

HOW TO LEAD IT PRIMARY ENGLISH

TRICIA MOSS AND SALLIE STANTON
SERIES EDITOR: JON HUTCHINSON

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1 Leading English

The job of English subject leader is, in our view, a wonderful one. It is an incredibly important role that offers the thoughtful teacher something to really get their teeth into. It offers intellectual and leadership challenge, and should be highly valued as much more than administration, co-ordination and collation of useful resources.

Subject leadership offers you the chance to act as a custodian for a crucial subject – someone who leads on articulating the vision for English, and is engaged in research regarding curriculum content and associated pedagogy. It gives you the capacity to develop teachers across the school so they can teach the subject with confidence.

We hope you will find this book a useful resource in undertaking this exciting challenge!

In this chapter, we will cover:

- the importance of English as a subject, both within the curriculum and for pupils
- the complexity of English, and what this means for you as subject leader
- exploration of the subject leader's role, including the 'persistent problems' framework for leadership, and what this means for English subject leaders
- ways to develop your expertise
- guidance on getting the most from this book.

Why English matters

English is a uniquely important and wonderfully complex school subject, with many interrelated strands. In English lessons, we ask pupils to think *about* the language they use, as well as to develop how they think *with* it. Throughout their time in school, pupils study a broad range of fiction and non-fiction texts in this language, and will be taught to respond through the same medium. Learning in English is highly symbiotic – for example, whilst learning the

alphabetic code is key to reading, it also enables pupils to spell with accuracy; whilst reading literature is of value in its own right, it also provides pupils with models of excellence for their own writing.

Development in English is considered to be one of the most important aspects of the primary curriculum because of its wider value to children and society. The key components, which can be simplified as speaking, listening, reading and writing, are not only objects of study in their own right, but also ways to access the wider school curriculum (DfE, 2013). Pupil success at GCSE, including in science and maths, correlates significantly with reading ability (GL Assessment, 2020). The impact of literacy levels also extends beyond school, as they are related to adults' employment prospects, wellbeing and even life expectancy (Terevainen-Goff et al., 2022).

To deny a pupil competence in English is to deny them much more besides – and, therefore, the English subject leader has an important job to do.

More than a set of functional skills

Language is essential to human society, and literature explores the human condition. As such, the subject offers an unrivalled contribution to both the individual and humanity. This means that teaching and leading English isn't just an *important* endeavour: reading great books and poems; sharing children's responses, both deeply emotional and clearly rational; delighting in language and seeing pupils use it with increasing precision and creativity to communicate their exact feelings and thoughts – this is *joyful* and *gratifying* work.

As a school subject, English is related to the disciplines of linguistics and English literature, which, in themselves, are broad fields of study with many branches. The knowledge pupils encounter in the primary classroom is their induction to these fields.

When we gently guide pupils to understand that texts are intentionally constructed, we are introducing the idea that they can, therefore, be studied, analysed, interpreted and produced. When our pupils participate in lively prediction of what might happen next in their class reader, we are doing more than creating engagement. We are shining a light on narrative structure, illuminating how writers share or withhold certain information deliberately to plant seeds or create tension. We are revealing how techniques such as foreshadowing are used to drive narrative. When we consider grammatical constructions within a text, we are exploring some of the building blocks of tone and style. When we invite pupils to discuss and debate their ideas in

response to a text, we introduce them to literary study, whereby meaning is developed and explored in relation to the views of others.

A complex domain

As we have seen, the aims of the English curriculum are broad. They are also contested and hard to pin down (Ashbee, 2021): in contrast to some other areas of the school curriculum, there is no clearly agreed body of knowledge that constitutes the English curriculum (Didau, 2021). The English programmes of study set out what pupils should be able to do – but, aside from vocabulary, spelling and grammar, don't specify what knowledge pupils need in order to build these competencies.

The danger of this is that, without strong and careful leadership, our sense of what English is can be dominated by statutory assessment requirements. Reading lessons can become little more than repetitive comprehension practice and writing lessons reduced to formulaic approaches to getting through the Teacher Assessment Frameworks (TAFs).

