their reading. In other schools, leaders recognise the importance of reading fluently but are not clear about how to make sure that pupils are successful.

Too often, schools choose texts to study in English lessons based on their link to other curriculum areas, rather than on how they might advance pupils' knowledge of English language and understanding of literature.

Schools teach grammar, sentence structure and punctuation explicitly. However, pupils do not always get enough practice to secure this knowledge. For example, oral composition is rarely used to practise using grammatical conventions and different sentence structures. Pupils' books show that fundamental errors go unnoticed and persist over time.

Most schools do not give pupils enough teaching and practice to gain high degrees of fluency in spelling and handwriting. Teachers rarely use dictation as a tool to help pupils practise spelling and handwriting. In many schools, pupils are expected to carry out extended writing tasks before they have the required knowledge and skills.

Primary and secondary

Few schools design or follow a curriculum to develop pupils' spoken language. Schools are not always clear about how to teach the conventions of spoken language that enable pupils to speak competently in a range of contexts. Teachers often attribute pupils' weaknesses in speaking to a lack of confidence rather than realising that they have not been taught what they need to know about the topic under discussion to be able to form and articulate worthwhile contributions.

Leaders are determined to develop a whole-school culture where reading is valued and enjoyed. However, pupils' attitudes to reading vary between and within schools. Most schools prioritise time for pupils to read and talk about books. Story time is a regular feature in Reception and key stage 1 classrooms. In other key stages, even when timetabled, reading does not happen as often as intended.

Schools use a range of approaches to introduce new vocabulary. This includes teaching vocabulary through the texts studied to improve comprehension. However, while key vocabulary is identified and taught, this is not necessarily embedded through repeated practice in different contexts. Often, pupils do not remember to use the vocabulary in their written and spoken language.

Leaders in most schools know that it is important to ensure that pupils read increasingly complex texts to develop reading comprehension. They recognise that comprehension comes from accessing a wide range of texts and encountering different forms and concepts and includes having a wide knowledge of the world. However, in some schools, completing national curriculum test and exam-style questions is the main, extremely limited, method of improving pupils' reading fluency and comprehension.

Schools allocate significant time to the subject. However, in some schools, this time is not always used productively, most commonly in key stage 1. In these schools, pupils carry out time-filling activities that lack purpose and do not help them to make progress in English.

Leaders arrange additional teaching for pupils in key stages 2 and 3 who are not yet reading fluently. Too often, however, this teaching does not directly address their knowledge gaps and is not frequent enough for them to catch up quickly.

Secondary

At key stage 3 especially, schools offer a broad literature curriculum. Leaders choose texts carefully, based on literary merit and how they contribute to a broad and rich understanding of a range of themes.^{[\[footnote 16\]](#)} This prepares pupils to read increasingly challenging texts over time.

Schools do not always identify the grammatical and syntactical knowledge to be taught for writing, and so do not build on what has been taught at primary school. Instead, written tasks are often modelled on GCSE-style assessments.

In some schools, leaders systematically plan for spelling and punctuation to be taught and revisited. In others, spelling needs are left for teachers to determine and address at an individual or class level. It is not uncommon to see the same inaccuracies repeated in books, including the basics, such as capital letters and full stops.

Schools are often unsure how to help pupils who arrive at secondary school unable to read and write fluently. Teachers do not always identify and teach the specific aspects of reading and writing that pupils are finding difficult. Sometimes, the activities given to pupils mask, rather than address, skills they need to improve and practise. For example, providing tasks that reduce the need to write does not help pupils to improve their handwriting. These pupils are often not making the rapid progress needed.

Assessment

Summative assessment in secondary schools has improved. Teachers now focus more closely on assessing what pupils have learned from the taught curriculum. However, in both primary and secondary schools, ongoing formative assessment is not used well to help teachers gain a reasonable sense of what pupils have learned or whether pupils are ready for the next step in the teaching sequence. This means that important errors and misconceptions can go unrecognised and be unaddressed.

In some primary and secondary schools, preparation for external assessments distorts the curriculum. For example, at key stage 3, schools often encourage excessive practice of a narrow range of writing structures to prepare pupils for GCSEs.

School systems

All those teaching phonics in Reception and key stage 1 receive training, either through the phonics programme or by other trained leaders. Beyond phonics, there is little training for primary teachers to build their professional knowledge about English literature and language.

In both primary and secondary schools, continuous professional development (CPD) focuses mainly on assessment and moderation practices. As a result, some teachers have a disjointed and narrow understanding of the subject.

Discussion of findings

Since we published our 'Excellence in English' report in May 2011, schools have made notable improvements to many aspects of the English curriculum. [\[footnote 17\]](#) There is still more to do, however, to make sure that all pupils learn important foundational knowledge well, from the start. This is especially the case for pupils with lower starting points and pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). Pupils who struggle to keep up from the beginning can quickly fall behind and find it increasingly difficult to access the same curriculum as their peers. A high-quality curriculum makes sure that pupils learn what they need as soon as they should. It reduces the need for pupils to catch up later and leads to fewer pupils being inaccurately identified as having special educational needs.

Both primary and secondary schools allocate a significant amount of time to English. All primary schools have daily English lessons throughout key stages 1 and 2. However, they do not always use the time productively, and schools do not always check how effectively the curriculum is being implemented. In some primary schools, teachers are not clear about the purpose of tasks that address different elements of English. For example, in 'guided reading' sessions, the same text is used for teaching language comprehension and word reading fluency. These texts serve neither purpose well for pupils in the early stages of learning to read. With limited decoding skills, they cannot yet read at the level of their oral understanding. Library lessons in secondary schools, aimed at improving reading, do not always have a clear focus. Although secondary leaders see writing and spoken language as priorities, the activities that teachers set to improve pupils' knowledge do not address these well.

Reading

There have been notable improvements to the reading curriculum since the introduction of the phonics screening check. All the primary schools visited adopt systematic synthetic phonics programmes to teach pupils to read. Most primary leaders recognise phonics as the curriculum for teaching all pupils to read, including those with SEND, not just as an approach that works for some pupils. However, there are differences between schools in how effectively phonics programmes are being taught in Reception and key stage 1. This means that, in some schools, pupils who struggle from the beginning fall further behind and are not helped to catch up quickly. Lessons and interventions are not always well matched to what pupils can already do and need to learn next.

In key stages 2 and 3, teachers' weaker subject knowledge of early reading results in additional support for pupils being less effective. Assessment does not always help teachers to identify and target gaps, and additional teaching is often not precise or regular enough. Few pupils receive

intensive daily teaching to address weaknesses in word reading, despite this being an urgent priority. Pupils who cannot read well at the start of secondary school are likely to find it increasingly difficult to access the full curriculum.^{[\[footnote 18\]](#)} These pupils are more likely to be from disadvantaged backgrounds.^{[\[footnote 19\]](#)} It is therefore essential that schools consider how and when to provide pupils with these opportunities.

Some schools have developed clear strategies to help pupils achieve reading fluency, recognising its importance for their reading comprehension. However, pupils do not always have sufficient practice to achieve this. In these schools, teachers over-use reading comprehension questions. This does not build pupils' reading fluency.

All primary schools are aiming to build a culture of reading, and pupils benefit from a range of reading experiences. However, some schools do not make sure that all pupils have enough opportunities to hear texts being read aloud and to read often, with increasing independence. Teachers do not always give story time priority beyond Reception and key stage 1, as they run out of time to fit it into a busy day.

Secondary schools are also aware of the need to develop a reading culture. They provide access to books and opportunities for pupils to discuss their own reading preferences. Although many have schemes to track and monitor reading, schools do not always evaluate their success. This means that pupils who have not already built a reading habit by the end of key stage 2 tend not to do so in key stage 3 and beyond.

Most secondary schools provide a good-quality literature curriculum at key stage 3. Leaders consider not just the texts they want pupils to read and study, but also the themes, genres and concepts they want them to know about and why these are important. They have thought carefully about how different fiction texts prepare pupils for the demands of GCSE. However, most secondary schools have not given the same careful consideration to non-fiction texts.

Primary schools often make choices based on links to themes being taught in other subjects and to wider issues, such as climate change and healthy eating. While this may be appropriate for additional texts read at other times of the day, the choice of texts for English lessons should be based on literary merit. These texts should also increase in complexity over time.

Writing

Many schools are acutely aware that some pupils struggle with writing and that COVID-19 restrictions have exacerbated these difficulties. Often, though, especially in secondary schools, leaders consider this to be purely an issue with writing 'resilience' and 'stamina' – an issue with the child – rather than a curriculum weakness. This means that schools typically do not provide enough explicit teaching or opportunities for pupils to practise the knowledge and skills that are not yet secure. For example, teachers ask pupils to copy handwriting from worksheets without having been taught the correct formation first. In other cases, teachers limit what pupils are expected to write by asking them to fill in gaps on worksheets or use a laptop to avoid writing at all. These approaches fail to address weaknesses in pupils' writing.

In our 2012 report, we noted that 'spelling was rarely taught explicitly' in either the primary or secondary phase.^{[\[footnote 20\]](#)} In our recent visits, we found that most schools explicitly teach spelling and letter formation, initially through the phonics curriculum. While this helps pupils with transcription, schools do not always ensure that pupils are secure enough in this. When teachers teach letter formation only in phonics lessons, pupils do not have the opportunity to practise

forming letters from families with the same starting point and direction. In many schools, the Reception and Year 1 curriculum do not sufficiently emphasise the need for pupils to learn how to hold a pencil comfortably and sit at a table to write. Weaknesses in letter formation and pen grip make it difficult for pupils to learn to join their handwriting and can be significantly harder to address at a later stage.

In most schools visited, pupils at the earliest stages of learning to write are often asked to complete complex tasks, such as writing a character description, before they have the phonics knowledge to spell the words or the manual skills to form the letters easily and speedily. Some primary leaders said that they are expected to gather evidence of independent writing for Year 6 writing moderation, and this is driving them to ask pupils to do too much too soon. Similarly, in many secondary schools, teaching focused too heavily on extended writing without securing pupils' knowledge of important components such as knowledge of the topic they are writing about or knowledge of grammar. Writing weaknesses are often masked unhelpfully by narrow approaches, such as extensive use of PEE (point, evidence, explanation) paragraphs.

The rush to produce extended pieces of writing independently also means that oral composition appears to be undervalued as a process. Oral composition is often seen as only part of a lesson rather than a curricular goal in itself, because staff feel there is a need to provide written evidence in books. For example, pupils are expected to write down a story they have re-told orally, whether or not they have the necessary transcription fluency. [\[footnote 21\]](#)

In secondary schools, while there are many opportunities for pupils to write, teachers do not always provide the explicit teaching that pupils need to write effectively in a range of forms and styles or in simple, direct standard English. There are too few opportunities for pupils to draft and edit or to write in forms other than those used in tests and exams.

