

## CHAPTER 1

# WHAT TEACHERS OF LITERACY KNOW AND DO



• attitudes • cognition • curriculum • imitation • innate • input • knowledge about language • language development • subject knowledge • processes

This chapter will give you:

- a sense of the importance of literacy and English
- ideas of the responsibilities of the teacher of literacy
- insights into the ways in which children develop language
- an awareness of what you'll need to learn
- a sense of relief that you already know a great deal
- an overview of what happens in English lessons and why it happens



Teaching English is really important – that could really be the message of this whole book. Reading, writing, speaking and listening are central to the curriculum and permeate every aspect of the school day. They are wonderful accomplishments in themselves, bringing pleasure and power, but they are also essential carriers of every aspect of learning. This is a pretty strong case in itself but it is what happens in adult life to people with poor literacy that makes the

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work of the primary teacher so significant. The National Literacy Trust found recently that:

70% of pupils permanently excluded from school have difficulties in basic literacy skills. 25% of young offenders are said to have reading skills below those of the average seven-year-old. 60% of the prison population is said to have difficulties in basic literacy skills. (2008: 6)

Though these are horrifying statistics, it is also the everyday burden of low levels of literacy which impacts on the lives of many people. If you consider the number of times you use your reading and writing skills in a day it is easy to see what a burden it would be in our society to have problems in these key areas. Not being able to do things like using a television remote, sending a text message, finding an address would be a nuisance; being unable to read the instructions for taking a prescription or write well enough to fill in an application form could have enormous effects. Joan, a recently retired school dinner lady, described her feelings about her poor literacy levels like this:

I nearly didn't go for the job because the thought of school still gives me the heebiebies. All through my life I've been pretending – sore finger when there was writing to be done, forgot my reading glasses – I don't even have reading glasses. Then there's things I'd have loved to do – cooking from fancy recipes. I don't even like being in strange places on my own in case of getting lost ...

No one should go through life with this burden and, hopefully, things have moved forward so much that children who struggle with reading and writing are supported by sensitive, astute teachers.

If being literate is so important to adults then it is essential that primary teachers approach the teaching of literacy with flair, diligence and a determination that every child will be successful and will enjoy all the processes of learning. Enjoyment isn't window dressing for learning: it is essential for progress (DfES, 2003). If this simple knowledge that literacy really matters is constantly in mind, then everything else will fall in place and classrooms will be places where children thrive as language learners. The promise all teachers make is that we will do everything possible to ensure that no one leaves primary school frightened of speaking, reading or writing or unable to draw on language skills for work and pleasure as they move towards adult life.



### Expert reflection

#### ***Colette Ankers de Salis: The best teachers of literacy***

Like all effective teachers, the best literacy teachers possess generic qualities that inspire and motivate children to want to learn. They have high expectations and believe in the young learners in front of them. They care. The best literacy teachers

know that developing children's literacy skills is of fundamental importance. They know that there is an undisputed link between levels of literacy and life chances; that being literate unlocks all other areas of the school curriculum and enables people to function in the real world after school. It is thus the foundation for all learning and future opportunities.

The best literacy teachers are committed to nurturing a love of the written and spoken word; they know that it is alarmingly easy to turn children off reading and writing through mundane worksheets and purposeless exercises. So they plan engaging lessons with clear learning intentions and communicate effectively with the children so that they understand what they are learning and why.

The best teachers of literacy are interested in and understand *how* children learn to read and write and plan stimulating lessons that build on prior skills and knowledge. They recognise that explicit teaching of letters and sounds is important but that children need opportunities to apply their developing skills and knowledge, capitalising on children's interests to create such opportunities.

They are passionate about children's love of reading and enthusiasm for writing. They recognise and value children's early reading behaviours and emergent mark-making and seek to develop these skills further through stimulating and developmentally appropriate activities. These teachers understand that literacy skills depend on the development of language skills. They know writing effectively and reading for understanding are problematic in the absence of a wide vocabulary and an understanding of the grammar and richness of the English language. Thus they create a language-rich environment where things such as talk, discussion, songs and word-play are valued and embedded.

The best literacy teachers know much about how children learn to read and write yet recognise that they may not know everything. Thus they remain open to embracing new ideas and research findings through life-long learning.

