

# Improving literacy in secondary schools

## Introduction and background

**Young people who leave school with poor literacy skills have poorer outcomes on almost every measure including health, employment and finance. Recent estimates suggest that low literacy levels cost the UK at least £20 billion a year. There is therefore a fundamental imperative to improve literacy schools in secondary schools. Literacy is a key to accessing subjects across the curriculum and is more important than ever in the light of recent curriculum reform.**

**This latest guidance report from the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) provides 7 key recommendations for improving literacy in the secondary phase. It challenges the idea that literacy is uniquely the preserve of English teachers and emphasises the concept of ‘disciplinary literacy’ whereby reading, writing, listening and speaking skills are crucial in all subjects.**

**Recommendations in the full report begin with accounts of typical literacy practices with questions which serve as a useful springboard for professional discussions.**

## The recommendations

### Prioritising ‘disciplinary literacy’

- As students progress through an increasingly specialised secondary school curriculum, they need to be able to access the academic language and conventions of different subjects. Disciplinary literacy is based on the idea that each subject has its own unique language and ways of knowing, doing and communicating.
- There are, for example, different ways of reading in different subjects. In Biology, a student may read a text about photosynthesis and assume that it is an authoritative account; there will be no consideration of the author of the text. In contrast, in an English classroom, a student may read a text with an awareness of the context and the author. Maths teachers who explicitly teach mathematical vocabulary and reading strategies for written problems are training their students to read like mathematicians.
- Although schools do not need to stop whole-school approaches to literacy, they do need to consider how these are balanced with subject-specific literacy support.
- The first step towards considering disciplinary literacy might be to discuss, with colleagues, questions that surround literacy in each subject. These may include consideration of which words and phrases are used uniquely in the subject and what is unique in the subject in terms of reading, writing, speaking and listening.
- Senior leaders should: audit existing literacy practices, resources and attitudes; create subject specific literacy plans; support teachers to define effective reading, writing and talk in their subjects; evaluate the quality and complexity of the reading materials available in the school; and ensure that curriculum development goes hand in hand with the development of disciplinary literacy.

### Targeted vocabulary instruction

- Students at secondary level must develop secure knowledge of the specialised and technical vocabulary needed to access the curriculum. To this end, there is a need for targeted vocabulary instruction in every subject.
- Etymology (the study of the origin of words) and morphology (the study of the structure and parts of words) can be used effectively. A biology teacher may, when introducing the concept of symbiosis, might explain that the word derives from the Greek for ‘companion’, thereby helping students to remember that symbiosis involves close physical association. A maths teacher might explore prefixes in shapes and spot patterns between, for example, triple and triangle.
- Specific strategies to teach vocabulary may include: teaching pupils how to break down words into parts and use dictionaries; regular low-stakes assessment to promote familiarity with complex subject-specific vocabulary; undertaking word-building activities (e.g. anti-matter, anti-body).

### Developing the ability to read and access academic texts

- In order to access academic texts, pupils need to be able to draw upon existing knowledge of the subject and make inferences. As an example, we can consider the following sentence from a BBC Bitesize summary for GCSE geography: ‘In 2004, Poland and 7 other Eastern European countries joined the EU. This increased migration into the UK’. To understand the link between the first and second sentences, students need to know that membership of the European Union entitles citizens of member states to freedom of movement.

- There are a number of strategies which can be deployed to help pupils to access academic texts. They can be encouraged to activate prior knowledge, considering what they already know about a topic. They can predict what might happen as a text is read – for example, they could be asked to predict the impact of migration on English seaside towns. They could be asked to generate their own questions about a text or to clarify, i.e. to identify areas of uncertainty which may be individual words or phrases. Finally, they could be asked to summarise sections of a text to consolidate their understanding.

