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CHAPTER 1

AN INTRODUCTION TO ENGLISH

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Chapter Aims

This chapter will:

- introduce the ways literacy in the English curriculum has been conceptualised by different theoretical traditions and how these perspectives influence the ways literacy has been taught

- describe and critique the state of the art for the teaching of reading, writing and speaking

- discuss innovation through the widening of the conceptualisation of literacy in response to the rise in digital technology

- present ideas for how teachers' creativity may be nurtured

- offer an introduction to assessment of English

Introduction

Teaching is a job for professionals. A professional teacher is passionate about education, and is determined to ensure the educational well-being of the children in their class. The professional teacher's practice is honed from an understanding of rigorously researched theoretical knowledge, generated in schools, universities and other research institutions or associations (Carr and Kemmis 1997). Teaching is not a job for amateurs, or for those who just want to be told how to do it. Teaching professionals are *educational activists* (Sachs 2003) and enthusiastic about knowing more from their reading, discussions and debates with children, colleagues and academics on how they can enrich the learning experience for their students. They take a critical approach to everything they hear about teaching and make well-informed choices about how they will teach. This chapter is aimed at those who aspire to this level of professionalism in the teaching of English. To this end, I will be providing a starting point by introducing the issues, perspectives and concepts that I feel new teachers of English must know at the start of their professional careers. Readers will also need to be critical of my approach too. All educational positions have an ideological source. Teaching is never just 'common sense' – it always has a theoretical foundation and it is not politically neutral.

The National Curriculum 2014 states: 'The overarching aim for English in the National Curriculum is to promote high standards of literacy by equipping pupils with a strong command of the written and spoken word, and develop a love of literature through widespread reading for enjoyment' (DfE 2013: 1). Literacy is central to the National Curriculum for English in primary schools. Literacy is complex and its teaching continues to be contested between teachers, academics and policy-makers. To help you become familiar with the arguments, I begin by offering a number of important perspectives on definitions of literacy and how it should be taught within the National Curriculum for English. These different definitions and teaching approaches will act as the foundation to an understanding of the perspectives on teaching reading, writing and speaking that you will encounter in the schools you visit.

The Traditional View of Literacy – Cognitive–Psychological Perspectives

Literacy education has often been conceived as learning that must have a steady and linear trajectory of development. Based on cognitive–psychological theory (Ehri 1987, 1995), this perspective contends that children need to be introduced to certain skills and knowledge in literacy at specific ages as it is assumed that all children should be taught to progress in similar ways. This is thought to be true for the teaching of reading, writing and speaking. Governments in the UK and in the advanced Western industrial nations are heavily promoting the general approach and the National Curriculum for English 2014 reflects this perspective. The curriculum conceives literacy

as a set of discrete skills that can be learned and taught in a number of different con-texts. This is contested: for example, Street (1984) described this model of literacy as *autonomous*. This means that for cognitive–psychologically influenced perspectives, literacy is a neutral 'package' of skills (Street and Street 1991) that can be simply trans-ferred from one person to another. It is a value-free literacy applied to all, despite the different needs and experiences of those who are expected to learn it. Street and Street (1991) argue that with this way of perceiving literacy, language is treated:

> as if it were a 'thing', distanced from both teacher and learner and imposing on them external rules and requirements as though they were passive recipients. (Street and Street 1991: 144)

It is argued (Goodman 1996) instead that language is a natural phenomenon, learned in home environments very early, and is linked closely to identity and culture (Gee 2004); therefore children already possess linguistic skills before they begin school. However, cognitive–psychological approaches often appear to treat the teaching of literacy as if it were an entirely new set of skills that children come to school lacking.

It is important to understand why government policy-makers favour this cognitive–psychological approach. During the 1980s there was increasing anxiety over perceived rising levels of illiteracy in the United States and the United Kingdom. There was widespread belief that post-industrial society had led to fundamental changes in work-ing practices and a change to the structure of the labour market. Concerns were voiced that workers may no longer have the capacity to contribute effectively to the demands of a growing service sector that was replacing manufacturing industries (Lankshear and Knobel 2003). In addition, English Ofsted (1996a, 1996b) inspection reports of schools claimed to show a decline in standards of reading and writing. According to these reports, far-reaching educational reform had to be implemented to improve functional literacy levels in primary schools. Children's development in these basic literacy skills needed to be tracked very carefully along a defined trajectory and initially in England and Wales; Statutory Assessment Tasks (SATs) were introduced as the measure of children's literacy success. Rigid efficiency in education like this is, of course, also less costly than more progressive measures that tend to need more time and resources. In addition, some argue that contemporary 'efficient' measures label those children who are unable to learn at the rate required as 'inadequate in some way' (Larson and Marsh 2005: 5) and who are often from homes in deprived circum-stances (Larson and Marsh 2005). Yet, it is this approach that one will currently witness in many primary schools in England today. Many advisors and school senior manag-ers, driven by policy from current governments, encourage and indeed demand a cognitive–psychological model to teach reading, writing and speaking. However, in my view, professional teachers need to take a more critical approach and be aware of alternative arguments about literacy in the English curriculum and decide how best to teach their children in the contexts within which they practise. Cognitive–psychological influenced methods are now enshrined in law; however, teachers must be professional