To guard against this, rather than being overwhelmed by this complexity, we encourage the English lead to lean into it. Remember, you are in the same boat as primary subject leaders across the country. Engage with different views, think carefully and, over time, build a vision for the subject within the context of your school. By taking a curious and interested approach to developing subject expertise, you will likely feel more confident in the decisions you make and your ability to lead.

The role of a primary English leader

The key roles of the effective subject leader can be summarised as:

- sharing the vision for English as a subject, actively advocating for its value within the curriculum
- collaborating with other teachers to share, refine and review this vision
- considering what should be included in the English curriculum

- liaising with others, for example your school's Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo) and other subject leads, to work towards ensuring a coherent, accessible curriculum
- sharing and overseeing production of long and medium-term plans for English
- curating, reviewing and sharing high-quality teaching resources that align with your curricular goals
- promoting and embedding high-quality teaching of the subject, using the professional development of colleagues as a powerful lever for achieving this
- quality-assuring English teaching across the school, providing developmental feedback to teachers and senior leaders.

School leadership can be seen as an ongoing attempt to overcome barriers or problems in order to make improvements. These include persistent problems: ones that are universal – in that all schools experience them – yet are issues we can impact upon positively through an effective response (Kennedy, 2016). Barker and Rees advise that understanding the persistent problems school leaders face, and drawing on expertise to solve them within the context in which you work, is a helpful way to approach this aim (Barker & Rees, 2020).

Barker and Rees identify seven persistent problems of school leadership, which are outlined in the following table reproduced from the chapter 'Developing School Leadership', in *The ResearchEd Guide to Leadership*, 2020. We have included two additional columns, specifying how these issues might apply to English subject leaders and signposting which chapters of this book can help you develop in these areas.

AREA	PERSISTENT PROBLEM	MANIFESTATION FOR ENGLISH SUBJECT LEADERS	RELEVANT CHAPTER(S)
School culture	Establishing a professional and supportive school culture and enlisting staff contribution	• Articulating the vision for English to colleagues • Consulting with teachers on curriculum content and associated pedagogy • Being open to feedback and seeking to solve problems with colleagues through ongoing dialogue	• Chapter 3: Progression in English • Chapter 4: Curriculum design • Chapters 6–11, which cover reading, writing and oracy • Chapter 12: Monitoring and quality assurance
Development	Ensuring effective approaches to professional learning and development	• Creating a curriculum for professional development (PD) that focuses on what teachers need to know to deliver your English curriculum effectively • Designing and delivering and/or identifying and promoting subject-specific professional development	• Most chapters, each of which features professional-development ideas and plans related to its content • Chapters 6–10, on discrete aspects of the curriculum
Curriculum	Organising and teaching the curriculum	• Identifying and sequencing the content knowledge to be taught • Leading on the provision of effective implementation and enactment of the curriculum through quality resourcing and subject pedagogy	• Chapter 3: Progression in English • Chapter 4: Curriculum design • Chapters 6–10, on discrete aspects of the English curriculum

AREA	PERSISTENT PROBLEM	MANIFESTATION FOR ENGLISH SUBJECT LEADERS	RELEVANT CHAPTER(S)
Behaviour	Attending to pupil behaviour and wider circumstances	• Creating a shared understanding of the learning behaviours needed of pupils and working with colleagues to develop these in classrooms • Supporting staff to overcome the barriers to learning faced by pupils within English, including keep-up and catch-up strategies	• Chapters 6–10, on discrete aspects of the English curriculum

School improvement	Analysing and diagnosing problems; planning and implementing strategies for continuous educational improvement	• Developing and implementing effective quality-assurance processes that will enable you to:
		  • track what pupils know and can do against the curriculum intent
		  • identify the development needs of teachers in order to identify and implement an effective response
			• Chapter 11: Monitoring and quality assurance
			• Chapter 13: Implementing change

Administration	Managing an efficient and effective organisation	• Ensuring the availability of quality resourcing and ways of working that consider staff workload and promote efficiency and effectiveness	All chapters

AREA	PERSISTENT PROBLEM	MANIFESTATION FOR ENGLISH SUBJECT LEADERS	RELEVANT CHAPTER(S)
Self	Developing personal expertise, self-efficacy and self-regulation	• Continuing to invest in your expertise, recognising where there are gaps in your knowledge and seeking opportunities to develop expertise in English	By reading this book, you are already engaged in this process! We aim to help you understand more about all aspects of primary English so you can lead with confidence. The 'Questions for reflection' at the end of each chapter are designed to support your personal development.