Spoken language

Some schools have thought carefully about the language they want Reception children to understand and be able to use. In designing the curriculum, they have considered the importance of immersing children in a wide range of well-chosen stories, rhymes and songs. This develops children's understanding and use of rich vocabulary and language structures.

Most primary and secondary schools do not have an explicit curriculum for developing spoken language. In most primary schools, there are opportunities for debate and discussion in different subjects and for speaking in assemblies and annual productions. Not all pupils are able to take advantage of these experiences though. The components which underpin effective spoken language, such as knowledge of the difference between spoken and written language, are not taught. Therefore, some pupils do not develop the confidence that comes from having the knowledge they need to speak clearly and express their ideas.

Although drama is taught discretely in all the secondary schools, this aspect of spoken language is rarely developed as part of the English curriculum. This limits opportunities for pupils to plan, rehearse and develop their own presentations over time. Schools are aware of this gap, and some have addressed it by adding spoken language units into the curriculum. But again, these often focus on the outcome rather than explicit teaching of the knowledge and skills which underpin this.

Combining the different modalities of English

In primary schools, there is a disconnect between the different modalities of English (reading, writing and spoken language). Teachers do not always take account of how a pupil's prior knowledge of one modality affects their ability to learn another. They therefore miss the chance to provide opportunities for pupils to apply their knowledge and build on it across different modalities, helping to embed their learning. In key stage 1, for example, pupils' knowledge of phonics is not always considered when they are asked to read or write in other English lessons. This leads to tasks that are beyond pupils' capabilities. In key stage 2, teachers are often not trained in phonics. This means that they are unable to use phonics strategies in key stage 2 English lessons to help pupils to embed their knowledge of word reading and transcription.

Assessment

While secondary schools have made considerable progress in summative assessment since changes to key stage 3 testing, assessment continues to distort the curriculum in a few schools, especially in writing, where there is a focus on GCSE-style assessment tasks. In some primary schools, the demands of moderation result in pupils being asked to produce overly manufactured portfolios of writing that may not reflect what they can do independently. In secondary schools, the writing curriculum often consists of frequent opportunities to practise writing exam-style responses before pupils have secured the more complex components.

Few schools use formative assessment effectively. Current assessment practices do not readily identify whether pupils have learned the knowledge they need in the lesson or for the next part of the teaching sequence. This means that teachers do not swiftly identify and address misconceptions and errors.

School systems

It is heartening to see that subject expertise is highly valued in schools and that, in secondary schools, English is taught mainly by subject experts. In primary schools, there has been a significant commitment to training teachers to teach phonics, although this does not always continue into key stage 2.

However, it is rare for schools to take a systematic approach to professional development. This means that they do not always make sure that teachers have the detailed knowledge of English necessary to teach all aspects of the subject effectively.

In secondary schools, much of the professional development time focuses heavily on exam practices and moderation. We also saw this in primary schools. While this clearly improves teachers' knowledge of the exam criteria, it does not always give them a clear understanding of what pupils need to learn in the subject or the pedagogical knowledge of how best to teach this. This is especially notable in key stage 3, where the components of writing and spoken language are not well understood. It is difficult for teachers to identify gaps in their own knowledge when they are unclear about what is being taught, and how. Occasionally, teachers noted that whole-school, generic practices in activities like retrieval do not include adequate time to consider how these principles could be applied to English.

In addition, there are very few examples of teachers working with subject associations to improve their knowledge of the subject and its pedagogy. Some primary schools make effective use of English hubs and other training organisations, but much of the support secondary teachers receive is provided by exam boards. Some trusts arrange for subject development groups to meet regularly, and these are valued by both leaders and teachers.

Recommendations: schools

Curriculum and pedagogy

In both primary and secondary:

- make sure that the national curriculum requirements for spoken language are translated into practice, so that pupils learn how to become competent speakers. This should include opportunities to teach the conventions of spoken language, for example how to present, to debate and to explain their thinking
- make sure that the curriculum takes full account of the foundational knowledge and skills outlined in the national curriculum that pupils need in reading, writing and spoken language to carry out more complex tasks; provide sufficient high-quality opportunities to practise these key components in the planned curriculum
- plan a reading curriculum that over time builds pupils' reading fluency, linguistic knowledge and knowledge of the world, and that does not limit them to responding to exam-style questions
- encourage pupils to read a wide range of books once they are fluent readers, and so build a reading habit
- help those pupils who enter key stages 2 or 3 unable to read fluently to catch up quickly. This includes making sure that teaching addresses specific gaps in pupils' phonics knowledge or provides additional practice for pupils who have accurate knowledge, but still read too slowly to absorb information effectively
- ensure that pupils who are in the early stages of learning to write, and older pupils who are not fluent in transcription, practise transcription skills in isolation (to avoid working memory overload)

In primary:

- continue to ensure that pupils in Reception and key stage 1 have daily phonics teaching until they are accurate in word reading (decoding). This includes identifying pupils who are beginning to fall behind and giving them extra practice
- make sure that staff know how to continue to develop pupils' reading fluency once they are able to decode accurately (which, for the majority, will happen at the end of a phonics programme)
- make sure that all key stage 2 staff are trained in systematic synthetic phonics and so can reinforce pupils' word reading and transcription skills in key stage 2 reading and English lessons
- choose texts for study in English first and foremost on literary merit

In secondary:

- make sure that staff who support the weakest readers know how to identify whether they need help with decoding or reading fluency, and act on it. This may include careful diagnosis to place pupils at the right point in catch-up teaching sequences
- plan for progression in spoken language and writing with the same precision as progression in reading and literature, and teach the vocabulary, grammar and conventions of these

Assessment

- ensure that statutory tests and exams do not disproportionately influence decisions about curriculum and pedagogy
- ensure that formative assessment gives teachers the right level of information and assurance about what pupils have learned and whether they are ready for the next step of learning

School systems

- ensure that teachers have high-quality professional development in English literature and language with time to develop subject knowledge beyond exam specifications
- ensure that teachers understand what pupils need to learn to be successful in English and how to teach and assess this

Recommendations: other organisations

Subject associations should:

- help schools to understand the different components of written and spoken language and how to sequence, explicitly teach and assess them. For example, they should make sure that their materials help teachers to know how to identify the grammar and vocabulary that pupils need to be taught, and to consider how tone, register and syntax differ, depending on the form chosen
- provide guidance for schools about how to help pupils who are struggling with the foundations of word reading, handwriting and spelling

Initial teacher education providers should:

- ensure that, at the start of their careers, teachers have a sufficiently broad knowledge of the subject, and know how to identify their own learning needs

In light of the findings from this report, we intend to review and update guidance for our inspectors. This is to enable a greater focus on how well curriculum, teaching and assessment lead to all pupils learning foundational knowledge and being able to apply that knowledge in more complex tasks.

Part A: English in primary schools

Our findings are drawn from the sample of primary schools that we visited.

Summary of the research review relevant to curriculum findings – scope and ambition^{[footnote 22\]](#)}

Pupils should be taught to read using a systematic synthetic phonics programme from Reception. Teachers should focus on identifying children who are not able to decode accurately, or are otherwise at risk of not learning to read, and prioritise teaching them to read.

Learning a high-quality primary English curriculum enables pupils to read increasingly challenging texts by building reading accuracy and automaticity. It is essential that schools devote time to pupils reading a lot of stories, using background knowledge and vocabulary to explore literary texts in analytical and evaluative ways. Such a curriculum builds pupils' readiness for future encounters with complex texts, critical views and ways in which we read in a disciplinary way.

The curriculum should develop pupils' knowledge of writing and their capacity to produce increasingly complex texts of their own, learning how to make apt choices of vocabulary and linguistic and literary features.

The curriculum should provide opportunities for pupils to practise, refine and apply their spoken language knowledge and skills. Pupils' study of spoken language should become more formalised over time, including using appropriate grammar and register for different audiences and purposes.

1. In all the primary schools we visited, English is taught daily. This takes different forms: phonics, reading, compositional writing, guided reading, handwriting and spelling. All leaders prioritise learning to read through a systematic synthetic phonics programme.
2. Most schools teach phonics daily from Reception through to the end of key stage 1. For struggling readers in key stage 2, phonics interventions often continue alongside English lessons.
3. While leaders recognise the importance of reading, texts for study in English are mostly chosen based on availability, current affairs topics, or the interests of pupils or staff. This often leads to a fragmented approach to the curriculum.
4. Some schools have the misapprehension that focusing on foundational knowledge in writing lowers the ambition of their curriculum. In some schools, the curriculum is shaped by writing moderation and national curriculum tests. This leads to the weakest pupils rushing through foundational knowledge and not getting enough practice to become fluent in components such as transcription.
5. Leaders in all schools recognise the importance of vocabulary, and many are teaching this as part of the English curriculum. In most schools, this links to the texts that are being studied, which helps pupils to develop a broader and richer vocabulary. In schools where this is not considered so carefully, pupils focus on learning individual words, which they do not go on to use in a range of contexts.
6. In all schools, the curriculum for spoken language is considered in far less detail than the curriculum for reading and writing. It is viewed as a pedagogy rather than also being an object of study in itself.

Spoken language

Summary of the research review relevant to spoken language

Developing spoken language, including vocabulary, is essential for the academic progress of all children. Pupils can develop language comprehension and composition through a literature-rich environment, for example through interactions with adults and by listening to, talking about and learning by heart stories, poems, rhymes and songs. The teacher has an important role in modelling competence as a speaker and listener, contributing significantly to developing pupils' spoken language.

The curriculum should provide planned opportunities for pupils to develop their proficiency in the components of spoken language. This includes the explicit teaching of knowledge, for example vocabulary and ideas necessary for effective communication. In order to become better speakers and listeners, pupils also need opportunities to practise, refine and apply this knowledge in a range of different contexts and for a range of different audiences.

7. In some schools, leaders discuss the importance of language-rich environments in Reception classes, with an emphasis on the interactions between adults and children. Teachers at this phase consider the elements of communication and language that they want to teach. In one school, this begins with songs, rhymes and repeated phrases occurring daily so that pupils become familiar with rich vocabulary and a wide range of language structures. Staff model speech effectively and have routines and processes for structuring talk and listening.

8. There are limited opportunities in the English curriculum for pupils to be taught spoken language structures and practise them deliberately over time. Most schools plan opportunities to develop pupils' spoken language, through discussions, debates and presentations. Some pupils speak in assemblies, at the school council or in school performances. However, teachers do not teach the components needed to improve pupils' spoken language or make sure that all pupils benefit from the opportunities available.

How one school went about developing spoken language

In one school, leaders had mapped out how pupils would make progress in spoken language, beginning in Reception. Teachers set out the responses they expected from pupils. These included discussions about characters, vocabulary the pupils had been taught previously and models for summarising their views. They explained how to participate constructively, including facing the audience, the right intonation, expression and volume of voice.

Teachers modelled the physical, emotional and social aspects of effective spoken communication, using examples of different forms of speech that pupils might not have encountered away from school. They considered how pupils might select and use the appropriate grammar and register for their audience and purpose, including standard English, as necessary. This included reframing pupils' spoken language and asking pupils to repeat this reframing.