and know what educationalists, teachers and researchers, who should be mainly independent of governments, are finding out about how children learn.

Literacy as Social Practice – 'Progressive' Measures

Barton and Hamilton (1998) have shown that literacy is not the same in all contexts. How people use words and utilise print varies depending upon the social environment where it is used. Literacy is not just the one promoted in schools. Literacy is a social practice and it is sculpted by the social, cultural, economic and political contexts within which it is found.

> Literacy does not just reside in people's heads as a set of skills to be learned … Like all human activity, literacy is essentially social, and it is located in the interaction between people. (Barton and Hamilton 1998: 3)

According to this model, literacy is situated only within social contexts and is formed and shaped through interaction between people. Literacy is not then merely an autonomous, discrete set of skills; it is 'alive', changing and dynamic. There is not one *literacy*, as portrayed in curricula, but many *literacies*, each intrinsically forming part of a specific social context and culture.

Culture is about how groups of people make meaning. Our culture is made through our histories and our experiences (Hall 2003). It was Bruner (1996) who wrote that our minds could not have been created without a culture. Our thoughts and the meanings we make derive from the culture within which we reside. Learning and thinking are always situated and are dependent upon the tools available within that specific social environment. The most important intellectual tool is language. Language is the symbol system that allows us to make meaning and to create our own identities within a culture.

It follows from this socio-cultural perspective that school literacy learning uses language in ways that are not neutral or autonomous, but have an ideological and cultural source. The literacy of school and curricula, according to this socio-cultural perspective, is based on a reductionist definition of literacy. It purports to offer a neutral set of skills and knowledge that are free from cultural domains. In doing so, it arguably marginalises and penalises those from different literacy cultures and normalises the middle-class literacy experiences that are privileged through school assessment (Larson and Marsh 2005). From this perspective, it may help us understand the consistent patterns of underachievement found in certain socio-cultural groups, as we begin to recognise that education and literacy learning are part of a culturally based process. It would follow from this that school literacy practices advantage those children who use school forms of literacy at home and disadvantage those who use words differently. As teachers we need to be aware of these arguments, and if we agree, we need to begin to plan our

teaching in a way that attempts to intervene to disrupt these social reproductive processes which seem to lead to consistent patterns of underachievement.

Language Learning as Natural – Psycholinguist Perspectives

Psycholinguist perspectives, like socio-cultural positions, contend that literacy learning does not begin in school. Kenneth Goodman (1996) argues that children already possess a wealth of literacy experiences and have developed an implicit knowledge of language before they come to school. Goodman (1996) states that what makes language necessary and possible for human beings is our ability to think symbolically. We are a symbolic species (Deacon 1997) and for this reason our engagement and use of language is natural. In other words, we use things to represent other things and language is one of the most powerful ways of doing this. Language enables us to construct complex systems that can represent experiences, feelings, concepts and ideas.

The psycholinguist perspective follows the work of the linguist Noam Chomsky (1965) who stated that humans have an innate predisposition to learn a language. We all learn to speak and construct complex grammatical utterances without any form of tuition. This might suggest that our ability to do so comes from within rather than from any external source of pedagogy. Chomsky stated that humans have evolved to make language development a part of the brain's function. Learning and using language is natural and the psycholinguists take this further than the learning of oral language. Goodman suggests that learning written language is no less natural. He argues that oral and written language both develop from the need for humans to think and communicate through symbols. Written language is developed when needed, when oral communication through face-to-face and here-and-now language is no longer sufficient (Goodman 1996). This is not to suggest that, like oral language, we draw on evolved inner mechanisms to learn to read and write. The use of the written word is a relatively new phenomenon in humankind's development and there has not been sufficient time for such inner mechanisms to have formed. Language development, both oral and written, is natural because humans are a symbolic species with an innate propensity to represent the world through symbols, through language. It is in our nature to want to use language, both oral and written, and to exploit these language tools for a deeper understanding of our surroundings.