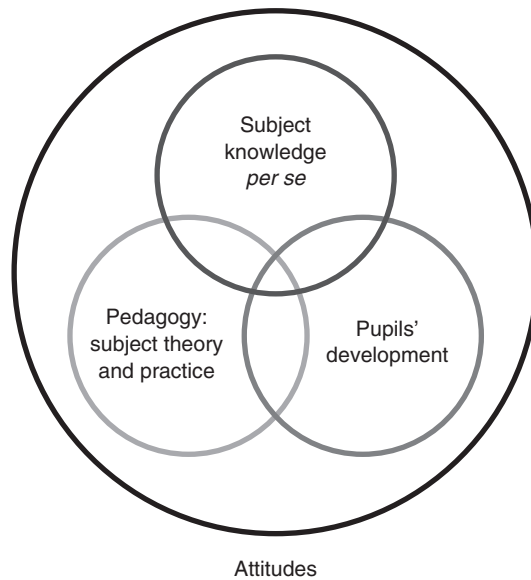
*(Colette Ankers de Salis is Senior Lecturer in Primary and Early Years Education, Liverpool John Moores University)*



- What groups of children are most likely to struggle with literacy in the primary years? How can teachers ensure that they experience success?
- Is motivation the most important factor for learning literacy?
- Is difficulty with reading or writing more of a burden now than it was 50 years ago?
- Can you identify times in the school day when you won't be teaching literacy in some way?

## What society has a right to expect of teachers of English

In 2007 the Teacher Development Agency considered the specific types of knowledge and understanding required by primary teachers (TDA, 2007). In their model the three main areas – subject knowledge *per se*, knowledge of teaching approaches and knowledge of children's development – interlink so



**Figure 1.1** TDA model of subject knowledge needed by teachers. © Crown Copyright 2007 Reproduced with permission.

that when teachers are informed by all three, they work with confidence and competence. This is a good example of all the types of knowledge coming together as a student teacher makes decisions:

My teacher wanted me to teach the children how to edit using a word processor. I was pleased because it is important for people to be able to use computers. This is how I researched and planned. First I read about children editing writing on the Strategy site and I talked to my English tutor. We decided that children were going to need to know how to delete, move sentences, change words and add words. Then I made sure I could do all this using the interactive whiteboard and the school laptops. Then I checked with my teacher what children had done with changing text and it was just changing fonts. Then I thought about whether the children would be ready to look so critically at their own work because that seemed very hard and I decided that it was better for them to edit something I wrote for them. My teacher thought it would be nice to do some shared editing before getting the children to do it on their own. (Kate, student teacher)

In the TDA model, the three intersecting circles of knowledge are shown inside a circle representing the teacher's attitudes to the subject and to the children as learners. The attitude of literacy teachers will influence every aspect of work. It is essential that teachers believe that all children can make progress in English and literacy, have a right to enjoy their learning and to have their needs met. We must also recognise that success in literacy will impact greatly on prosperity, achievement and probably happiness throughout life. Being a literacy teacher is a huge responsibility – one that we all must recognise and accept.

## The subject knowledge of the curriculum

Teachers must (fairly obviously) know the material they have to teach in English lessons. The heart of this knowledge is stipulated in the National Curriculum; it is essential that children cover this in order to make the progress expected. The knowledge required to teach this should not be taxing for anyone on an Initial Teacher Training course as entry qualifications are far higher than this. However, not only must teachers be able to understand the material, they must also be able to make others understand it (Kyriacou, 1998). This is often quite demanding because we can be very effective users of our language without being fully aware of our own levels of understanding or the rules which are determining our choices (Fielding-Barnsley and Purdie, 2005) – being able to do something well doesn't necessarily mean that you can teach it effectively.

When we come to teaching something, our own language understanding can be strained because we have to explain things which have been instinctive or intuitive before. The conscious knowledge of the structures, rules and reasons of our language is now usually called 'knowledge about language' though some texts will refer to it as 'metalinguistic awareness'. It is this knowledge that we have to develop very strongly as teachers of English as it enables us to understand children's misconceptions and to help them to understand them too (Eyres, 2007). It also helps us with the 'why questions' about our language: being a great teacher requires confidence with the 'whys' of the curriculum as well as the 'whats' (the expected coverage) and the 'hows' (effective pedagogy).