Pupils of all ages benefited from plentiful opportunities to practise and apply their new knowledge of spoken language across a range of contexts and purposes. For example, they could use their vocabulary knowledge in comprehension and in self-expression. This meant that pupils could understand the power of language. They could experiment and use different forms of speech to rehearse ideas orally as a key aspect of their English lesson, rather than just seeing it as a stepping stone towards writing.

Writing

Summary of the research review relevant to writing

To develop proficiency in writing, pupils need accuracy and automaticity in transcription (spelling and handwriting) and composition skills which include knowledge of the topic they are writing about. Explicit teaching of foundational skills, including spelling and handwriting, sentence construction, control of grammar and use of vocabulary, allows all pupils to write effectively. The English curriculum needs to provide opportunities for pupils to write frequently for a range of purposes and audiences. Pupils also need to be taught how to plan, draft and revise their work, to reflect on the choices they make as writers, and to draw on the increasingly complex models they study and encounter in their reading.

9. All schools use the national curriculum as a basis for the writing curriculum. Grammar, punctuation and spelling are taught explicitly. However, a lack of practice leads to some pupils not securing this knowledge. When teachers do not address pupils' errors, these often become embedded and persist over time.

10. In all schools, leaders plan for pupils to write frequently. They plan writing activities about texts that pupils read in English and content in other subjects. In most schools, pupils have opportunities to edit this work. However, some schools see the end point as the mode of practice, for example writing more stories to get better at writing stories. This means that pupils who are not secure in the foundations of writing are being asked to complete tasks that they are not ready for.

11. In the great majority of schools, there is significant use of scaffolding and editing. Some schools explained that this is because they needed to gather evidence of independent writing for local authority moderators. However, in the schools where these are overly used, pupils are rushed into composing complex texts, using features they have not properly learned yet, before they are ready. This masks where there is a lack of foundational knowledge, for example of sentence construction, that pupils need to write independently. While guides and scaffolds can help pupils to apply new ideas, they should be gradually removed as pupils become more fluent towards independent practice.

12. Schools visited make some use of oral composition as part of writing lessons. However, oral composition, such as retelling a familiar story, is not often seen as an end goal. This means that pupils at the earliest stages of learning to write have limited opportunities to practise, which in turn affects their ability to write coherently. This is because they are not given sufficient time to plan and consider sentence construction, grammar or vocabulary orally before being asked to write.

13. A few schools use dictation to practise and test spelling every week. However, beyond this, schools do not use dictation regularly as a way of practising transcription without overloading pupils' working memory.

14. Pupils' development in writing is further affected by a lack of cohesion in the curriculum. A few schools use their phonics programme to teach some parts of the handwriting national curriculum requirements. However, schools do not always consider how pupils will continue to learn handwriting beyond phonics lessons. Schools do include handwriting as part of English lessons, but they do not teach it explicitly, leaving some parts of the national curriculum expectations for handwriting not taught. This means that some pupils at the earliest stages of writing do not get enough teaching and practice to build fluency in handwriting. Again, these pupils need extra support when writing, as their working memory is taken up with transcription.

15. Primary school leaders said that the COVID-19 restrictions have had a big impact on pupils' writing, in particular their 'writing stamina'. To address this, some schools are giving pupils more opportunities to write, rather than dealing with the barriers to fluency, including transcription and

sentence construction. This results, in some schools, in pupils struggling in English lessons and needing to be heavily supported into key stage 2, rather than teachers adapting their teaching at key moments of the lesson or providing further teaching and practice of the basics at a much earlier stage.

16. A small number of schools had considered what has underpinned pupils' difficulties with writing after COVID-19 restrictions. One school, following a review of what pupils knew and could do, provides extra support in handwriting joins and forming letters, for those pupils who need it.

How one primary school went about developing their writing curriculum

Leaders had carefully identified the stages pupils needed to go through to develop their transcription skills. They started with encoding, the reversible aspect of phonics, which pupils practised to fluency.

As pupils developed proficiency in writing captions and simple sentences, leaders took a stepped approach to introducing them to different types of sentence structures and grammatical conventions. Pupils were again given the time to practise these before starting to experiment further with the structures. Teachers modelled the component parts, first at word, then sentence, then paragraph level, before moving on to whole text composition later.

Although leaders made sure that pupils were introduced to increasingly complex texts for their reading curriculum, they had decided to focus on building secure foundational knowledge and skills in writing. Oral composition continued to play a significant role in English beyond Reception, ensuring that pupils could create complex narratives verbally. Pupils were not rushed into composing complex written compositions before they were ready.

Reading

Summary of the research review relevant to reading

Proficiency in reading is essential in order for pupils to successfully access the English and broader curriculum. Skilled reading requires accurate, speedy word reading and good language comprehension. Urgency is necessary to ensure that pupils learn to decode accurately and with automaticity at the start of primary school. This also enables pupils to form positive attitudes to reading.

Reading comprehension requires knowledge of vocabulary, context – including the background knowledge of the subject of the text, syntax and narrative structure, as well as the capacity to read fluently. Therefore, a broad curriculum taught to pupils of all ages will help them to understand texts. Reading comprehension strategies can help pupils to uncover the meaning of texts. However, the usefulness of explicit teaching of these strategies is time limited and unlikely to benefit pupils before they can read sufficiently fluently.

Schools can build pupils' 'readiness' for future encounters with texts by introducing them to high-quality whole texts in different forms and genres.

Reading accuracy, fluency and comprehension

17. In all schools, pupils in the early stages of reading are learning to decode words using systematic synthetic phonics. This includes using decodable books that are consistent with the

pupils' developing phonics knowledge, for word-reading practice at home and in school. Most pupils with SEND are also learning to read through these programmes. Pupils who struggle to keep up with their peers at an early stage do not always get the teaching they need to build on what they already knew and secure what they have learned so far. These pupils quickly fall behind and need additional catch-up support. Schools do not always address this with enough urgency.

18. Teachers help pupils to build fluency in reading while they are learning to decode, by making sure that they read and re-read decodable books. This builds up the bank of words pupils can read 'at a glance'. Beyond phonics, and into key stage 2, some leaders recognise the importance of reading aloud and repeated reading to build fluency. However, pupils do not always have sufficient practice to achieve this. In many schools, pupils who cannot read fluently have to complete written reading comprehension tasks from extracts, usually as part of guided reading sessions. This is at the expense of other kinds of work, such as reading the text repeatedly, being monitored by an adult when reading aloud, rehearsing reading with prosody (patterns of stress and intonation), or reading more whole texts to build fluency.

19. The vast majority of schools offer interventions for pupils who are not secure in word reading, typically a few times a week. This often includes one-to-one sessions or reading clubs with older peers. In some schools, this provides opportunities for teachers to model prosody or for pupils to practise reading. But the content of these interventions is often not well considered. Some practices, such as spending time attempting to review sounds that pupils do not yet know, are not the most efficient use of a pupil's learning time. They cause confusion and mean that the pupils take longer to catch up.

How one school went about developing reading accuracy and fluency

In one school, leaders had carefully considered the relationship between early reading, fluency and comprehension. This school continued to check that pupils had secure knowledge in phonics and frequent opportunities to practise reading accurately to automaticity up to Year 6. Pupils who required extra support were provided with targeted sessions in which they were taught the sounds they needed to know.

The leaders had also considered how pupils built their comprehension through both a wide range of texts and repeated encounters with the same text. They selected stories carefully to ensure that the books pupils were reading became increasingly complex and that they included a range of genres and forms.

Leaders then created a shared approach to reading in English lessons once pupils could read accurately and automatically. This made use of the same text throughout the week. In the first encounter, the teacher pre-taught key vocabulary, then they modelled reading with prosody. The teacher used choral responses to check that pupils were identifying the pre-taught vocabulary in the context of the text, and to give them an opportunity to practise pronouncing these unfamiliar words. Pupils then re-read the text aloud in pairs, with a focus on reading with accuracy and clarity. The teacher checked the pupils' overall comprehension of the text throughout both these stages. The final stage was a close read to begin to explore the text in greater detail, and to discuss the writer's language choices and how these contributed to the overall meaning of the text.

20. Many leaders said that they use the national curriculum as the guide for the reading curriculum. In some schools, its statements and aims are broken down, and the curriculum is carefully planned. In schools where the curriculum is less clearly planned, teachers do not know how to move pupils from learning to read, to reading to learn – in other words, how they can become fluent readers who read widely to gather new knowledge for themselves.

21. Some schools are clear about how, once fluent, pupils get better at reading comprehension through regular reading and by developing their knowledge of language and the world. In many

schools, learning new vocabulary is part of the process of reading comprehension. For example, in one school, teachers explicitly teach pupils the knowledge they need for comprehension. This includes vocabulary, knowledge of narrative structure and syntactical knowledge, as well as knowledge of context and ideas in the text. Teachers emphasise the relationships between words and help pupils to explore morphology (how words are formed) and etymology (the origin and history of words) to support their comprehension and spelling.

Developing a culture of reading

22. In many schools, leaders recognise that reading plays a role in learning beyond English, and they are keen to develop pupils' reading habits. Many schools we visited have school libraries that pupils visit regularly. When pupils go to the library, they often select books that are familiar. Teachers and librarians have conversations with pupils about books, to encourage them to choose other texts that they might enjoy based on their favourites and to broaden their reading experience.

23. Many leaders prioritise whole-school approaches to reading. They celebrate regular reading with rewards and use visits from authors to highlight its importance. However, while there are lots of initiatives, these are not always strategic. Leaders do not consider whether the approaches are having a positive effect on pupils' own reading habits, so that they chose to read widely and often in their own time. Similarly, many leaders organise independent reading books in colour-banded levels to set out a progression in difficulty. This approach sometimes limits pupils' book choices and may not inspire them to read widely and often. Typically, teachers read a text with the class each day. Sometimes, the teacher models prosody, and sometimes they use choral reading. Most pupils value this time, although some of them said that it is sometimes cut short if other activities take priority on the timetable.

24. Some schools work to address barriers to reading more widely, especially for the most disadvantaged pupils. [\[footnote 23\]](#) For example, in one school, leaders are aware that not all pupils have books available at home, and they used pupil premium funding to select and buy books for them.

Literature

25. Leaders in all primary schools we visited have a clear sense of the texts that they think are important for their pupils to read. Many schools talk about their school's 'canon', the stories that they want to share with pupils, which they would enjoy. In Reception and beyond, there are stories that children become familiar with, reread and retell. This helps them to understand the work of readers and establish themselves as storytellers. In these schools, leaders understand that a literature-rich environment is important in developing all aspects of English. However, in a significant number of schools, texts for study in English are not always chosen for their literary merit. Instead, they cover aspects of personal, social and health education, and current affairs. This gives pupils a disjointed experience of literature, because the concepts, such as narrative voice, are not well connected across the text choices to support pupils to deepen their understanding. While pupils can learn from all books, English curriculums should give careful consideration to texts of literary merit that would support pupils in their understanding of English now and in the future. Other books should form an essential part of the wider curriculum or reading for pleasure.