Both socio-cultural and psycholinguistic perspectives on literacy teaching reject the idea that all children come to school without a literacy. They honour young children with a belief that from a very young age they bring a wealth of literacy experiences based around their own cultural backgrounds and want to build on these forms of experiences. For these reasons, the pedagogy they propose is very different from more so-called traditional, cognitive–psychological positions on teaching literacy. They would deny that a linear and staged curriculum is appropriate for all children and reject the need for creating conditions in classrooms that enable direct staged

instruction to be the main way of teaching. Socio-cultural and psycholinguistic teachers propose creating conditions that favour more independent learning, honouring children's own interests in the forms of texts and language they encounter at home as well as those texts associated with the school curriculum. They argue that learning a literacy is a cultural process (Lave and Wenger 1991; Rogoff 1990) where a community of learners is developed that share multiple perspectives on how language is learned, needed and used (Rogoff et al. 2001).

There are many modern primary school classrooms that use some of the practices that derive from psycholinguist and socio-cultural perspectives. Yet the contemporary pressures of standardised tests that measure children's learning of one form of literacy at selected stages of children's schooling arguably inhibit the freedom of many teachers to work in this way. However, professional teachers need to decide with their colleagues which theoretical position, or positions, they want to take and then work towards creating the conditions, both politically and educationally, to enable them to work the way colleagues know is best for the children in their classes. The National Curriculum is enshrined in law and teachers are bound to teach to it in all state schools, with exceptions among academies and free schools, yet within these constraints teachers can still create learning environments that are right for the children in their classes to succeed and begin to love reading and writing.

The State of the Art in Pedagogy

Reading

Cognitive–psychological models of teaching reading are the current dominant perspectives that drive educational policy across the Western industrialised world. These methods are commonly found in state primary schools in England and the UK. The extent to which this theoretical position is applied will vary from school to school.

The *Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading* (Rose 2006), often called the Rose Review, commissioned by the New Labour UK government (1996–2010), emphasised the need to teach children to learn to read through a method called synthetic phonics. The review argues that the teaching of synthetic phonics is the most important strategy to teach young children to read. This approach is likely to be continued in broadly the same ways by successive governments for the foreseeable future and is enshrined in the National Curriculum for English 2014. Yet, teachers need to know that this perspective on teaching reading continues to be contested (for example, Davies 2013).

The psycholinguist Goodman (1967) maintained that children need to draw on three of what he called cueing strategies: grapho-phonic, semantic and syntactic. Grapho-phonic is similar to what the Rose Review advocates that children should be taught first when learning to read – decoding graphemes (letters) into phonemes

(sounds) and blending them to sound out the word. The National Curriculum for English 2014 demands that this cueing strategy is taught first and in isolation to others.

Syntactic cueing strategies, Goodman (1973) argued, are how readers are able to predict the next word by drawing on their implicit knowledge of language structures and the order of words in sentences and utterances. If a child comes across a word that she cannot read, instead of using grapho-phonic strategies to sound out the word, the teacher asks the child to read to the end of the sentence and then go back and read the sentence again. By doing so, the child can hear the sentence drawing out pattern-markers and inflectional suffixes and cues and predict the word. In other words, the child draws on her own knowledge of language and language structures to read the words.

The third cue that Goodman describes is semantic. Using this cue, like the syntactic cues, asks the child to draw on her own knowledge, but this time, knowledge of the world and the contexts within which the book she is reading takes place. Children know about the world, for example, that grass can be green, the sky can be blue and knowing about these things and the language that conceptualises and describes them enables children to predict the words that are coming up in a text. With the help of more experienced readers, children learn to orchestrate their knowledge (Chittenden et al. 2001) about language and the world by using all the cues together.

However, since the Rose Review and the National Curriculum for English 2014, this way of articulating the strategies needed for children to read is no longer favoured. The teaching of grapho-phonic skills is now the preferred first teaching approach for young children, emphasising a more cognitive–psychological approach.

Synthetic Phonics

Using synthetic phonics, the individual phonemes associated with particular graphemes are each isolated, pronounced and blended together (synthesised) to read and write a word. For example, h/a/t has three phonemes and three graphemes. Children are taught to *segment* words into their individual phonemes. For instance, the word b/r/u/sh is made from four phonemes. Segmentation assists children to spell. A child needs to segment a word they want to spell into its component phonemes, providing a grapheme (letter) or combination of graphemes to represent each phoneme.