Teachers also need to know how to translate their knowledge into terms which will be understandable to children. This will require careful thought about how to link the new concept to children's existing knowledge. It is also necessary to think about the technical terminology to be introduced and how it should be defined. One of the hardest things is to find examples which make the learning absolutely clear. For example, some people may choose to use metaphors to introduce new linguistic concepts, perhaps likening a complex sentence to a chocolate éclair! Wierzbicka (1996) explored the way in which we use figurative language to introduce new concepts. It can be an excellent way of making the concept clear but also leads to the question of when technical terminology has to be introduced. So it is sensible to explain that a complex sentence is like an éclair but less valuable to name it as one. It is debatable whether there is any value in teaching a transitional terminology which then has to be unpicked and replaced with the conventional words.

The material to be covered (the immediate subject knowledge) is simple to research. However, a teacher's knowledge of the curriculum has to be sufficiently secure to do other things (Ofsted, 2008). When asked an unexpected question or confronted with an unusual error, teachers must have the knowledge to respond immediately with accurate knowledge or have the confidence to say, 'I don't know but I'll find out for you'. Recently, one of our students was

asked whether haikus ever used similes when written in Japanese. By admitting that she didn't know and later explaining how she'd found the answer, she did a great deal to enhance the child's knowledge of the subject, of research skills and of the value of independent thinking in the study of English.



Before a placement, your teacher will always let you know the English topics you will have to teach. When you know the topic, break it down into the key concepts which will become the learning objectives. For each one check that you:

- understand the concept at your own level
- know any rules or conventions
- know the key technical terminology
- can explain all these in ways which children would understand
- can identify some good examples
- can explain why it is worth learning

## The teaching strategies of literacy lessons

As well as knowledge of the curriculum, literacy teachers need to know the most valuable ways of teaching the subject. When the 'literacy hour' was implemented in a very formal way, key teaching strategies were incorporated into the structure of the lesson. Though the timings are now much more relaxed it is probably still appropriate that, in every literacy or English lesson, children:

- work together as a whole class exploring ideas and developing knowledge
- work as a member of a group. This doesn't mean that they happen to sit near other children while working independently, but that the group of children work together on something which might be too daunting to do alone. Some of this time they will be led by the teacher, but at some times, equally importantly, they will be learning to make decisions and get out of difficulties by drawing independently on their own knowledge (Sainato et al., 1990)
- may also work on their own consolidating or applying the group or whole class learning
- may also increasingly, be offered by teachers one to one coaching and support for individuals. McKenna and Walpole (2004) have explored this in the context of the American primary system. It is also advocated by National Literacy Strategy (2009)

This list shows that the typical literacy lesson will involve a range of teaching strategies. The important thing is that they are a support not a straitjacket. They are all sensible things which, combined and blended thoughtfully, should ensure a range of appropriate teaching and learning activities. Teachers have to make decisions within this structure – and may sometimes choose to go outside it.

Within this structure of what children are likely to do, it is also sensible to list some key teaching activities:

1. Sharing the learning objective/outcome: you'll have to *translate* technical terms. You'll also need to explain how it links with previous learning and when it will be useful or appropriate.
2. Reactivating existing knowledge: you'll often start a lesson by *reminding* children of relevant knowledge which will act as the foundation for new learning. This requires reference to good *recording of information* in the past. You'll often *invent* a game for this part of the lesson. You may also take the opportunity to *coach* to address individual gaps in learning.
3. Shared work (speaking and listening, reading or writing): you'll *model* the effective use of the new skill or learning, often *commentating* on what you are doing by 'thinking aloud' the decisions you are making. You will *invite* contributions from the children, *listen* carefully to responses, *interpret* them, review them and respond encouragingly, *noting* successes and either *gently addressing* errors and misconceptions or *remembering* them for help later. You will also *instruct* directly, *explain* key concepts and ask question in ways which enhance knowledge and ensure full understanding. While doing this, you'll *assess* children's response through observing, and *evaluate* the effectiveness of your teaching.
4. Guided group work: you'll be using similar strategies to those in the shared work with the whole class. As the children have broadly similar needs, you'll be working with much more precision. You'll have to *create* a more relaxed (though still very productive) atmosphere so that all children have the confidence to contribute. In this part of the lesson you'll need to expect to *improvise* examples and explanations as your responses, instructions, examples and questions cannot always be predicted.
5. Independent work: This will be going on while you are teaching the group so your strategy in the lesson is going to be a benevolent overview. This is only going to be successful if the planning (see below) and working ethos are strong.
6. Plenary: With the whole class together again, you will *reiterate* the desired learning; *encourage reflection* on achievement; *assess* the learning against the objectives. Most importantly, you'll ensure that children finish the lesson with a knowledge of genuine success. Hopefully, you'll do the same for yourself – though your evaluations will identify things you could have done better, you will certainly have had some new achievements. Make a note of them and *praise yourself* too. If you don't identify what was good, you won't know it is worth doing again.