26. In the majority of schools, the sequencing of literature is not deliberate. Although texts get harder, for example moving from simple narrative structures to parallel or sub-plots, it is less clear how this is intentionally sequenced so that pupils build on what they have read before. This

includes thinking about the themes, genres, forms and background knowledge that pupils need to access these texts. As a result, pupils are not able to understand new texts and make connections between these and the texts they have studied previously. For example, in one school, pupils considered a modern reinterpretation of myths without having understood the features of traditional myths. This shows that their learning had not been primed. They were unable to understand why the author had made the decisions that they had.

How one primary school went about establishing a coherent reading curriculum

Leaders noticed that pupils who were avid readers had a slightly better experience of lockdown because they could ‘escape’ into a book. They reaffirmed their ambition to inspire all pupils to become independent readers through their curriculum.

Leaders made deliberate choices about the reading curriculum. From Reception and beyond, the school considered which texts they wanted their pupils to revisit, so that they would experience a rich body of stories during their time at the school. Leaders recognised the importance of practising reading and becoming familiar with a book. Books were repeated over a week or returned to across a few weeks.

Leaders had thought carefully about which texts had earned their way on to the curriculum, and were clear about ‘why this? why now?’ They wanted to ensure that pupils encountered high-quality texts and stories at every point of the curriculum. The vocabulary, genre and syntax in texts were carefully considered to ensure that pupils could understand the texts they read and be prepared for future texts. Leaders understood that reading comprehension related to background knowledge and made sure that this was taught intentionally. Comprehension strategies were time limited and effective. They came second to reading to pupils and giving pupils increasingly complex texts to read.

What pupils know and remember, and what this means they can do

Summary of the research review in relation to impact

To gain expertise in English, pupils need to assimilate content that is well organised. Pupils need foundational knowledge that builds from knowing the alphabetic code, and knowledge of language, linguistics and the world. Pupils need to remember what they have learned previously. They need to have opportunities to practise applying this knowledge until they become fluent and incorporate it into their emerging interconnected schema (the connected knowledge pupils have of the subject). This knowledge then becomes flexible, meaningful and easy to use. It prepares pupils to tackle the challenging concepts of the subject, including creating their own compositions, reading progressively complex texts and presenting their own ideas in a range of ways.

27. Many pupils are positive about their experiences of English, including ‘reading for pleasure’. Some pupils are keen to recommend books to each other and talk about opportunities to do this at school. In some schools, pupils talk with confidence about the books they are reading independently, while in others they are far less confident and have few favourite stories or characters. Pupils value story time and being read to; however, these opportunities are sometimes lost because of competing priorities, even though the evidence suggests that it is valuable. [\[footnote 24\]](#)

28. Pupils, including very young pupils, talk clearly about their learning. However, most pupils refer to the skills they acquire in English so they can complete the national curriculum tests, rather than the stories, plays and poems in the English curriculum. Some pupils struggle to recall confidently,

for example, the style, genre or author of books they read together as a class. This is because they do not spend enough time learning about them or are moved to other activities too quickly.

29. While pupils speak positively about their experience of English, many have distorted ideas about what the subject of English is. Some pupils think that their school teaches them to get better at reading by giving them harder and harder comprehension activities. In one school, Year 6 pupils stated that they could not remember the last time they read poems, playscripts or acted out scenes from texts. Many commented that their class reading is deprioritised in favour of other activities related to national curriculum tests.

30. In a considerable majority of the work seen, teachers correct errors in writing according to agreed policies. However, gaps in pupils' foundational knowledge persist. Basic errors in punctuation and handwriting are not always corrected, and pupils often repeat these errors, further embedding misconceptions. At times, pupils who are not fluent in their writing are supported in lessons with heavily scaffolded worksheets or are asked to copy from adults or the board with limited success. While this helps them to take part in the lesson, it does not enable them to learn what is needed for success in the subject as a whole. In other schools, pupils are unable to complete tasks, and teachers do not use dictation where it might help pupils to write more automatically. In some schools, pupils in Year 1 and beyond who have not mastered pen grip or accurate letter formation are being asked to compose stories.

31. In the schools visited, most pupils have a limited understanding of how they can improve their spoken language, other than by speaking more loudly. Some pupils have the opportunity to give speeches, but there are very few opportunities for them to practise spoken language in a range of contexts and for a range of purposes. Beyond Reception, some teachers seek to extend pupils' vocabulary or reframe their spoken language to introduce them to new words or structures, but these opportunities are infrequent and not planned.

How a small sample of pupils from different primary schools viewed the subject of English

Year 2 pupils:

English is learning about stories...

It is a subject you do at school... You have to do lots of sentences... Mostly it's about writing words and sentences...

Do phonics every day, and you read every day, and books are changed weekly. Teachers help us to get better at reading.

Year 6 pupils:

English is about allowing us to express our imagination in writing...

English is about reading books...

English is about grammar and spelling and punctuation...

English is about drama and scripts and plays...

English is about poetry...

I really love reading because it feels like a wonderful get away... When I read narrative, I can picture myself as the characters in the texts I read...

Reading is dreaming with your eyes open... You can escape to another world.

Teaching the curriculum

32. In the great majority of schools, teaching activities are matched to the intentions of the curriculum and help pupils to learn the content. In a few schools, the curriculum is not taught as intended. In these schools, teachers saw the shared curriculum as a guideline. Teaching is not adequately focused on curriculum content. Activities sometimes distract pupils from learning the most important content. For example, in one school, pupils spent a considerable amount of time writing an adaptation of a Shakespeare play without important requisite knowledge of the play itself. This leads to significant misunderstandings and prevented pupils from retaining the information they needed to understand the text.

33. Leaders in some schools know that pupils need to acquire knowledge in small steps. This gives them sufficient time to practise and repeat content until it is secure in long-term memory. For example, in one school, teachers carry out retrieval and quizzing at regular intervals to check that pupils understand the small steps in the curriculum. In this school, leaders spend time developing teachers' expertise in these shared approaches, so that they can be used deliberately in subject-specific ways. Practice is understood as an important curricular goal in itself.

34. In some schools, pupils' knowledge is not actively retrieved to support their learning in a lesson. For example, in a Year 3 lesson in one school, pupils were asked to write sentences retelling a traditional myth. Teaching did not draw on what the pupils had already been taught about sentences in Year 2, or on the vocabulary they had been taught.

35. Most schools do not identify common misconceptions in curriculum planning. This means that teachers are less prepared to address them in lessons when they arise, or when they revisit the content to tackle these misunderstandings. In one school, teachers do not correct errors at all, and some of the content is not accessible to all pupils. These pupils are expected to complete extended compositions without having secured the foundational knowledge for writing.

36. Some schools use high-quality models to help pupils to practise. In one school, subject leaders have written examples of sentences, as well as lengthier pieces, that teachers can use. These examples are high quality, appropriate and engaging for pupils. This supports teachers in delivering the curriculum, increases consistency and reduces workload, especially for teachers new to the profession or the school.

37. Leaders have the same curriculum ambitions for pupils with SEND as for their peers. In the best examples, this means that curriculum end points are broken down further to give pupils more time to embed knowledge before moving on to more challenging content. Teachers make adaptations, including using further explanations. They modify resources when needed and use appropriate groupings to ensure that pupils can access the content in a suitable sequence. In the weakest examples, pupils are expected to copy from the board or from teaching assistants without fully grasping what they are writing or reading. These schools are not clear about how best to support pupils in the earliest stages of learning to read and write.

Assessment

Summary of the research review in relation to assessment

Formative assessment focuses on looking at the component parts of the curriculum and checking how securely pupils have learned them. This allows teachers to precisely identify misconceptions and gaps in learning and adapt their teaching to address them. Specific feedback tells pupils how to improve. Teaching focuses on building pupils' prerequisite knowledge rather than on practice for answering examination questions.

Internal summative assessments enable schools to measure standards, see how effective teaching and the curriculum are across year groups, report to parents and monitor pupils' progress and wider outcomes. It is crucial that schools are aware of the limits to the inferences that can be drawn from summative assessments. These check performance in complex tasks rather than the knowledge and skills which underpin these.

Ongoing assessment of all children's phonic knowledge is critical to identifying pupils who need intervention. They need to be taught the alphabetic code as effectively and as swiftly as possible so that they do not fall behind their peers, and so that they have full access to the curriculum that proficient reading gives them.

38. Most schools use summative assessments to check whether pupils are learning the taught curriculum over time. Where summative assessment is most successful, its purpose is clear and shared with teachers. In one school, there are regular reading assessments that review pupils' proficiency in phonics as well as their fluency and automaticity. This means that teachers can diagnose exactly what pupils need further help with. This informs teaching, and some pupils receive targeted and time-efficient interventions to catch up.

39. In most schools, summative assessment unhelpfully informs the design of the curriculum and how it is taught. Schools told us that they work towards national curriculum test assessments and moderation. In many schools, this process takes the form of writing or reading rubrics that pupils are assessed against. This presents a challenge, because curriculum planning does not identify the building blocks that pupils need in order to become proficient in those areas. Instead, pupils are expected to get better at the assessments merely by doing more of them. In one school, pupils, especially those in upper key stage 2, are being assessed daily to gather evidence for national curriculum tests and moderation. This is leading to distortions of the curriculum and means that pupils are not given enough time to learn and practise key knowledge and skills that would better support them in their final assessments.

40. In most of the schools, formative assessment is used to assess whether the curriculum has been learned. This is then used to identify pupils who need additional support or so that teachers can make necessary adjustments to teaching if the misconceptions are widespread. However, in many cases, feedback does not result in a change in pupils' understanding, and sometimes pupils continued to repeat errors in their books. Even when errors are addressed, especially in foundational knowledge such as grammar and punctuation, they sometimes persist. This means that mistakes can be embedded in long-term memory and become more difficult to unlearn.

41. Ongoing assessment takes place in the vast majority of schools to identify pupils who need reading intervention. Where these assessments inform decisions about the intervention, they are helpful. Where these are summative assessments, they do not always help pupils or teachers to know whether pupils catch up sufficiently and what the remaining gaps might be. In a few schools, it is not clear how the interventions are different from the whole-class provision and whether pupils

would be better supported in lessons. Other schools use regular assessment to review whether targeted approaches are working. Careful review of what pupils know and can do is particularly important at transition points between phases, stages and schools, where gaps are likely to widen if the new teacher does not know the pupils' starting points in reading.

Systems at subject and school level

Summary of the research review in relation to prioritising English

The roles of senior and middle leaders are critical in ensuring that all pupils learn to read, write and speak with proficiency. Their decisions about timing, the arrangements for catch-up, professional development and assessment all have an impact on the quality of the English curriculum. Teachers' content knowledge in English is fundamental to pupils' progress. CPD should be relevant to teachers' specific needs and capabilities, but it must also ensure that they understand the rationale for what they are being asked to learn.