Teaching synthetic phonics will also entail instructing the children how to *blend* a word. This means merging the phonemes together to pronounce a word. When reading and confronted with an unknown word, the children are taught to attribute a phoneme to each letter or letter combination and then merge them to sound out the word. Psycholinguists believe that this is not enough and that children need to learn all the cueing strategies from the moment they begin to learn to read. They argue that experienced readers use all three and so children must learn to do this from the beginning. However, present governments insist that using synthetic phonics must be the first strategy that children learn.

Whole-Language Learning

These cognitive–psychological methods are roundly rejected by psycholinguists and socio-cultural teachers of reading. Instead, they broadly use what has been called a 'whole-language approach' to the teaching of reading. This includes teachers introducing the three cueing strategies to children together from an early age within the context of good books. This approach concentrates far more upon teaching the processes as well as the skills, as many argue that children will not wish to read unless they understand the processes that make the activity so enjoyable and worthwhile. Concentrating on discrete skills, as cognitive–psychological models favour, has the danger of making reading appear as a form of labour devoid of any pleasure. While many cognitive–psychological models of reading teach skills in isolation, whole-language approaches emphasise the importance of reading rich literature (Holdaway 1979; Meek 1988), sometimes called 'real books', to allow children to experience the pleasures of reading. Texts are chosen to which children can relate: multi-cultural stories, tales that involve children from different religions, races and social classes. Teachers will also draw on popular culture – the television and film industry – enticing children into reading by demonstrating the pleasure it can give to everyone. Whole-language approaches aim to create stimulating experiences for children to learn to read. They combine direct teaching in different group sizes with opportunities for children to experience the 'untaught lessons' that books can offer; again, this happens from an early age to demonstrate from the start that reading is more than a dry act of labour.

In addition to the three cueing strategies that are taught both formally and informally, teachers from a whole-language perspective teach the processes (Grainger and Tod 2000). These are the processes with which accomplished readers engage and which children need to learn:

- **Predicting** – anticipating what will happen next in the story from what has occurred earlier and how other similar stories often operate.
- **Picturing** – being aware of how reading a fictional text can create pictures in one's mind's eye. These pictures are given to the reader both by the writer's work and by the experiences that children have had in their real world.
- **Connecting** – from an early age children will make connections with events and characters in a text with their own lives and other stories they have read in books or seen in films or on television.
- **Questioning** – good readers tend to generate questions about the texts they read (Benton and Fox 1985). We constantly ask questions of the narrative, the characters and events, demonstrating that reading is not a passive activity.
- **Engaging** – how many of us have cried at the end of a novel or been terrified and had to shut a book? Children also need to discuss how they engage with a text and understand and experience the effects of good writing.

- **Evaluating** – having what is sometimes called 'critical literacy' broadly means that readers feel confident to make judgements about the texts they read. Children must be encouraged to evaluate texts from different perspectives – political and aesthetic.

Children are taught to engage in these processes and understand their pleasures while at the same time learning the cueing strategies that are essential for reading too. Both skills and processes are vital in becoming a reader. The pedagogy for whole-language learning is a combination of direct and independent teaching and learning. While cognitive–psychological models of reading are much more a 'drilling and skilling' of children using synthetic phonics, whole-language teachers are enthusing children to read by offering authentic experiences with great books.

Case Study 1.1

Robert is a teacher who defines reading as a search for meaning in texts. He teaches reading using synthetic phonics for those children in his Year 1 class who need it, but is also acutely aware of the need to help children to read using other cueing strategies too. Robert believes that a large proportion of the children in his class have yet to learn the pleasure that can be found in reading books alone and with others. In preparing his class for September when he met the children for the first time, he decided that books and the pleasure of reading would define the layout in his classroom. He set up a well-organised and attractive reading area in his class. He set aside a large corner of the room for his classroom books. He ensured he had a good range of literature and included comics, children's magazines and catalogues in the collection. He divided the books by genre and put them into their own labelled baskets so children knew where to go to find their favourite texts and those that were unknown to them. He provided comfortable seating and brought in colourful posters that promoted reading for pleasure. Every day he set aside 30 minutes for quiet reading and read to the children at least three times a day (sometimes reading three books in one sitting). The reading corner became the centre of the developing culture of reading in his class. The children enjoyed Robert's passion for books and he became known in the school as the 'reading teacher who loves books'.