Re-reading this list, my first thought was, 'Can anyone genuinely do all that?' Primary teachers do it all the time, much of it being so automatic that at the end of an excellent lesson the teacher might find it quite hard to explain what she had done. Make a list of the italicised verbs and check when you have successfully done each thing. As you gain experience, each of the teaching skills in this list becomes much easier.

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Many new student teachers are surprised (or, more honestly ‘horrified’) by the amount of preparation and recording required for each lesson. Again, though the requirements won’t lessen, your increased confidence and competence will soon make them much easier. Before every lesson you’ll have to know:

- what you aim for the children to learn
- how you will know if they have learnt it
- whether there are any language barriers which make it hard for some children to make progress, and how you will overcome them
- what the children have previously learnt which is relevant to what you’ll be teaching
- whether there are any children who will need support to bring them to a suitable starting point for the lesson
- whether any children are working to individual learning outcomes
- whether any children will need support with the language to be used in the lesson
- whether any children have already achieved the learning objectives and will therefore need different challenges
- the National Curriculum relevance of the intended learning
- the links to other curriculum areas
- the way the learning furthers the *Every Child Matters* agenda
- the ways in which children are most likely to learn the required material

In practical terms you also need to know what you, the children and any other adults supporting the lesson will do in all parts of the lesson. You’ll need to locate and evaluate resources or possibly make your own. You’ll need to think about where and when you’ll be teaching, how the teaching area will be organised to maximise learning and how to make materials such as dictionaries, paper, websites, reference books, and stationery available so that children are encouraged to make independent decisions.

Your ITT provider will need evidence that you have made all the decisions needed and planned your lesson in good detail because the needs of children are always the first priority. Though the documentation may seem like a burden, it is a way of ensuring that you practise all the decision-making needed to prepare and teach excellent literacy lessons. Similarly, after every lesson, student teachers have to put on paper the things which experienced teachers of literacy often keep in their heads.

After every literacy lesson you will need to:

- think about how well you taught
- discuss achievements and areas of concern with any adults who worked with individuals or groups
- assess and record the achievements against the learning outcomes
- accumulate evidence in the form of written work, your notes, photographs (check the school’s policy) etc.



- make note of any issues which need to be addressed in the next lesson
- consider your effectiveness in that lesson
- respond to all written work
- modify, if necessary, the planned work for the next lesson

## Knowledge of children's language development

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This is not the place for a detailed consideration of the different models of language acquisition. There are many excellent texts devoted to the issue if more depth is needed. It is important to have a view of how children have developed initial language because this will impact on the ways in which you expect them to continue to develop as language learners in your class. It is not something which is only important in the early years: language acquisition continues throughout childhood. The processes which spurred a baby into first attempts at communication will work to develop language further in the primary years. Our understanding of how children grow as language users should influence our teaching.

## Models of language acquisition

Imitation seems the most obvious way in which children learn language. They learn to treat the linguistic sounds of their family language as different from other noises. They also learn to use the words which their families use. However, there are some things in young children's language patterns which can't have come from imitation of adults. For example, most children as they learn basic rules from others, over-generalise them. Children who have learnt that plurals are formed by adding 's' will speak about *sheeps* or *childrens*: this cannot be in imitation of adults.

This obvious weakness in the imitation model led to the development of ideas that children are born with an innate capacity to develop language given the right stimuli. The innate capacity would involve both the general principles of language learning and grammatical knowledge – an ability to form rules based on examples (Pinker, 1994). This approach explains why children develop speech so readily and rapidly but, doesn't fully account for children developing language very differently (Tomasello, 2003).