Adapted from Barker, J., & Rees, T. 'Developing School Leadership', in Lock, S. (ed) *The ResearchEd Guide to Leadership* (C) 2020 John Catt Educational. Reproduced with permission of the Licensor through PLSclear.

Developing your confidence and expertise

This book aims to help you know and understand more about all aspects of primary English so that you can lead with confidence, but we also hope to provide a springboard for you to engage with a wider wealth of guidance and support to enhance your expertise further. In Chapter 2, we offer advice on engaging with research and evidence.

In addition, each chapter features an 'Explore further' section, which signposts further reading or resources to enhance your knowledge in the area of the chapter's focus.

Useful resources

We have set out some additional key documents related to primary English in the table below. You may be familiar with some of these – but, if you are new to leading English, these documents are a great starting point.

USEFUL RESOURCES	LOCATIONS
STATUTORY AND NON-STATUTORY GUIDANCE	
The National Curriculum: Programmes of Study for Key Stages 1 and 2	https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7de93840f0b62305b7f8ee/PRIMARY_national_curriculum_-_English_220714.pdf
The Early Years Foundation Stage statutory framework: Speech and language guidance	https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/670fa42a30536cb92748328f/EYFS_statutory_framework_for_group_and_school_-_based_providers.pdf
Development Matters: Information on the links between solid early-years practice and later English learning	https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/64e6002a20ae890014f26cbc/DfE_Development_Matters_Report_Sep2023.pdf
EVIDENCE SUMMARIES AND REVIEWS	
Guidance from the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF): Evidence-based guidance on the themes of language and literacy bespoke to Key Stages 1 and 2, and resources including a guidance report, summary posters, (which are great for sharing key messages with other staff) and additional tools such as planning templates, case studies and additional evidence	Key Stage 1: https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/guidance-reports/literacy-ks-1 Key Stage 2: https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/guidance-reports/literacy-ks2
Research Review Series: English (Ofsted, 2022): Outline of research relating to the teaching of English National Curriculum aims, considering what progression may enable pupils to meet those aims and exploring linked pedagogy	https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/curriculum-research-review-series-english/curriculum-research-review-series-english
Telling the story: the English education subject report (Ofsted, 2024): Outline of Ofsted's findings on practice in English schools, including recommendations for improvement to the English curriculum	https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/subject-report-series-english/telling-the-story-the-english-education-subject-report

Professional qualifications

You may want to consider undertaking a National Professional Qualification. The NPQ for Leading Teaching is relevant to leaders of all subjects, and the NPQ in Leading Literacy offers a way for you to build some subject-specific expertise. Your school may be eligible for funding if it includes a high proportion of pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Discussions with colleagues

Exploring and discussing your views with others is a valuable way to develop your knowledge and confidence. Many local authorities, trusts or groups of schools that work informally together organise Teach Meets, study groups and professional development networks for teachers and leaders. Finding out what is available in your local area, or looking to establish a group yourself, could be a helpful way to network with colleagues beyond your school.

Case study: developing curricular expertise

Raheem works in an urban two-form-entry primary school that is part of a small multi-academy trust. He has recently taken on the role of Subject Leader for English. Raheem has a real passion for literature and really wants to offer his pupils the opportunity to develop a love of reading, which is what drove him to take on the role. Raheem realises how complex teaching English is, and decides he wants to develop his thinking about the discipline so he can lead the subject as effectively as possible.

Raheem starts by reading the Ofsted reviews and EEF guides. However, he finds there is a vast amount of information to take in. He realises he would appreciate the opportunity to discuss his response to the reviews with others. He gets in touch with the three other primary school English leads in his trust to ask if they would be interested in setting up a study group. He proposes they read agreed documents in turn, and have conversations focusing on key points and how these might relate to their contexts.