Writing

Vygotsky (1978) believed that reading and writing are two halves of the same process: mastering written language (Barrs and Cork 2001). What writers must do is to find

themselves 'shuttling between spoken resources and an increasing store of forms internalised from their reading' (Britton 1982, cited in Barrs and Cork 2001: 42). So, from this perspective, reading experiences are integral to being able to write, as well as the belief that one's spoken language resources can also be utilised in written composition. I suspect no one would disagree with these ideas, yet it is how to provide children with these skills and knowledge that continues to be where disagreement lies. Following on from what has been said previously in this chapter, cognitive–psychological theorists would advocate that children need to be directly taught the skills required. This would involve practice through exercises. However, if we wish to avoid teaching a generation of clerks, many will argue, particularly psycholinguists and socio-cultural theorists, that children must be shown how writing will open up opportunities for them to increase communicative repertoires. Children can recognise these benefits of writing if we encourage them to make choices about their writing – form, content and purpose – and allow them to find their personal voice (Clarke 2000).

The National Curriculum for English 2014 emphasises the importance of teaching the structure and language features of writing, arguably at the expense of emphasising the meanings that children can produce for their own personal, aesthetic or practical satisfaction. As you now know, this corresponds with cognitive–psychological perspectives on the teaching of literacy and this will be a consistent feature of current educational policy. You should expect to be asked to teach writing skills directly to the children in a de-contextualised way, often as exercises to teach specific skills. However, there are some ideas about the teaching of writing that are often generally agreed upon and should be taken very seriously when planning how to teach writing in the primary classroom. I intend to discuss them here.

Writing begins with other forms of symbolising (drawing, modelling, play, drama). If humans are symbolic species, they are attracted to finding ways to express themselves through the use of symbols. Right from being very young children, we have always attempted to communicate symbolically – for example, 'the gesture is the initial visual sign that contains the child's future writing as an acorn contains a future oak' (Vygotsky 1978: 107). Teachers have the responsibility of introducing children to conventional written ways of making meaning through signs. Psycholinguists would argue that teachers can do this best by building on children's natural interest in symbols and celebrating the ways they are using symbols before they come to school. In other words, treat children as meaning makers from the beginning, encourage the early marks they make on paper and treat them as serious forms of writing that convey meaning. The literacy we teach in schools is not entirely new to children: they have used signs before.

The writing process can be divided into two parts and this is how it is presented in the National Curriculum for English 2014. The first of these is *composition* – this is the capturing of ideas, authoring, construction of the narrative, choosing genre and grammar. To compose one needs no means of written transcription. It happens all the time: for example, children compose narratives in their games and adults compose to a

dictaphone or when they meet and talk to people on an everyday basis. We know that 'writing and speaking are different but writing, without an understanding of its roots in speech, is nothing' (Graves 1983: 162). Composition, one might argue, is the heart of writing; it is where meanings are generated and arguably it should be the part of writing that needs to be nurtured the most.

Transcription is the second part. This consists of the handwriting, spelling and punctuation that are also crucial to successful communication through writing. It is children's early mark-making, but it is also what secretaries need to be good at as they transcribe what has been composed on the dictaphone. Strangely enough, this is often the part of writing that is given the most importance in many schools, and the National Curriculum 2014 has been accused of continuing this trend (PUG 2012). It is very important of course, but it is a part of the writing process and not all of it. Both parts need to be nurtured, nourished and taught together and, I would argue, in meaningful contexts.

For writers to be motivated and to write successfully they need to know the:

Purpose: This seems obvious, but children become far more motivated when the teacher has found authentic purposes for their writing. This may be as simple as knowing that it will be read by a real audience – it will be displayed on a wall or will be part of a book or a website. Too often writing is destined for exercise books and put away in drawers, read by no one but the teacher.

Form: Writers need to know what type of writing will be most appropriate to their purpose and in what type of writing they can organise their ideas. What types of writing are available? What sort of vocabulary and grammatical construc-tions best serve their intentions? From an early age teachers expose children to a wide range of texts that are used for various purposes: by doing so through talk and discussion about the texts' success, children recognise the affordances of these text types.

Audience: Who will read the children's writing? What effect do the children intend their writing to have on their audience? What assumptions can they make about their readership?

Teaching the Writing Process

It has been said that:

> The best way to understand and encourage interaction between the child's growing linguistic system and her emerging ability to write is to see the latter as a develop-mental process, which first emphasises fluency, then clarity, and finally correctness. (D'Arcy, 1999: 97)

What is being stressed here again is the importance of teachers encouraging children to draw on the language resources they bring to school and showing them how to use this knowledge and experience to develop their writing abilities. The fluency is encouraged right from the beginning, celebrating children's early mark-making and compositions; recognising these attempts as being genuine forms of writing; raising confidence and then developing clarity and then correctness. For this educationalist, too often children are taught to write from the other way round. Clarity and correctness is privileged over fluency. Children are told early on that their efforts on paper have little worth as they have not yet grasped the conventions of written language. Many argue that cognitive–psychological models often emphasise correctness and teach skills too early, providing a message to the children that their early mark-making and compositions are not valued. This model assumes children come to school ignorant of the ability to compose and transcribe.

