

Report summary

Moving English forward

Action to raise standards in English

There can be no more important subject than English in the school curriculum. English is a pre-eminent world language, it is at the heart of our culture and it is the language medium in which most of our pupils think and communicate. Literacy skills are also crucial to pupils' learning in other subjects across the curriculum.

Recent reports from Ofsted on English have focused on good practice. The previous triennial report included a section that identified the features of outstanding provision in English and, since then, Ofsted has published a series of case studies of schools that achieved excellence in English.¹ This survey also found much effective practice in English in the schools visited. However, standards are not yet high enough for all pupils and there has been too little improvement in primary schools. Consequently, this report sets out to answer the question: how can attainment in English be raised in order to move English forward?

The report is based on evidence from inspections of English between April 2008 and March 2011 in 133 primary schools, 128 secondary schools and four special schools in England, supplemented by three additional good practice visits. It also draws on evidence from six college inspections, other reports published by Ofsted, discussions with teachers and others, and national test and examination results. It reviews developments in the subject in the three years since Ofsted's previous English report.²

Around 70% of schools inspected in this survey were judged to be good or outstanding in English. This reflects the high profile the subject enjoys in schools, the emphasis placed on raising standards in English and the impact of substantial recent training and support. However, these positive findings also reflect in part the choice of schools for the survey since the sample did not include schools that were in special measures or had been given a notice to improve. Although the quality of provision was broadly similar for primary and secondary schools, there was not enough outstanding teaching in primary schools.

¹ *Excellence in English* (100229), Ofsted, 2011; www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/100229.

² *English at the crossroads* (080247), Ofsted, 2009; www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/080247.

Since 2008, attainment in English has risen in secondary schools. There has also been improvement in the proportion of children who are secure in all aspects of communication, language and literacy at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage. This has not yet carried through into Key Stage 1 where too many pupils failed to secure the basic reading and writing skills expected at that stage. Standards in English at the end of Key Stage 2 have also not risen since the last report. While four-fifths of pupils at Key Stage 2 reached national expectations over the last three years, one in five primary pupils did not achieve the expected standard in English. Far more pupils failed to achieve this standard in writing and the report links this with weaknesses in the teaching of writing and gaps in the subject knowledge of some English coordinators in primary schools.

Although GCSE results have improved, nearly 30% of students who are entered for GCSE English do not achieve grades A* to C. Across all phases, girls continue to outperform boys in English. Those pupils who are known to be eligible for free school meals continue to achieve less highly in English than those pupils who are not eligible. In addition, the government's White Paper³ makes it clear that floor standards in English need to rise still further and surveys suggest that standards have slipped in comparison with our international competitors.

This report is in two parts. Part A highlights the main strengths and weaknesses in English and presents the evidence from the survey inspection visits. Part B takes forward the findings from Part A to analyse 10 areas of weakness and identify the actions that would help to improve practice in these areas and contribute to higher standards of English in schools.

Key findings

- Attainment in English has risen in secondary schools since 2008, but there has been no improvement overall in attainment in English in primary schools.
- A large majority of schools in the sample were judged to be good or outstanding in English. Around 30% were no better than satisfactory. Provision was broadly the same across primary and secondary schools, although there was more outstanding practice in secondary schools.
- An increasing number of children were assessed as being secure in communication, language and literacy in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS).⁴ However, a minority of children did not achieve these levels and where this was the case, schools were not always systematic enough in developing their early communication skills.

³ *The importance of teaching: schools White Paper*, Department for Education, 2010; www.education.gov.uk/schools/teachingandlearning/schoolswhitepaper/b0068570/the-importance-of-teaching.

⁴ Pupils achieving six or more points at EYFS for each of the communication, language and literacy scales 2008–11

- The quality of teaching was good or outstanding in seven in 10 of the lessons seen. In these lessons, teaching plans were clear about the key learning for pupils, teaching was flexible and responded to pupils' needs as the lesson developed, and tasks were meaningful, giving pupils real audiences and contexts where possible.
- The quality of pupils' learning was hampered in weaker lessons by a number of 'myths' about what makes a good lesson. The factors that most commonly limited learning included: an excessive pace; an overloading of activities; inflexible planning; and limited time for pupils to work independently. Learning was also constrained in schools where teachers concentrated too much or too early on a narrow range of test or examination skills.
- The curriculum for English was judged to be good or outstanding in the large majority of schools inspected. The most successful schools were those that had identified the particular needs of their pupils and then designed a distinctive curriculum to meet those needs.⁵
- However, few of the secondary schools visited had taken the opportunity, following the ending of the Year 9 statutory tests, to refresh their Key Stage 3 schemes of work. The best schools provided students with tasks that had practical outcomes beyond the classroom, thus reinforcing the importance and relevance of the subject, but this was not common enough across the survey schools.
- Although the survey uncovered areas of good practice, the quality of transition between Key Stages 2 and 3 in English was too often no better than satisfactory. The lack of regular communication and exchange of ideas between primary and secondary schools created problems for continuity in teaching and assessment. There was similar evidence about whole-school literacy. This report includes some examples of good practice but the majority of schools visited did not have systematic procedures in place to develop good literacy practice across all departments.
- The survey found that too few schools gave enough thought to ways of encouraging the love of reading, and a sizeable minority of pupils failed to reach national expectations in reading. The teaching of writing was variable in quality, with too little attention given to spelling and handwriting.
- Leadership and management were judged to be good or outstanding in most schools surveyed. More secondary than primary schools had outstanding leadership and management. The report links this with the lack of subject specialists in primary schools and suggests that this is one of the reasons for slower improvement in English in primary schools.

⁵ *Excellence in English* (100229), Ofsted, 2011; <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/100229>.

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