42. In every school visited, English subject leaders feel supported in their roles. This is because reading and English are seen as important areas of the curriculum.

43. Reception is part of the planning in English in many schools. This means that teachers understand how the key stage 1 curriculum builds on what has come before. In a few schools, however, curriculum plans do not include Reception. Weaker curriculum plans refer to coverage of the national curriculum, but do not always give enough detail beyond this to help teachers understand what pupils should be expected to know and do before new content is taught.

44. Teachers typically receive training in phonics. There is little mention of training beyond phonics, especially for those not directly involved in teaching it in the early stages. Teachers rarely mention any subject associations they work with. There are some positive mentions of the work of the English hubs in relation to support for early reading. [\[footnote 25\]](#)

45. Sometimes, leaders use plans created and shared by their trust, but adapt them to suit the needs of their particular school. Leaders find these plans useful and often state that they help with workload. In one school, they receive regular twilights (after-school sessions), briefings and discussions with their trust to make sure that every staff member is using and adapting the resources effectively.

46. In most schools, leaders use different commercial plans for different purposes: for example, one for reading for pleasure and another for comprehension. These may offer benefits such as reducing workload and supporting teachers who lack subject expertise. However, in the great majority of schools, leaders have not given as much thought to how these different plans work together, what research and evidence they are based on, and how they might provide a coherent curriculum for teachers and pupils.

47. In most of the schools, catch-up teaching is on offer. A small number of schools rely too much on catch-up teaching rather than making sure that pupils are learning the taught content accurately the first time round. In one school, leaders focus on the lowest attaining 20% of readers, with early morning interventions, additional reading and half-termly checks. Some pupils are learning new knowledge to support their reading; however, schools are less clear on which interventions are having an impact. This school had not begun by considering how the curriculum could make sure that pupils are keeping up in lessons, to prevent additional interventions from being needed.

48. In many schools, there is a lack of training and support to meet the national curriculum requirements. As a result, teachers are unclear about how to sequence the spoken language curriculum and receive little support with this. Teachers reflected that what is monitored is driving behaviour, for example, moderation of writing and preparation for national curriculum tests in reading comprehension and English grammar, punctuation and spelling (EGPS). Sometimes, exercise books give evidence of pupils' reading through photographs or portfolios, which is unnecessary and time-consuming for teachers. At times, these recorded activities focus on text types or comprehension rather than on deepening pupils' understanding of stories.

49. Some schools take unhelpful generic approaches to teaching, which at times add to workload. For example, in one school, there is weekly monitoring of whole-school teaching and learning approaches that are not always helpful to the subject of English. Schools are monitoring whether pupils complete extended writing activities in books. This means that teachers rush through the curriculum. In these instances, the activities are not contributing to success, and pupils who most need to improve their reading are being asked to carry out complex tasks without having the necessary fluency in foundational knowledge.

50. Some schools are not clear about the difference between curriculum and pedagogy, nor are they clear about pedagogical content knowledge. In these schools, approaches that are not subject specific are the norm for CPD. There is no systematic way of identifying gaps in teachers' subject knowledge. Teaching assistants/learning support assistants lead catch-up sessions, but do not always have the subject knowledge and training to do this effectively. Monitoring of teaching and coaching support is based on teachers stating what they think they need, rather than on a shared model of expertise and deliberate practice towards these goals. Schools have not considered what pupils need to learn, and this is feeding into a lack of thought about what teachers need to develop in their subject knowledge. Too often, this is left to individual teachers' discretion, which does not lead to an equitable experience for pupils.

How one school went about establishing a professional development offer for English

In one school we visited, the professional development offer was well defined. Leaders had a professional development programme that ran over a 2-week cycle, focused on a specific area of the curriculum. For example, when leaders considered the models for writing, they looked at how to use these to explicitly teach the small steps required. Leaders diagnosed why pupils had misconceptions and used this information to inform training to close those gaps quickly. Where pupils struggled with temporal fronted adverbials, leaders identified these misconceptions and considered how they might address them through explicit examples in coming weeks. This was planned and delivered centrally within the trust to help teachers to share expertise and to reduce workload.

Part B: Secondary English

Our findings are drawn from the sample of 25 secondary schools that we visited.

Curriculum intent: identifying what pupils need to know and do

Summary of the research review relevant to the curriculum

Learning a high-quality secondary English curriculum enables pupils to read increasingly challenging texts. This builds on the reading accuracy and automaticity that they developed at primary school. It is essential that schools devote time to pupils reading a lot of text, using background knowledge and vocabulary to explore literary texts in analytical and evaluative ways. Such a curriculum builds pupils' readiness for future encounters with complex texts, critical views and ways in which we read in a disciplinary way.

The curriculum should also develop pupils' knowledge of writing and their capacity to produce increasingly complex texts of their own, learning how to make apt choices of vocabulary and linguistic and literary features.

Pupils' study of spoken language should become more formalised at secondary school. It should include the features of rhetoric and the use of appropriate register and tone to communicate ideas in increasingly formal and academic ways.

Curriculum scope

51. English is taught regularly in all the secondary schools we visited. Most schools allocate 3 or 4 hours per week for English curriculum time. Some schools increase this in Year 11. Some schools are recently devoting more time at key stage 3 in response to concerns about gaps in learning following the pandemic.

52. The curriculum matches the overall scope of the national curriculum in all the secondary schools we visited. Content is often organised around the texts that pupils study over time. Pupils are given opportunities to develop their writing, often in relation to the books they have studied. This includes both fiction and non-fiction, although there is a greater emphasis on the former.

53. In our 2009 subject report 'English at the crossroads', we raised concerns about how the key stage 3 curriculum is not 'sufficiently challenging or stimulating and that work in Year 7 often repeated what they had learned in primary school'. [\[footnote 26\]](#) In addition, we found that the key stage 3 curriculum lacked 'a clear enough sense of purpose or rationale for students' or clarity about the 'defining vision for English'. We did not find this to be the case in our recent visits. All schools carefully consider how key stage 3 builds on what pupils have already learned in that phase and prepare pupils over the 3 years for their next steps. This is especially the case in the study of literature.

54. It is clear that the planned curriculum is being taught in all schools, and there is a strong commitment to making sure that all pupils, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds or with SEND, can access the curriculum.

55. In most schools, pupils are taught in sets. We found that the great majority of pupils of all abilities, including those with SEND, study the same texts and curriculum as their peers. Leaders recognise that they need to provide an alternative pathway for a small number of pupils, including a curriculum that progresses more slowly towards the same end goal, because pupils have different starting points. This gives these pupils more time to embed knowledge before moving on to more challenging texts. Leaders, however, are passionate about the importance of all pupils having access to the same texts and opportunities.

56. Leaders in most schools are in the process of strengthening the study of non-fiction as part of the curriculum at key stage 3. This is sometimes in response to the exam requirements, but leaders are also aware that these texts offer rich opportunities for pupils to encounter different ideas and topics presented in ways that would enhance the curriculum. Some schools have sequenced this carefully, weaving these texts alongside the texts studied as part of literature. They consider the knowledge that pupils will study and practise as part of writing. The department selects and sequences texts, fiction and non-fiction, to build on pupils' learning in other aspects of the English curriculum and to model the language and structures they can use in their own written work.

57. In other schools, the teaching of non-fiction is less well planned. Individual teachers make decisions based on the needs and interests of their particular class, following on from their assessments. In these schools, it is less clear how pupils are specifically taught to analyse texts in detail or replicate the style of writing themselves.

58. Leaders in all schools recognise that vocabulary is an important aspect of the English curriculum. Most schools have identified key vocabulary in the texts that are being studied, and many spend time checking that pupils understand this. Sometimes, this vocabulary is less well defined and the focus is on learning individual words in isolation, as opposed to embedding a rich vocabulary in context, which allows pupils to think, speak and write about the subject and to create their own complex compositions. This leads to pupils learning words in a decontextualised way that does not allow them to see them in action or add them to their own vocabulary.

59. In a small number of schools, leaders have carefully considered how to build on the curriculum from key stage 2, especially in terms of grammar and punctuation. These are not considered in the curriculum planning in many secondary schools though, and opportunities to retrieve this knowledge and apply it are not always clearly identified.

60. Some leaders consider how the curriculum from key stage 3 onwards can be organised to support study at A level and prepare pupils for the demands of this. Most follow the specification set out by the exam board, and consider how the links between the concepts across the English curriculum support pupils to produce their coursework.

Spoken language

Summary of the research review relevant to spoken language

On arrival at secondary school, pupils should have developed a great deal of proficiency in spoken language. However, the secondary curriculum should continue to teach them the components explicitly, including the vocabulary, register, tone and body language that they can use to communicate their ideas effectively. This teaching allows pupils to make choices about the language and grammatical structures they use. Pupils at secondary level also need opportunities to study the art of rhetoric, by reflecting on how effective orators communicate. To become better

speakers and listeners, pupils also need opportunities to practise, refine and apply this knowledge in a range of different contexts and for a range of different audiences.

61. A small number of schools have identified the components that pupils need to be taught in relation to spoken language as part of the English curriculum. These schools have explored the vocabulary that pupils need to learn and develop to be successful communicators and ways in which they might use rhetorical devices in speech. Leaders plan opportunities for pupils to see this modelled and to practise it in different contexts. They share high-quality examples and require pupils to present short speeches that use persuasion, as part of a lesson. The complexity of what pupils need to know and be able to do increases from the start of key stage 3. These schools have also recognised the important relationship between spoken language, reading and writing. Teachers draw on the speeches and other models that pupils encounter to help them develop their own ability to present their ideas. These include the study of rhetoric. However, decisions about the explicit teaching of spoken language are often left to individual teachers. Many schools have recently introduced spoken language assessments in key stage 3, in response to a perceived lack of confidence that pupils displayed when they came to do their spoken language endorsement. Pupils are therefore being given more opportunities to practise speaking in different contexts and for different purposes. However, although these opportunities have increased, the schools have not clearly defined what pupils specifically need to know and practise doing to get better at speaking.

62. Drama is offered as a subject distinct from English in the secondary schools we visited. In the majority of schools, pupils at key stage 3 are studying this either once or twice a week, and lessons are taught by a drama specialist. Almost all offer drama as an option at key stages 4 and 5, where applicable. Uptake of the subject is variable.

63. In most schools, there are some links between drama and English, and members of the team often teach across both subjects. In other schools, drama is part of the creative arts, alongside dance, music and art. However, drama is rarely considered to be part of the English curriculum in the schools visited, and leaders are unsure whether aspects of the English curriculum relating to drama are covered elsewhere. Rarely do schools consider what drama might look like as part of the English curriculum.