Many teachers emphasise the writing process and, within a real context that requires composition and transcription, teach each stage of the process thoroughly. The process broadly looks like this:

- re-reading
- revising for meaning
- editing
- proofreading.

Professional writers often complain that they rarely confine their creativity to this form of writing process. Indeed, teachers may wish to be aware that real writers, like themselves, sometimes never get to the end of the process, as writing is not always for an audience and so children do not need to always go through the whole process for all writing. However, it is a good guide to what needs to be taught and experienced by the children.

Case Study 1.2

Helen teaches in an inner-city primary school in a deprived catchment area. She became aware that because of pressures from a test-driven curriculum the children in her Year 5 class were not being given the opportunity to write independently, choosing subjects and forms with which to express themselves. Helen decided to introduce writing journals. She gave all the children an exercise book and asked them to customise it using pictures from magazines, and protect it with some clear plastic covering. The children claimed ownership over the books by covering them in images that were meaningful to them. Helen fitted in a journal-writing session three times a week that lasted up to 30 minutes each.

She gave the journals a big introduction. The children were told that the journals were to be used to write anything in them they wanted. Importantly, Helen told them that she would never mark them in any way and she would only read what they had written with their permission. Helen made some suggestions about what they could write (reports of football matches, stories, poems, lists and so on) and during the first session asked children to tell the others (with their permission) what they were doing. The impact was dramatic. The children loved writing in the journals. Even reluctant writers felt liberated by them. Helen kept her own journal and wrote alongside the children.

Speaking

As I have already tried to stress in this chapter, language is a distinctly human characteristic and learning to talk and to listen is where it begins. We learn to talk without any direct instruction. Our brains have evolved to learn spoken language and we use language both to communicate to others and to think. We learn to use spoken language from our cultural environments and we go to school already talking and thinking. Language is a tool of the mind (Olson 2001) and brings coherence and meaning to our world. Language forms our very consciousness. It is fundamental to our identity – language makes us who we are. Through our use of language we make the knowledge we have (Vygotsky 1978) of the world. Talk, therefore, becomes an essential component to any successful learning experience and is fundamental to a healthy classroom learning environment.

It is because language is a part of our identity and derives from our cultural background that many teachers and educationalists argue for sensitivity when teaching children 'how' to speak and listen. After all, children can do this already. However, as we have seen, literacy is not a neutral entity; some forms of literacy and language use are imbued with more power in society than others and so teachers are required to teach children to use spoken language in particular ways that may bring this power. I have discussed the resulting inequality and the tensions of this phenomenon earlier on and teaching children to speak and listen 'properly' is contested too. For example, Fairclough (1992) argues that in teaching children to speak in particular ways that may be very different to how they are accustomed may undermine their own speech from local communities. Fairclough (1992) contends that if we teach that one form of talk is better within prestigious and powerful contexts like schools, it makes children's own habitual ways of talking marginal and irrelevant.

Teaching spoken language skills must respect the language backgrounds of the children in the class. All kinds of dialects can be found in schools. A dialect is distinguished by its vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. Where a distinction can be made only in terms of pronunciation, then the term to use is *accent*. So, for example, one can speak using a Standard English dialect with a Scottish accent.

Standard English is another dialect with its own set of grammatical rules and it is this which teachers are required to teach. Children will need to learn to distinguish between dialects and recognise how some are more powerful than others. However, one needs to be aware of the dangers of implicitly creating negative messages about children's home use of language and consequently their own identity. If instead teachers celebrate all forms of spoken language, compare differences and discuss their use in different contexts then it may be possible to avoid alienation of children who often come from other cultures and classes.

The removal of speaking and listening as a separate attainment target in the National Curriculum for English 2014 is seen as a flaw by many (for example, NPTEC 2013), despite its inclusion in the general NC framing. It is argued that its absence undermines the crucial importance of pupils' development as speakers and listeners and of oracy as a tool for learning and thinking across the curriculum.

Children can be encouraged to reflect on the use of language:

- their own talk – building confidence to speak in a range of contexts; examining their own oral histories
- others' use of language – how people talk differently; the use of standard English
- construction of talk – what creates differences in the use of language; the structure of utterances.