Over time, the group uses the notes from their discussions to draft and agree a document that outlines their understanding of what makes a good-quality English curriculum. This gives Raheem the confidence to move forwards with shaping a school vision for English teaching that he can articulate to his colleagues.

How this book can support you

Throughout this book, we will explore the varied aspects of the primary English curriculum in more detail, giving you a strong foundation from which to lead the subject. We won't shy away from the complexity of the topics we cover, but we will try to explain things in a clear and easy-to-digest way, and will include plenty of examples drawn from evidence, the views of other experts and our personal experience as teachers and leaders. In this book you will find:

- examples of best practice across key stages
- real and fictional case studies
- suggestions for staff professional development
- reflection questions to help you structure your thoughts and identify next steps
- follow-up reading and resources if you want to explore a particular area further.

In the next chapter, we will draw together insights from cognitive science with evidence related to the practice of English teaching. We will also look at how you can take an evidence-based approach yourself.

We will next move on to look at progression (Chapter 3) and English curriculum design (Chapter 4) before considering how we can best use assessment (Chapter 5).

You will then find detailed chapters on specific areas of the subject: reading (Chapters 6 and 7), writing (Chapter 8), handwriting (Chapter 9), spelling (Chapter 10) and oracy (Chapter 11).

We will finish with some guidance on quality assurance (Chapter 12) and tips on implementing improvement and change (Chapter 13).

Chapter summary

- English is an important subject within the curriculum and our pupils' lives.
- English is a complex subject, but this book intends to help you engage with that complexity to shape a vision for the subject in your school.
- Your role is not only important but also interesting, varied and gratifying. We hope this book can help you enjoy your development in the role.
- This book has been structured to build understanding sequentially, but you can also use the chapter coverage guides at the beginning of chapters, chapter summaries and sub-headings to dip in and out as needed.
- Each chapter of this book has a consistent structure, making it easier for you to navigate.

Questions for reflection

- Do I have a strong sense of what English is as a subject? What makes it different from other areas of the curriculum? Why does it matter?
- Do I think teachers in our school have a shared understanding of the value and purpose of the English curriculum? What could I do to find out? Have I shared my vision for the subject with all colleagues?
- Do our teachers understand the rich interplay between aspects of the English curriculum and the wider curriculum?
- How confident am I in the subject knowledge of the teaching team? Is there any English-specific professional development I would like to source to develop collective expertise?

Explore further

- *Making Meaning in English: Exploring the role of knowledge in the English curriculum* (2021) by David Didau
- *Knowledge in English: Canon, curriculum and cultural literacy* (2020) by Victoria Elliott

- *Primary English Knowledge and Understanding* (2000) by Jane Medwell, George Moore, David Wray and Vivienne Griffiths

Connecting with a wider subject community of English specialists is a great way to grow your expertise. This can be achieved in a number of ways. For example:

- Connecting with colleagues can be a great starting point. Gather teachers together, share and discuss reading related to English teaching and explore how the subject can be contextualised for your setting.
- Start a book group. You could read and discuss class readers, interspersed with papers and books related to the teaching of English.
- Join the thriving English subject community online. English specialists on social media often seek and share advice and resources using #TeamEnglish, and many share blogs and advice.

2 Getting the best from research evidence

As an English subject leader, you could use numerous different types of research to help guide your curriculum design and teaching approaches. However, it can be hard to identify which sources of evidence are likely to be most useful: typing 'literacy research' into an online search engine brings up literally thousands of options. We hope that, by the end of this chapter, you will feel much more confident in navigating the evidence base.

This chapter explores how to use research evidence in two parts:

- First, we look at how to approach research evidence in a productive way.
- We then move on to consider one major field of research: the cognitive science of learning – particularly cognitive load theory and how theory can become applied practice in the classroom, particularly in relation to the English curriculum.