64. The role of drama in English is often regarded as that of a pedagogy. While there can be much to gain from making use of aspects of drama to teach key ideas, drama, as defined in the national curriculum, is rarely seen as an object of study in the English curriculum. Schools rarely consider the key requirements of the national curriculum for pupils to learn about 'improvising, rehearsing and performing play scripts [and to] discuss language use and meaning, using role, intonation, tone, volume, mood, silence, stillness and action to add impact'.^{[\[footnote 27\]](#)} Teachers do take opportunities to explore drama in relation to Shakespeare or other play texts, but this is still very much as part of literature study. Watching productions and considering stagecraft and adaptation are rightly regarded as central to the study of these texts. However, the study of dramatic techniques is not a key focus of the English curriculum. Nor are the aims of the national curriculum to teach pupils to improvise, rehearse and perform play scripts and poetry included. Most schools also have not considered how they teach elements such as register, pitch and tone as part of the development of spoken language.

Writing

Summary of the research review relevant to writing

To develop proficiency in writing, pupils need accuracy and automaticity in transcription and knowledge of the topic they are writing about. The English curriculum needs to provide opportunities for pupils to write frequently for a range of purposes and audiences, including academic writing. Pupils need to be taught about sentence construction, vocabulary, grammar and syntax. This will allow them to write with confidence and increasing flair. Pupils also need to be taught how to plan, draft and revise their work, to reflect on the choices they make as writers, and to draw on the increasingly complex models they study and encounter in their reading.

Writing, as with reading, plays an important role in all subjects, and pupils can be taught to further refine their writing to meet the specific requirements of the particular subject.

65. All secondary school leaders recognise the importance of writing. Many have made recent changes to include more opportunities for pupils to write in English lessons. Many schools said that the pandemic has had an impact on pupils' writing stamina and think that giving pupils more opportunities to write at length has a positive impact on this.

66. Staff in a few schools have deliberately planned the progression in writing for pupils. They have considered the grammatical structures they revisit and explicitly teach from the primary phase. These schools have designed a curriculum that builds on pupils' knowledge, using models from the literary texts that pupils are studying and models that teachers have composed themselves. This includes pupils who are studying A level. Leaders have also designed opportunities for pupils to learn important vocabulary that they can then apply to their writing.

67. However, most schools do not carefully consider what pupils have learned in the primary phase and do not check and revisit key knowledge and skills. This is particularly evident in grammar and writing, where it is often assumed that pupils know or can do things, but schools fail to identify when these should be revisited, practised and developed over time.

68. Most schools are keenly aware that what pupils are reading can help to develop their writing further. In the strongest examples seen, leaders go beyond simply identifying the vocabulary and structures that pupils need to know in order to be successful. In these schools, they consider how they can be taught most effectively. They use precise models and scaffolds to ensure that pupils have enough opportunities to work on the components of writing over time, rather than rushing them to more complex composite tasks, such as GCSE practice.

69. Although leaders and teachers have a clear understanding of the relationship between the texts pupils study and the development of writing, in some schools their understanding of which specific elements they want to draw out for pupils to emulate, especially in syntax and grammar, was less clear. As a result, there is rarely a sense of this building on what has been taught before. Many of these decisions about what to teach are left open to the interpretation of individual teachers. This leads to disparities in the experiences of the pupils and their understanding of the discipline. This is also true of spoken language. There is little consideration of how the development of spoken language and oral composition might support pupils' ability to write and explore ideas in texts more effectively.

70. Most leaders identify vocabulary that supports pupils to improve their writing over time. However, they are not always clear about how pupils can build this vocabulary over time, when and where they can revisit it, and whether they can draw on it in their own writing. Words, such as unfamiliar vocabulary or character names, are linked to schemes of work and often form part of the initial recap in lessons. But this is not always effective in developing pupils' rich knowledge of

vocabulary when schools have not considered the connections between units or how they grow in complexity.

71. A small number of schools have gone further than simply identifying this vocabulary. They have developed a cohesive approach to teaching. Planning includes details of when and how to approach new words, what opportunities there are to revisit them over time and how assessment can explicitly check where they are being used in pupils' work.

72. Accuracy in spelling and punctuation forms part of the feedback that pupils receive after assessment or marking in most schools. In some of these schools, leaders have systematically planned for these elements to be taught or recapped. In others, this has not been planned so carefully across the department or the curriculum. In these schools, beyond key vocabulary, spelling needs are left for teachers to determine and address at an individual or class level. Some teachers use systems such as rewriting spellings or asking pupils to check their own or their peers' spelling. It is not uncommon to see the same errors repeated in books, including the basics such as capital letters and full stops. Some schools have addressed this by being more explicit about what is being taught. They pre-empt misconceptions from pre-teaching, building on what pupils have been taught at key stage 3 and linking it clearly to formative assessment in class. In the main, however, pupils know what these conventions are, but do not always use them fluently or check their own work for errors. Often, work is accepted with these inaccuracies in place, and errors go unchallenged.

73. In most schools, the writing curriculum focuses on composites or outcomes, such as creative writing. Schools do not always carefully identify the knowledge and skills that pupils need to be successful, and much is left to individual teachers' choice. Some teachers make these decisions after initial assessments or in response to later pieces of assessment. This means that there is some variability in what is being taught and corrected.

74. Very few schools have clearly planned how to address the issues that pupils have with transcription. Many of these pupils are often struggling with both reading and writing. Very few schools have considered what pupils who struggle with the foundations of transcription need to learn and practise.

75. When pupils struggle with writing, leaders and teachers often provide extra support to overcome this. Some of this aims to reduce the amount of writing these pupils need to produce. This means that these pupils often get less practice over time, especially with developing legible handwriting. Many schools identified issues with pupils' writing on arrival at secondary school after the pandemic. But they regard difficulties in transcription as indicating a special educational need, rather than as something that can be addressed using the methods that evidence shows to be the most effective. (See the [primary section on writing](#) for details on developing transcription). Laptops, writing frames and short responses often replace opportunities for pupils to work on the specific knowledge and skills they need support with.

How one secondary school went about developing a curriculum for writing

In one school, leaders had carefully considered the knowledge that pupils needed to be taught explicitly in order to develop their writing. They had broken this into its components, including the vocabulary, grammar and style of writing pupils needed to be taught. They had sequenced these over time, gradually building complexity. These were then revisited later. When pupils were required to write a complex text, teachers first modelled how to use the components in practice, making sure that pupils understood this. Pupils were then given opportunities to apply them to their own work. The department had taken a collaborative approach to identifying the most important knowledge and skills that pupils needed, and then planned how to teach these so that all pupils could understand and apply them.

Reading

Summary of the research review relevant to reading

Proficiency in reading is absolutely essential in order for pupils to successfully access the English and broader curriculum. This is why it is necessary that pupils learn to decode accurately and with automaticity at the start of primary school. This will also help pupils to develop positive attitudes to reading, which will develop their proficiency further, and lead to more encounters with texts and an increase in comprehension. Reading comprehension requires knowledge of vocabulary, context, syntax and narrative structure, as well as the capacity to read fluently. Pupils also need to learn about how to analyse texts as part of the discipline. Carefully choosing texts for study in English can support this, as will reading in other relevant subjects.

Urgency in supporting pupils who are struggling to read is necessary to prevent them from falling behind their peers and to make sure that they can access the wider curriculum. It also enables them to gain knowledge through reading widely, for both information and enjoyment.

Supporting struggling readers and developing a culture of reading

76. In all secondary schools, leaders are alert to the importance of reading. They are aware of its significant role in enabling pupils to access the curriculum, to encounter new information and ideas, and to read for pleasure. Pupils have access to libraries in the school, and staff use a variety of methods to encourage and monitor pupils' reading habits and engage them in reading.

77. Some leaders have carefully chosen the texts that pupils encounter, to develop their reading beyond the English curriculum. They choose a range of texts that are progressively more challenging, and introduce pupils to the background knowledge, complex or academic vocabulary and sentence structures that develop their ability to understand them. These include extracts of fiction and non-fiction texts, short stories and whole-class novels. One school has carefully mapped the texts that pupils read in tutor time. It has considered how it could use increasingly complex texts to enrich pupils' knowledge beyond the texts studied in literature. This includes making use of a range of high-quality non-fiction texts and other extracts from seminal texts. Teachers model how to read these complex texts, to ensure that all pupils, including those with SEND or with English as an additional language (EAL), are able to access them.

78. Leaders in most schools are aware of the limited impact of comprehension strategies. They know that comprehension strategies alone will not support pupils' developing understanding. While they may provide some initial support for weaker readers, in helping them know what to think about while trying to understand a text, a continued focus on them is unlikely to improve comprehension.^{[\[footnote 28\]](#)}

79. In many schools, reading is part of pupils' day-to-day experience. They read during tutor time, at the beginning of lessons and in library lessons. Many schools continue library lessons into Year 8 and a few into Year 9. However, the focus on reading for pleasure or developing a reading habit is rarely pursued at key stages 4 and 5.

80. Pupils' attitudes to reading vary between and within schools. Most pupils say that they are reading when it is required but are not making this choice more freely. This attitude is often, but not always, more common in boys. Pupils who find reading more difficult do not, perhaps unsurprisingly, enjoy these opportunities to read their own books. Some schools recognise that this is an issue but are unsure how to address it.^{[\[footnote 29\]](#)} In a few schools, pupils commented on how they enjoy reading together in tutor time and discussing the texts that are chosen. There are avid readers in most schools, but it is not possible to say whether this is because of the school's strategies to encourage reading.

81. Leaders in most schools identify pupils who are still not proficient readers, often through assessing reading age scores. In the most successful schools, they go beyond this and precisely diagnose what specifically pupils are finding difficult (for example, accurately decoding or reading with fluency) and use interventions to address this. They provide frequent purposeful opportunities for pupils to practise over time, and carefully track and evaluate the impact on these individuals. Reading is a key feature of these schools more broadly, and pupils are given many opportunities to see reading modelled and to discuss the content.

82. In many of the schools, while leaders recognise the importance of reading, they are less clear about what specifically pupils are finding difficult and how to address it, beyond providing opportunities for them to read more. In some schools, these opportunities take the form of small group reading sessions during library lessons or tutor time. In other schools, they are part of a wider initiative to encourage reading, such as library lessons or 'drop everything and read' activities. Where this kind of personal reading is the main focus, some pupils who are still struggling with decoding and fluency are not making progress, or the schools are not tracking their progress carefully enough beyond how many books they are reading. Many pupils said that they do not read regularly and do not choose to read at home. A few pupils said that reading only happens if they are 'forced' to do it, by the use of detentions for missing reading sessions.

83. Many schools have not carefully considered the purpose of library lessons. Pupils, especially those who find reading difficult, are often reading books that are unlikely to support their progression in reading. Some schools take measures to check what pupils are reading in these lessons, making use of questions or summaries. However, pupils are often reading texts that are unlikely to support the development of their reading, as they do not provide opportunities for them to encounter challenging vocabulary or syntax. Some pupils actively dislike these sessions. Developing a reading habit is important, but schools need to be clearer about what the additional catch-up support for these pupils entails and to evaluate how effective it is. Developing pupils' fluency in reading also needs to go beyond simply providing opportunities. It requires schools to have a clear purpose for how, what and when pupils are being asked to read.