Innovation

Innovation in literacy teaching can come in many forms. The use of new technology and the advent of screen texts, gaming, chat rooms and social networking sites has prompted a large number of teachers and academics to advocate the use of the term 'digital literacies' and to suggest that the current literacy curriculum must reflect the changing nature of literacy much more than it does in the face of growing accessibility to these forms of communicative repertoires (Kress 2003; Marsh and Millard 2000). Sadly, there is scant mention of digital literacies in the National Curriculum for English 2014. Yet, there is enormous potential for teachers to innovate by exploiting children's growing awareness of how new technology enables meaning to be made through a combination of words, images and sound. This is called multi-modality because different modes of meaning-making are combined to enrich communication. Many teachers are encouraging children to make blogs to complement and enrich the work undertaken in the classroom; to communicate through email and webcams with children in other schools both nationally and internationally, all of which requires children to use language in different ways, adapting to the audiences with which they communicate. Twitter is also being used in primary classrooms (Waller 2010).

Lankshear and Knobel suggest that we need to recognise the four roles that characterise the practices of people who engage in multi-modal text production as they

learn to produce, distribute and exchange texts. These people are 'digitally at home' with new technology (Lankshear and Knobel 2003):

- **Text designer** – the word design is used here deliberately rather than authorship for multi-model digital texts require the utilisation of the written word, the image and sound. Teachers need to decide how these design processes can be supported and extended.
- **Text bricoleur** – this term comes from the concept of bricolage – 'the artisan of inventiveness' – where people draw on what is to hand to make meaning. Lankshear and Knobel (2003) draw on the ways web users create texts within on-line communities. They raid various sources to produce their texts. Teachers can facilitate the use of the web to make a text bricoleur.
- **Text broker** – skills are taught that are associated with those who manage discussion boards or those who give online web materials like blogs and articles a rating.
- **Text jammer** – this involves skills needed for the process of changing and adapting electronic texts in order to subvert the messages given – online critical literacy practices.

Teachers can innovate their literacy practice by becoming the trail blazers for teaching, enriching and reflecting upon the skills required to effectively operate as multimodal meaning-makers. These new literate behaviours associated with new technology require new skill sets, many of which children already utilise at home. Schools can enrich these skills for those who already use them, provide the hardware and software for those who do not and introduce the skills and facilitate learners' reflection upon the issue of power which is associated with all forms of communicative media. In addition, children are also extremely motivated to work with new technology and can open up possibilities to create synergy between digital literacies and more traditional forms.

Creativity

English creativity makes teaching exciting. Teachers can offer literacy education that both adheres to national statutory requirements and is influenced by, but also challenges, the rich cultures and intellectual traditions of the community within which the school is placed. In my view, teaching professionals take risks and often push at the boundaries of expectation, challenging pre-conceived ideas of national governments and agencies, but also those of the community in which they work. English teachers and teachers in general encourage critical engagement with the world; they want their students to ask questions, interrogating what can often come to be common knowledge and sense. Teaching and learning can be exciting, disturbing and challenging.

As Bernard Shaw remarked, learning something initially always feels like losing something (Eagleton 2007).

Teachers can also ensure that they too stay in touch with their own creativity, their passions and interests. I have met many teachers who, although often feeling exhausted by the end of the week, take steps to feed their own creative imaginations and intellect. They do this by attending events and activities that they know they find intellectually or physically challenging. Those who like the theatre or sports make sure they still go to watch or participate, while others maintain active involvement with areas of interest that provide stimulus – whatever that may be.

The best teachers I know read. They read material that interests them as well as taking an interest in genres with which they may be less familiar. All the good literacy teachers I know read children's literature. They often have their own collections and cannot help diving into a bookshop to find all the latest books that they can read to their class.

A love of children's literature will be passed to the children one teaches, but so will one's own interest in one's own writing. Work I have undertaken with teachers (Grainger et al. 2005), to improve the teaching of writing in primary schools always involves teachers recognising and re-connecting with their own talents as writers and building upon them. Teachers become writers: they keep 'writing note books', they write poems and stories and sometimes share them with their class, their family or their friends and colleagues. Teachers I know now write alongside the children on writing projects with which the class is involved. They feel confident enough to do the same writing that the children have been asked to do – often modelling the struggle that writing can be. They do this not once a term, but as often as they possibly can, building a community of writers that includes the adults too. It is a simple idea that children seem to enjoy and from which they learn.

Assessment of Children's Literacy and English

Statutory Assessment Tasks (SATs) and tests remain the way governments expect teachers to assess their children's progress at the end of each Key Stage in England. Yet, teachers also need to make formative assessments of their children's progress in order to plan the teaching that will see them continue to progress in their literacy learning. I offer an introduction to the processes that teachers use to assess their children.