### Breaking down complex writing tasks

- The complexity of writing can place a heavy burden on pupils' working memory, i.e. the part of the brain where information is processed and combined.
- Effective writing instruction eases the burden on working memory by breaking down writing tasks.
- Teachers should provide word level, sentence level and whole text level instruction. There is evidence to suggest that by focusing on the micro elements of writing for longer, students will ultimately be able to write longer, high quality responses. For example, in History, sentence starters can encourage students to analyse sources more deeply (for example, 'While initially it might appear that..., on closer inspection...')
- Teachers should ensure that pupils understand the connotations of subject specific vocabulary. For example, in English literature, 'evaluate' questions require a personal response, backed up by reasons. However, in PE, evaluating may involve students referring to the consequences of choices.
- Students should be helped to monitor and review their writing, perhaps with a checklist of features of high-quality work.
- Planning strategies, such as the use of graphic organisers, should be explicitly taught across all subjects.
- Teachers can further support students by ensuring that transcription skills become automatic and using pre-writing tasks to check students' prior knowledge of the topic.

### Combining writing instruction with reading

- Reading and writing are overlapping, complementary skills. It is therefore beneficial to consider how to combine reading and writing instruction, rather than to see writing as something which is undertaken after students have 'learned the material'. Below are some suggested strategies for combining these 2 skills.
- Teachers could set a pre-writing task, asking students to bullet point what they already know about a topic or to generate questions to which they will try to find answers through reading.
- Annotations could be used to identify information or to explore key features of texts, for example underlining evidence about the types of evidence being cited in a science textbook.
- Students could be asked to write short summaries of texts which they have read. They may, for example, write a one sentence summary of a paragraph.
- Students could create checklists based on examples of good writing in each subject. For example, while reading a geography textbook, they might be asked to highlight words related to cause and effect, such as '*Due to this...*'; '*A contributory factor was...*'
- Teaching spelling, punctuation and grammar explicitly can improve pupils' writing. Within different subjects, teachers should consider pre-teaching spellings of challenging

words and prioritising words linked to current content.

- Teachers can also provide contextualised grammar instruction. For example, to improve students' argumentation skills, History teachers could explain the role of modal verbs such as 'could', 'would', 'should' and 'might'. They might also consider sentence combining activities, whereby students combine 2 or more basic sentences to make more sophisticated ones.

### Opportunities for structured talk

- The academic Lauren Resnick has developed a framework called 'accountable talk' which helps to ensure that classroom talk is of high quality. The framework sets out 3 elements, namely knowledge, reasoning and community. In seeking to make pupils accountable to knowledge in a debate, a Religious Studies teacher might ask participants to refer back to quotations from recent texts. Reasoning involves pupils being able to give justifications for claims. Accountability to community highlights the importance of making students feel that their contributions in class matter, for example by emphasising the value of errors.
- There are a number of strategies which teachers could use to enhance the quality of talk in the classroom. They might deliberately sequence speaking activities alongside reading and writing activities to give students the chance to practise new vocabulary. They may also set roles and goals in group discussions (e.g. the summariser or the questioner) or use sentence starters and prompts to help students to extend their answers.

### Providing literacy interventions for struggling students

- Assessment, including both standardised tests and more precise diagnostic testing, should be used to match students to the right intervention and to monitor the impact of interventions. Standardised test results should be considered along with teacher assessments.
- Schools should proactively plan to support students with the weakest levels of literacy, particularly in year 7.
- Some common features of effective interventions are: regular sessions maintained over a period of time; training from experienced trainers or teachers; structured supporting resources; tuition which is additional to and linked with normal lessons; and connections between the out of class learning and the day-to-day whole class learning.
- The highest effects for TA-led interventions occur when TAs receive ongoing, high quality support and structured training. When teaching assistants are deployed in more informal, unsupported instructional roles, they can impact negatively on students' learning outcomes.
- There are a number of online resources which help teachers to find interventions which are backed up by evidence. For example, the EEF's Promising Projects include a range of high-quality literacy interventions. Teachers may also wish to look at the Institute of Effective Education's Evidence for Impact database.

The full document can be downloaded from:

<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/news/improving-literacy-in-secondary-schools>