Cognition theories would argue that children process language in ways their thought development permits. In this model the language structures become linked to existing cognition. For example a child cannot use the language of comparison *Your dog is bigger than Daisy* until she has been given opportunity to make comparisons. The difficulty of this approach is that it is impossible to unravel the role of language in the development of concepts: a sort of chicken and egg argument. This problem is shown if the example above is put back into its original context.

- Child:* Your dog is very, very, very, very big.  
*Me:* Her name's Polly. She's very big but she won't hurt your dog.  
*Child's mum:* Polly's much bigger than Daisydog. Daisy is big but Pollydog is much bigger, isn't she?  
*Child:* Your dog is biggerer than Daisy.  
*Me:* That's right. Polly's bigger than Daisy.

In this example, the mother and I are both automatically setting the context for language development and concept development so it is hard to know whether one preceded the other or if they arrived together. Another example could be the word *Schadenfreude* which means the lamentable delight we gain from the misfortune of our friends: it was only when I learnt the word that I recognised the concept.

Input can be seen in the example above. Both the mother and I worked to develop the child's language by repeating the desired word. Input theories became popular in the 1960s when linguistics became interested in the ways in which adults modify normal language when speaking to children. The characteristics of modified language are:

- repetition of ideas and phrases
- very short sentences
- restricted and repeated sentence structure, e.g. *who's a ... where's the ... that's a ...*
- rising intonation at the end of speech to invite response
- paraphrasing or repeating when there is no response
- modification of words by shortening long words *banana/nana* or lengthening very short words *dog/doggy*.
- there may also be an adult use of the child's pronunciation of a word *mooks/milk*.
- in some languages the special version of the word may be a representation of a characteristic such as *woofwoof* or *poo*.

Though this language adaptation was originally called 'motherese' because it was noted in maternal speech, it was soon noticed that its use extends beyond families; most adults speaking with babies and very young children seem to use some special language forms.

Hopefully, we have moved beyond the time of vehement adherence to any one model of language acquisition to gain a realisation that there is probably some value in each theory. Understanding is not yet complete but we can take a patchwork of ideas which give a satisfactory account of language development. This could be that humans are certainly predisposed to learn language but environmental factors impact on language development. Though children's language development cannot be in advance of concepts gained through experience, adult language modification enhances language learning (Hayes et al., 2001).

- What are the links between theories of language development and general learning theories?
- Do all children enter primary school with the same potential to develop as language learners?
- How should planning, teaching and assessing language take account of developmental issues?

## Implications for the teacher

All teachers must be aware of the developmental achievements and needs of every child as a language user in order to know what needs to be taught next. 'Next steps' are mentioned frequently in governmental curriculum documents (e.g. DfES, 2006). Though this is usually valid as both language development and learning follow fairly predictable routes, we must also recognise that all children are different with differing approaches to learning and different strengths as learners. Perhaps it is better to see language development as a pebble thrown into a rocky pool. There will be ripples in every direction but where some will splash easily over rocks of difficulty, other rocks may be impossible to go over and the ripples will break to flow around the problem. The rocks are going to be different for every child but the wise teacher watches out for them.

The other implication for the teacher is that there is little point in having an excellent view of the child's language development unless this is a trigger for direct teaching. Perhaps the input model of language development is of particular value here; though children bring to us an eagerness to learn and ways of thinking which facilitate learning, it is the active, appropriate, deliberate intervention of the teacher which is the key to continuing progress. We cannot be people who set up environments in which language should thrive and make observations of how it progresses. Whatever age we are teaching, we need to be actively involved in furthering development through planned, informed action.

The models of language show the approaches to what a teacher needs to know, think and do when teaching literacy – which is all day, every day in school. If we accept that each of the theories nudges us a little closer to our understanding of children's learning of language, and we recognise that language development continues throughout the primary years, these seem to be the main implications for teachers.

As children are innately predisposed to learn language, the classroom must be organised and resourced to enable the active learning to be stimulating and relevant. The language-rich environment of the school must stimulate further learning of speaking and listening, reading and writing. The teacher's role is partially to enable, observe and enhance or modify opportunities as children progress. This often breaks down at KS2 as, in many ways, the classrooms of our Y6 children provide less rich opportunities for developing as speakers and listeners than they were given at nursery.

As children also learn from imitation, the teacher must be someone whose language merits imitation. For many student teachers this will require moving

to a more formal language which, at first, seems very uncomfortable. This transformation of language gradually becomes as natural as putting on your work clothes when you get up but, for many people, the change is difficult.