84. Some schools use phonic-based reading programmes for pupils who need more support with reading. Some of these are not carefully targeted or tailored specifically to the sounds that pupils need to know, and there is little diagnosis of the barriers that pupils face to becoming fluent and confident readers. These programmes are not always given adequate time to allow pupils to practise. They often take place a few times a week or even once a fortnight.

How one secondary school went about developing reading and a reading culture

In one school, leaders took a layered approach to assessing reading. They regularly checked pupils' reading ages at the start of each school year or when new pupils joined the school. This provided initial information about who needed additional support most urgently. They followed this up with careful diagnostics to check what areas pupils needed to work on further. They then provided regular opportunities to specifically teach what was needed, for example making use of a phonics programme where gaps were identified, often in a one-to-one setting. Pupils then used decodable books to practise, both in school and at home. They also had access to other stories and texts, which introduced them to some of the complex vocabulary and ideas before the main class teaching. Additional English lessons were then used to provide these pupils with opportunities to revisit these texts. Pupils quickly gained proficiency in reading, including those with SEND or EAL.

Literature

Summary of the research review relevant to literature

The study of literature as a discipline becomes more significant in secondary schools. An English literature curriculum should identify the knowledge that pupils will need in order to make progress in English literature. Texts become the object of study as well as a vehicle to improve reading proficiency. The exposure pupils have to increasingly complex texts through literary studies continues to be an important factor in developing their reading proficiency. Pupils also need to how critics apply different perspectives, and to know about influential readings of texts and how to reach interpretations. Pupils also require contextual and aesthetic knowledge to be able to appreciate a text.

Knowledge can be acquired through studying carefully chosen and sequenced texts that become increasingly complex in style and substantial in content and themes. This learning is best achieved with some explicit teaching and modelling, for example of different interpretations and ways to think and write critically.

85. In all secondary schools, leaders consider the main ideas, concepts and themes they want pupils to encounter in their study of literature. They identify the most important elements of the texts that they want pupils to know, such as recurring concepts or themes. Leaders design a curriculum that allows pupils to revisit these concepts in different contexts, and think about how the texts build pupils' 'readiness' for the texts they study in key stage 4. For example, some texts look at heroism and use of metaphor and symbolism or characterisation.

86. In many schools, leaders demonstrate sophisticated curricular thinking about the texts they choose for their key stage 3 pupils. For example, they consider vocabulary, syntax and themes, as well as the literary merit of texts. They do not rely on potentially superficial measures of progress, such as reading age, but consider how each individual text builds an understanding of genre, form and theme. The texts chosen include plays, novels, short stories and poems. Leaders consider how these texts connect to one another and prepare pupils for even more challenge as they move towards key stages 4 and 5.

87. In most schools, leaders and teachers identify where pupils repeatedly encounter literary concepts, such as the conventions of the genre, in different contexts at key stage 3, and how this prepares them to study the selected texts at key stages 4 and 5. For example, one school had introduced the 19th century novel in Year 8. This familiarises pupils with the context, vocabulary and writing conventions that prepare them to study 'A Christmas Carol' at key stage 4. Another school had considered how following the thread of tragedy would prepare pupils not just for GCSE, but for A level. They carefully sequence the opportunities pupils have to explore this in different contexts over time, including where there are opportunities to contrast it with the comedic form.

88. In the most successful schools, leaders reflect carefully on pupils' starting points and the areas they find most difficult. For example, in one school, teachers had identified that pupils have found it difficult to make comparisons between complex texts at key stage 4. In response to this, they have built in opportunities during the study of poetry for pupils to be taught how to do this and to practise it in small steps at key stage 3.

89. In a very few schools, although leaders carefully consider the texts pupils encounter and why they are important in developing pupils' reading, they have not identified what knowledge pupils need to take forward from this study. This leads to some texts appearing to be disparate or disconnected. For example, collections of poems or play scripts stand alone from the study of the novel, and knowledge of the different forms is not developed further over time. Teachers and

pupils are unsure about the connections between the texts, and how studying the sonnet form might prepare them for the study of some Shakespeare texts, for example.

90. Occasionally, leaders' decisions on which texts to study at key stage 3 are made for reasons other than quality. In these schools, leaders want to select texts that focus on issues of social justice or that pupils are able to access more easily. The desire to link texts to pupils' experiences or current issues means that they do not always select a text for its literary merit. In these cases, the sequencing of these texts and the underlying knowledge and skills pupils are to learn are not always carefully defined in relation to the study of literature. Schools do not consider how the study of these texts might prepare pupils for further encounters with even more complex texts, as opposed to developing their understanding of issues such as homelessness. Text choices vary, but some are not necessarily giving pupils opportunities to encounter the complex vocabulary and structures that will prepare them for the challenges of key stage 4 and beyond.

What pupils know and remember, and what this means they can do

Summary of the research review in relation to impact

To gain expertise in English, pupils need to assimilate content that is well organised. Pupils need foundational knowledge that builds from knowing the alphabet, and knowledge of language, linguistics and the world. Pupils need to remember what they have learned previously. They need to have opportunities to practise applying this knowledge until they become fluent and incorporate it into their emerging interconnected schema (the connected knowledge pupils have of the subject). This knowledge then becomes flexible, meaningful and easy to use. It prepares pupils to tackle the challenging concepts of the discipline, including through creating their own compositions, reading progressively complex texts and presenting their own ideas in a range of ways.

91. In most secondary schools, it is evident that pupils can accurately recall important information about the literary texts they are studying in English, drawing threads together in relation to themes, genres and ideas. The work they produce demonstrates how they are able to explore increasingly complex concepts related to literature.

92. We saw some high-quality work in many of the schools visited. In these examples, there is evidence of pupils writing increasingly complex work, exploring increasingly complex texts and ideas, and making effective use of the language and structures of the subject.

93. It is not always clear how pupils are getting better at reading, writing and spoken language, especially pupils who are still at the earliest stages of learning these. Most schools are unsure how they would go about addressing some of the prevalent issues in writing, especially for pupils who are still struggling with the foundations of reading and writing. This is also the case with spoken language. This means that some of the pupils who arrive at secondary school struggling to write and read fluently, or who do not know how to present their ideas effectively orally, are not making the rapid progress needed.

94. Some schools use precision teaching of reading for pupils who find this difficult on arrival at secondary school, so they catch up quickly. Other schools rely too much on broad systems to track or encourage reading. This means that pupils who need precision teaching, especially in phonics, are not receiving it, as the school has not accurately identified gaps in their learning. As a result, many of these pupils remain behind their peers.

95. In lessons, pupils are engaging with the subject and generally they are keen to explore the texts and tasks they are given. Pupils who decide to continue to study English at key stage 5 often do so because of their relative success in the subject rather than because of the texts chosen. Their enjoyment of the subject arises from having achieved well, and they value what it can offer them in their continued studies and possible careers.

Teaching the curriculum

96. In the majority of secondary schools, leaders had considered in detail the approaches that they use to teach the curriculum. They make appropriate decisions about how to teach the designed curriculum and make sure that pupils learn it. Many schools use modelling, retrieval and additional support as a standard part of their lessons. In some schools, teachers use an 'I do, we do, you do' approach to modelling, and 'do now' tasks to recap pupils' knowledge and prime them for their next steps.

97. In some schools, English teams collaborate on how to make the best use of approaches such as modelling and retrieval. They evaluate how effective these are in the context of their subject. They have a clear understanding of both the curriculum content that they want to teach and how they go about doing this.

98. Some schools have not considered as carefully how teaching approaches relate to the subject. While all leaders say that they use modelling in lessons, this is not always evident in lessons or in the subsequent discussions with teachers. Teachers and subject leaders are not always given opportunities to examine how to make best use of this tool. Furthermore, in some schools, where retrieval is a key element of pedagogy across the school, leaders and teachers have not had the opportunities to consider how these activities relate to the subject and the curriculum. This means that, in those schools, some teachers are not retrieving the most salient information for the subject and considering how they might best make use of this approach.

99. A few schools have not discussed the most effective ways to develop pupils' knowledge of English, and some teaching approaches do not focus on the content pupils need to know or the practice they need to improve. In some schools, pupils spend time drawing characters or designing adverts. It is unclear what pupils are able to learn or do as a result of these tasks.

100. In the schools that build their curriculum around GCSE assessment objectives and outcomes, pedagogy often focuses on getting pupils to practise answering exam-style questions from the start of Year 7. While it is important to know how to approach questions in an exam, pupils at these schools are given a narrow view of the subject. They are limited to completing PEE or point, evidence, terminology, analyse and link (PETAL) paragraphs or writing texts that are purely designed around exam tasks. Some pupils say that this limits their enjoyment of the subject, because so much of their time is devoted to crafting these types of responses.

Teaching the curriculum in one secondary school

In one school, leaders had spent significant time exploring how to draw on the most effective elements of retrieval and modelling to ensure that English was taught in a way that pupils would remember. They had collaborated with the English team to produce centralised resources. These included core knowledge, recap materials, retrieval activities and models. Teachers met regularly to discuss how best to teach their curriculum and how they could check that this content had been learned and that pupils could do more as a result.

Teachers also had the autonomy to adapt some of these resources to meet the pupils' needs. They provided additional models or scaffolds and adapted the questions or retrieval tasks to revisit concepts that their pupils had found more challenging. They always focused on teaching the content in a way that pupils would remember and checked this systematically.

Work in pupils' books showed that they were revisiting important knowledge, practising elements such as vocabulary and syntax in their own writing and building towards greater independence in their reading and writing.

Assessment

Summary of the research review in relation to assessment

Formative assessment focuses on looking at the component parts of the curriculum and checking how securely pupils have learned them. This allows teachers to precisely identify misconceptions and gaps in learning and adapt their teaching to address them. Specific feedback tells pupils how to improve. Teaching focuses on building pupils' prerequisite knowledge rather than on practice in answering exam questions.

Internal summative assessments enable schools to measure standards, see how effective teaching and the curriculum are across year groups, report to parents and monitor pupils' progress and wider outcomes. It is crucial that schools are aware of the limits to the inferences that can be drawn from summative assessments. These check performance in complex tasks rather than the knowledge and skills that underpin these.

101. Most schools recognise some of the key issues that teachers face when assessing in English. These largely relate to workload and the reliability of marking. Many leaders take steps to make sure that moderation of assessment work takes place, especially at key stage 4. In addition, many schools reduce the marking load by limiting the number of formal 'data drops' required, and introducing live marking, whole-class feedback or comparative judgement. However, this is with an understanding that marking will always be a demanding part of teaching the subject.

102. What is not always as clear is the purpose of the assessments and how this relates to the form they take. Pupils frequently act on feedback from assessment. However, they sometimes repeat errors, indicating that the feedback is not necessarily having the intended impact. In schools where they carefully identify the knowledge and skills they want pupils to master and how to assess this, for example through multiple choice quizzing or short form responses, pupils are much clearer about how to avoid repeating that error.