Teachers need to know about the processes and skills children are learning. They need to know about:

- the knowledge and understanding children have about reading, writing and speaking and listening
- children's confidence and independence to read, write and talk

- the reading, writing and oral language experience children have already
- the strategies children are using to read and write
- children's reflectiveness about reading, writing and speaking.

(Adapted from Barrs and Thomas 1991)

Running Records for Reading

Running records are an important way of learning about the children's use of cueing strategies mentioned earlier in this chapter – grapho-phonic, syntactic and semantic. It is a simplified version of miscue analysis (Goodman 1973), which can be used for older children and was developed by Marie Clay (1985). Running records work well with children in Key Stages 1 and 2 (see Goouch and Lambirth 2011).

Miscue for Writing

Eve Bearne (1997) devised a miscue analysis specifically for writing. It seeks to analyse a piece of writing for the meaning the writer wishes to make. Bearne recommends that the teacher observes the child while they write and then engages the child in a form of writing conference (see below). The two discuss the writing process; the alterations the child has made to the text; how the child sought assistance from various strategies; the success of writing for a particular audience; the spelling; the punctuation (depending upon which part of the writing process they were currently working on).

Reading and Writing Conferences

One-to-one conversations are a perfect opportunity to learn more about individual children in the class. It can become a forum for children to talk about their likes and dislikes with reading and writing and facilitates teachers finding out about children's attitudes and their ability to reflect on their own development. These conferences are just chats, but teachers may wish to do as Barrs and Thomas (1991) recommend for reading and create two occasions a year when individual children and the teacher sit down for a longer and more focused talk. Some teachers make a record of the children's comments to provide a focus for the next discussion a while later to note changes. Children who have English as an additional language will be able to discuss the reading and writing they have been undertaking in their mother tongue or indeed any other languages they know.

Informal Observations

We know from research (Medwell et al. 1998) that effective teachers include 'continuous monitoring of children's progress through the tasks provided and the use of informal assessment to give the basis for teaching and reporting on this progress' (p. 5). This entails:

- initiating ideas – drafting
- making notes of children's enjoyment of books
- discussing children's reading diaries
- working with small groups of children, 'probing, questioning and supporting' (p. 41)
- making observations and note-taking in informal ways.

Guided Reading and Writing

Guided reading and writing sessions are a very good time for observation of the children. Guided reading and writing was formally introduced to primary classrooms with the National Literacy Strategy in 1998 (DfEE 1998). It consists of a small group (maximum five) of children chosen to work with a teacher in order to target specific aspects of their learning to read or write. These may not be static groups and the teacher will choose the groups for various reasons and children may find themselves working with different children. The sessions have a specific content carefully chosen and a lesson planned with precision. It is during these sessions that teachers can record aspects of the children's development in order to assist in future planning.

Assessing Speaking

Children's ability to speak and listen in the classroom can be monitored and discussed with the children in many of the assessment opportunities I have provided. However, it is very important that teachers regularly sample children's oral ability in different situations, both formal and informal in nature. As has been found (National Oracy Project 1991), because of the variables that affect talk, it is not possible to make absolute judgements about children's oral ability. Teachers can note children's successes in:

- explaining
- supporting others
- listening and responding
- using questions
- summarising a group discussion
- seeking consensus.

It is important to support one's statements about the child's development with quotes from the events one has watched. We are looking for:

- the part children play in discussion
- how children give and follow instructions
- how children use talk to work through problems and to clarify situations
- how children adjust their talk to different situations and audiences
- the quality of the content of children's talk.

Conclusion

As you will now be aware, the teaching of literacy is like no other job. It does not require teachers to be simply technicians, but instead needs teachers to be sensitive, creative, intelligent, passionate and committed. Teachers need to be activists, as I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. Teaching English is unique and wonderful. It is political too and, in my mind, it is crucial that teachers are aware of this so as to judge what successive governments are expecting of them and the political motivations that lie behind what they ask. As a teacher, it is no good ignoring this fact. Language development is intrinsically linked to consciousness and identity; it defines the way we all think. For that reason alone it will always be the concern of politicians. Being a professional and being proud of this status will help ensure that teachers mediate the practice in schools. Teachers have enormous social power that comes partly from their ability to encourage their children to question and to make education as a 'form of inquiry' at the forefront of all they do.

Reflection Points

1. How did you learn to read? Can you remember the strategies and processes you were taught when you were at school? Do you remember reading at home with parents and other members of the family? How did this help you to become a reader?
2. Do you know the latest and best children's literature available? Go to the Books for Keeps website at http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/ to make a start on finding out about children's literature.
3. You will be teaching children to write a range of different texts. Do you ever write the kinds of work you will be asking the children to write? Do you think it matters?

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