As children learn language as part of cognitive development, the curriculum must be contextualised in ways which highlight the links between language learning and learning in all other areas. For example, it's important to decide when technical or subject specific terminology can be introduced successfully. This can also be considered from another perspective: children's lack of language skills can mask their understanding in other curriculum areas so the two aspects should be closely linked.

As children learn from adults more easily if language patterns are modified, teachers need to be careful about terminology, sentence structure, repetition, rephrasing and signals for response. In school, children have to learn to move gradually from the English of early childhood towards the English of broad, diverse communities and purposes. The pace of this transition needs to be considered carefully.

## Standard English

Just as children move from the language of the home to the language of the community, so many student teachers find that they move from the language patterns of their own education to language appropriate for educating others. This is one student's recollection of an early experience in school.

My mentor was sitting at the back when, looking at the children's worksheets, I said, 'You done that lovely'. I meant, 'You've done it lovely', so I realised it was wrong and I said it again. Then after the lesson my mentor said that even that was wrong! I should have said 'You've done it beautifully'. Or 'you've done lovely work'. She said 'lovely' isn't an adverb but I thought it must be because of ending in 'ly'. I wasn't happy about being picked up on it because it was just a little slip but when I told my mum she said she'd have been angry if I'd come home from school when I was young and I'd learnt something wrong from a teacher. I was very careful for all of that placement. That was in my first year. Now talking carefully seems easier. (*Laura, B.Ed student*)

Having read Laura's account it is worth considering whether you have any language patterns which need to be modified to ensure you give a good model for children. My own experience was even more embarrassing than Laura's. After listening to an explanation, my placement teacher commented, 'You're not very keen on consonants, are you?' My London accent changed very rapidly!

There's an expectation that teachers will use the structures of **Standard English** most of the time. This doesn't mean that **accent** will have to change because we can pronounce Standard English with any accent (though we have to ensure that our accent doesn't prevent children from understanding what we are saying). Teachers use structures which are most like reasonably formal

written English as this ensures that children have excellent role models on which to base their own speech for formal occasions.

The previous paragraph may have made it seem that teachers use a uniform, rather bland language which distances them from the children. This is not the case at all: the most talented teachers have a wonderfully rich and interesting repertoire of phrases and words which they use to communicate effectively in all different aspects of teaching. They can hold attention and stimulate response through vivid choices of words. They may even, for particular effects, move away from Standard English but, when they do so, it is a conscious decision not a mistake. Here are some examples from Hazel (a very experienced teacher) of occasions, in one day, when she decided not to use Standard English.

In literacy we were focusing on past tenses so I told Sid the Snake's (*puppet*) weekend news with non-standard verb forms for the children to correct. Maths ... don't remember any there. Yes, I did! I didn't use sentences to respond when I wanted to ask probe questions. I started sentences and left them for Blue Table to finish because they needed that help to start them on their answers. After lunch, in the Tudor topic I made them laugh by using Elizabethan phrases to praise them – 'thou hast warmed the cockles of my heart' was one. Nothing else – except when Niki fell over. I never mean to but I always find myself being very informal when children are upset. I suppose they want their mum and I try to be like mum for them.

## The specific subject knowledge of literacy and English

Mallet (2005) makes a distinction between the content of English and literacy learning, and the processes associated with learning to be an accomplished user of our language. As teachers we need to be at ease with the content and confident about a range of successful ways of helping all children to learn. Just as, in primary school, we start every new topic with making sure the children are aware of what they already know, it is sensible to start your teacher education with the awareness that you probably already know nearly all of the content you'll have to teach. There will be technical issues, such as sentence structure, which you will need to learn in new ways and you'll have to learn some things which, like most other people, you've been skilfully avoiding for years – such as the way to use possessive apostrophes. Despite these, your knowledge is certainly good or you wouldn't have gained a place on an initial teacher training programme. Let's try to demonstrate that I'm right: read the section in italics and find some errors: *Primary teacher's must be professional at all times, their very important people in lives of children what they taught.* You can probably find six or seven errors which means that you already know a great deal. Teachers have to take this knowledge one step further to explain what is right and why this is so.