103. Most schools use some type of formative assessment. In all but a few schools, teachers routinely check pupils' understanding and adapt the next steps of the lesson to address this as needed, usually through questioning. This is most successful in schools where leaders and teachers carefully identify the knowledge that pupils need to learn and where misconceptions might arise. These schools focus their learning checks on these small steps for all pupils.

104. Some schools are experimenting with more targeted approaches to formative assessment, such as multiple-choice questions and in-class or online quizzing. This is due to concerns about teachers' workload, and to make sure that teachers identify gaps in learning more effectively.

105. Where formative assessment is less successful, learning checks are limited to a small number of pupils who are either targeted by the teacher or who raise their hand to respond to a

whole-class question. Very few schools are using formative approaches that allow them to quickly determine where there are misunderstandings across the whole class. Evidence in books shows that pupils are often repeating the same errors in spelling, punctuation and grammar. Teachers do not carefully identify misconceptions and errors carefully enough and consider how to ensure that these are rectified.

106. Most schools use infrequent written tasks mid way through or at the end of a unit to check what pupils know about the text or topic they are studying. While these tasks do identify gaps in pupils' knowledge, they have implications both for how quickly misconceptions are picked up and addressed and for teachers' workload when marking these longer tasks.

107. Many schools have made significant changes to their approach to summative assessment in English. Some schools that had previously used GCSE criteria recognise the limitations of these kinds of assessment when looking at what pupils know and can do at key stage 3. In many schools, leaders are also aware of teachers' workload, and have reduced the requirement to assess summatively from 6 points a year to 2 or 3. However, this is often not the case at key stage 4, where many schools carry out a number of 'mock' assessments over the 2 years. Increasingly, these are becoming more carefully calibrated to the taught curriculum. They focus on the points pupils are at in the course, rather than aiming to assess them across the whole discipline.

108. Some schools use a GCSE mark scheme throughout key stage 3 as well as key stage 4. They attempt to modify the scheme to reflect the point that pupils have reached. However, they are still assessing pupils against criteria that ask them to carry out complex tasks, requiring skills and knowledge that they have not yet been explicitly taught or have not practised in different contexts. This also narrows the content of what pupils are studying, as they repeat activities related to extracts to prepare them for exams, rather than studying whole texts. In many other schools visited, writing activities are often limited to GCSE-style writing tasks. They do not provide opportunities for pupils to be taught and practise the components of this over the 5 years. The GCSE is designed to sample across a range of knowledge and does not in itself provide a wide curriculum.

109. In a few schools, GCSE assessment objectives are still central to their curriculum design, and much of their English teaching still focuses on what pupils can do in relation to these criteria. If pupils have not explicitly been taught required knowledge, have not encountered this in a range of different contexts and have not had time to develop the kind of writing they will need, it is unlikely they will be able to meet these criteria. These types of assessment can also make it difficult for staff to identify what pupils need to know more about, and they reduce pupils' opportunities to practise to fluency to achieve this.

Pitfalls when planning using GCSE assessment objectives

In one secondary school, the subject leader was concerned about the lower starting points of the pupils in school. A large number of pupils spoke English as an additional language, and leaders saw this as a key barrier to progress in reading. However, this led to them focusing on exam practice from Year 7 onwards to prepare pupils for the demands of the GCSE, using extracts and writing prompts, rather than making sure that pupils had a rich diet of whole texts and a clear understanding of how to write accurately. They did not fully appreciate how developing pupils' spoken language could give them time to rehearse and embed concepts before the additional challenge of writing about them. This made it difficult for teachers to identify pupils' knowledge gaps and to adapt what then needed to be emphasised in teaching. Pupils' experience of English was also then limited to the scope of the GCSE.

Systems at subject and school level

Summary of the research review in relation to prioritising school English

The roles of senior and middle leaders in secondary schools are critical in ensuring that all pupils learn to read, write and speak with proficiency. Their decisions about timings, the arrangements for catch-up, professional development and assessment all have an impact on the quality of the English curriculum. In addition, leaders in secondary schools make key decisions about the ways in which groups, for example sets or intervention classes, are organised.

110. All secondary school leaders are clear about the importance of English. In a few cases, this is purely related to outcomes. However, in most schools we visited, leaders take a broader view and are determined to provide the support necessary to ensure that they teach a high-quality English curriculum. This means that English teams are given the resources and time to provide a whole-school approach to developing reading, vocabulary and spoken language. 'Oracy', as distinct from a spoken language curriculum, is often seen as a way to support literacy. While such approaches might support the goals of the English curriculum, this is not necessarily the case. They are often general teaching approaches that do not consider spoken language as the object of study.

Teacher education and professional development in English

Summary of the research review in relation to developing teachers' knowledge and expertise

Teachers' content knowledge in English is fundamental to pupils' progress. CPD should be relevant to teachers' specific needs and capabilities, but it must also ensure that they understand the rationale for what they are being asked to learn.

111. In the great majority of schools, English teachers and leaders are subject specialists who are knowledgeable and passionate about their subject. They are keen to improve their curriculum and develop the way it is being taught. They are aware of where there are gaps in what they are covering, for example in writing or spoken language.

112. However, the development of subject knowledge in English is often concentrated on exam marking and moderation, with a focus on GCSE or A-level criteria. While there is value in understanding exam requirements, it is important to remember that this type of assessment will only sample part of the curriculum. It may not give pupils the knowledge they need to learn key stage 3 content or the discipline beyond the exam.

113. In all schools, departments meet regularly to discuss their work. They take different approaches to planning, working from centralised resources, working in 'buddy' pairs or working on a sequence of lessons to refine and reflect on as a group. Some teachers think that they would benefit further from this kind of approach, and there could be some tensions between whole-school training and having time to embed this into the subject. However, some leaders explained that it is their role to help the team to transfer what this looks like into the subject and explore what would or would not work. They believe they have the freedom to do so, but time to do this is sometimes limited. This means that some generic approaches to pedagogy, such as questioning and retrieval, are not yet considered in relation to English.

114. Although teams meet regularly, both formally and informally, most schools have no coherent plan for ensuring that teachers develop the content knowledge that they need. This is especially in

relation to the components that need to be taught in writing and spoken language. Some schools rely on staff identifying this knowledge themselves. The monitoring of teaching often focuses on whether teachers are taking a generic approach to teaching or on the behaviour of the pupils, instead of diagnosing an area to develop around content knowledge. Where schools do not identify what needs to be taught, it is difficult for them to know how effective the teaching is or what teachers need to know more about in order to do this well.

115. This is especially the case where teachers are non-specialists or new to the profession. Mentoring and buddying are used to support them, but this relies on teachers identifying gaps in their own knowledge. It is unclear how these gaps will be addressed specifically, including for teachers at the early stage of their career.

Appendix. Methodological note

We gathered the evidence for this report through research visits to 50 schools across England, with an equal number of visits to primary and secondary schools. The evidence for early reading was drawn from visits to 25 schools as part of routine inspection activities. Both these methods follow the principles set out in the education inspection framework.

We checked that the sample represented a range of criteria. These were: region, inspection outcome, disadvantage quintile, size of school and a rural or urban location. The sample was broadly representative of the national picture, including schools with different characteristics.

We gathered qualitative evidence about English education in schools we visited. The range of evidence gathered during these visits enabled us to identify common themes in English education that are likely to be relevant in a wide range of schools.

We focused on gathering evidence that related to the following areas:

- curriculum
- pedagogy
- assessment
- school systems
- the impact of the above on what pupils learn

When analysing this evidence, we drew on the conception of quality in English education that we outlined in our English research review. This enabled us to consider how English education in English schools relates to our best evidence-based understanding of how schools can provide a high-quality English education for all pupils.

The subject report sets out what we saw in a range of schools across England. It is not intended to be used in place of the criteria set out in the education inspection framework, which provides guidance on how inspectors make judgements about school curriculums under the quality of education judgement.

1. [Research review series: English](#), Ofsted, July 2022. ↵
2. [English at the crossroads](#), Ofsted (through the National Archives), June 2009. ↵
3. [Moving English forward](#), Ofsted, March 2012. ↵
4. [Research review series: English](#), Ofsted, July 2022. ↵

5. [Key stage 1 and phonics screening check attainment, Academic year 2022/23](#), Explore Education Statistics. [↵](#)
6. [PIRLS 2021: National report for England](#), page 7, Department for Education, May 2023, Research report. [↵](#)
7. [Key stage 2 attainment](#), Explore education statistics, September 2023. [↵](#)
8. [Key stage 2 attainment](#), Explore education statistics, December 2022. [↵](#)
9. [Key stage 4 performance](#), Explore education statistics, October 2023. [↵](#)
10. [Provisional entries for GCSE, AS and A level: summer 2023 exam series](#), Explore education statistics, June 2023. [↵](#)
11. This refers to the phonics screening check, key stage 1 and key stage 2 national curriculum test data, and GCSE and A-level outcomes. [↵](#)
12. [Research review series: English](#), page 21, Ofsted, July 2022. [↵](#)
13. For more on working memory, see: [Research review series: English](#), pages 19 to 22, Ofsted, July 2022. [↵](#)
14. Phonics screening check, National curriculum 2013, EYFS reforms 2021, English hubs programme, Reading framework. [↵](#)
15. [English at the crossroads](#), page 4, Ofsted (through the National Archives), June 2009; [Moving English forward](#), Ofsted, March 2012. [↵](#)
16. On literary merit, see the 'A range of perspectives' section of the [Research review series: English](#), Ofsted, July 2022. See the 'Literature' sections of the report for more detail. [↵](#)
17. [Excellence in English](#), Ofsted, May 2011. [↵](#)
18. [Now the whole school is reading](#), Ofsted, October 2022. [↵](#)
19. [Key stage 2 attainment](#), Explore education statistics, September 2023. [↵](#)
20. [Moving English forward](#), Ofsted, March 2012. [↵](#)
21. [Research review series: English](#), Ofsted, July 2022. [↵](#)
22. Section summaries are adapted from the conception of subject quality outlined in the research review that preceded this report: [Research review series: English](#), Ofsted, July 2022. [↵](#)
23. [Education recovery in schools in England](#), National Audit Office, February 2023. [↵](#)
24. RG Nathan and KE Stanovich, 'The causes and consequences of differences in reading fluency', in 'Theory into Practice', Volume 30, Issue 3, 1991, pages 176 to 184. [↵](#)
25. [English hubs](#), Department for Education. [↵](#)
26. [Excellence in English](#), Ofsted, May 2011. [↵](#)
27. [English programmes of study: key stage 3](#), page 6, Department for Education, September 2013. [↵](#)
28. [Reading framework](#), page 77, Department for Education, July 2023. [↵](#)
29. [Reading framework](#), page 94, Department for Education, July 2023. [↵](#)