Most people would recognise that knowledge about punctuation structure and spelling are central to English but would place less emphasis on knowledge

about literature. This is a great pity because, unless you know about a good range of books and other texts, it is difficult to find something which will move, inspire, intrigue or amuse a child. It is also very important that teachers read, and ideally write, for their own pleasure so that they can see the worlds of literature through a child's eye. This takes me back to the consideration of teachers' attitudes at the beginning of this chapter – if we can't show children that we enjoy reading it is going to be very hard to bring them to a love of books.



Ask some of the children in your placement class to recommend you books to read. Make a list of them and get reading. I hope there'll be something on the list which will make you step back in amazement at the brilliance of many books written for children. There will probably also be one book which you'll dislike intensely.

When you reflect on and can explain either reaction, you are well on the way to being able to choose texts for children and discuss them with knowledge and enthusiasm.

The knowledge needed to teach English probably seems daunting. It really isn't: it is very like the models of learning language. Most students who come into teacher education seem to have always wanted to teach – perhaps there is an innate predisposition to helping the inexperienced to gain insights we believe are important. We also have the cognitive ability to assimilate new knowledge and ways of working; the structures are in place for new learning. We also learn to teach through input. There will be plenty of people in your university and school-based studies who will model, explain and gently correct. Finally, there's imitation. Try to remember a teacher who inspired you and possibly may even be the reason why you decided that you'd like to teach. He or she was probably memorable because she made learning enjoyable, encouraged you to think more deeply, always seemed interested in your ideas, challenged you to take ideas further than you'd thought possible, and delighted in your successes. If you do the same, you too will be an inspiring teacher.



Look at this list of words and choose the five that you hope people would use about your first class after you have taught them for a year:

*Able, ambitious, articulate, astute, assertive, calm, confident, considerate, competent, creative, critical, enthusiastic, diligent, excitable, imaginative, independent, insightful, motivated, resourceful, successful, talented, thoughtful, witty.*

Now think how these qualities would be evident in their speaking, listening, reading and writing.

Finally consider whether you show them in your own literacy work and attitudes. If you don't, they won't.

## Attitude to teaching and learning literacy and English

This is the heart of success. Everyone comes into primary teaching to make a difference to children's lives and to inspire them with a love of

learning. We do this by believing that all children can make progress in all aspects of language learning. This isn't just about a drive to increase the skills of children but also includes all those things which can't be tested but are probably more important: the pleasures of picking exactly the right word, composing an original phrase, knowing that someone has been moved by the way in which you've expressed your ideas. In short, it is our attitude which equips children to use their language with confidence and flair.

This is Sarah's reflection on her learning while training to teach.

When I began my studies in English I was amazed by how much I'd actually forgotten and hadn't practised since leaving school. Although I speak clearly and have good vocabulary, I needed support with punctuation, grammar and glossary of terms for English. I am a mature student and have spent a number of years raising a family at home. On reflection, I realise that during this time I have written very little on paper. I have done a fair amount of form-filling – my children's entry to school, applications for higher education, passport forms and the like. Rarely, if ever, have I during this time, sat down and written a letter or a piece of prose.

During lectures, I have been taught how to plan for English lessons for different Key Stages. I recognise that to be a good teacher requires you to demonstrate and model the specific English for that lesson, whether it is skills of handwriting, structuring sentences, reading or spelling patterns. I also recognise that when I am teaching I am constantly working on language development – increasing the children's range and use of vocabulary. All these are important to the children's understanding of the correct use of English.

When I am teaching, I am aware that my children will repeat the English that I use. I will teach them to express the way they feel about different things, encouraging descriptive words, and I will show them that combining these words can form sentences. My teaching will be very much about effective communication and providing the children with all the skills they will need in order to communicate effectively.

Who knows how we will be communicating by the middle of this century, when the children I am about to teach will be adults? I am of the opinion that good English will always be important. Although our vocabulary is constantly evolving, the way we speak will, I believe, always say a lot about ourselves.

## Chapter summary

- Literacy teaching and learning is important: really important!
- Children's language acquisition continues through the primary years.
- We teach literacy one way or another throughout the school day.
- Language development isn't always linear: we have to consider individual needs and strengths
- Teachers have to have excellent language knowledge so they can analyse and address errors
- Great teachers have purpose, knowledge, enthusiasm, sensitivity and a sense of fun.

## Further reading

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