Guiding principles

To implement a new strategy or change effectively as a subject leader, you will need to make evidence-informed decisions. These could draw on both external evidence, such as research, and internal data from your own context about what has and has not worked in the past. The decisions come with an opportunity cost: the more time that is devoted to less effective strategies, the less time there is to spend on more effective ones. Therefore, we need to invest time to select the right solutions. The following approaches can be helpful in guiding decisions.

- **Prioritise large-scale studies**: Focus on research with substantial sample sizes. Leaders are not so interested in how an intervention worked for the pupils within a study; they're interested in whether the same intervention might be beneficial for your own pupils. Bigger samples tend to allow for more generalisable conclusions, leading to interventions appropriate for a wider range of learners.
- **Consider the consistency of the participants**: A large sample size doesn't automatically guarantee high-quality research: you should also examine the participant selection process and drop-out rates. Many reading research studies are conducted on secondary-school pupils and undergraduates so we must be cautious of applying findings about older pupils to those in primary or EYFS. Equally, long-term studies based on primary pupils are prone to changes in participants as pupils and/or teachers move schools.
- **Compare contexts**: If the context of a study is very different from your context, the findings may not be particularly useful. It's worth reading the study parameters carefully to check this. An example of this would be a study that concludes children can learn to read quickly in one year where they begin to learn phonics at age seven. In this study, the children are likely to be learning a language that has a very regular and transparent code that can be learned quickly. To learn English, in comparison, they would need to learn far more code. (In Chapter 6, we explore the reasons behind the complexity of the English language.) Full appreciation of the context would be necessary for the results not to be misleading.
- **Be wary of simplification**: Research that has been distilled into bite-sized chunks can lead us to decisions we believe are perfect fits for our schools. However, we should remember that broadly generalised results, especially those summarised without nuance, can only really give us an 'average effect' impression.
- **Don't trust results implicitly**: We should be mindful that all findings are built on a body of research that can be later refuted as more research studies are published. For example, for many years the EEF (an evidence base discussed below) recommended that, if phonics hadn't worked, a different approach to teaching reading would be necessary. As discussed in Chapter 6, the evidence base strongly indicates that this is not the case and the EEF now does not recommend a different approach.

- **Steer clear of educational fallacies**: The field of education is rife with myths, misconceptions and outdated ideas – for example, that pupils will learn better if they discover things for themselves, or that repetition is the surest way to secure understanding. Many of these persist despite being disproven (de Bruyckere et al., 2015). While you can't be aware of all of the fallacies, familiarising yourself with some common ones can save time, helping you to focus on more-promising approaches. Many are discussed online, in teaching and other literacy forums, and can be sought with a simple search (for example, 'literacy misconceptions'). See the 'Explore further' section for some other suggested reading such as *Urban Myths about Learning and Education* by de Bruyckere, Kirschner & Hulshof (2015) and *The ResearchED Guide to Education Myths: An evidence-informed guide for teachers* (2019), edited by Craig Barton and Tom Bennett.

If you are a subject leader who is new to appraising evidence, you might want to start by looking at the Institute for Effective Education's 'Engaging with evidence guide', which breaks down different types of evidence and their limitations (Haslam & Shaw, 2019). The website 'That's a Claim!' (www.thatsaclaim.org/educational) is also helpful for bitesize explainers on different aspects of educational research.

Primary education sources and guidance

There are several notable challenges that make accessing, analysing and interpreting evidence difficult for those of us who work in schools. Lack of time to read and digest research, and difficulty interpreting the scientific jargon in research papers, are challenges familiar to many of us.

A good starting point is to look at what organisations who commission and conduct research have found to be effective. These organisations often digest research for educators into more-accessible formats and collate research into summaries.

While keeping the guiding principles in mind, you may find the following evidence bases useful.

The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF)

The EEF is an independent charity that was set up to improve educational attainment levels of pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds in

England. The Foundation helps schools, colleges and Early Years settings improve outcomes through the better use of evidence. This may be through their guidance reports, which review the evidence base for a range of strategies developed to support specific areas. Alternatively, it may be through research into the efficacy of specific strategies.

- Their guidance reports *Improving Literacy in Key Stage 1* (Higgins et al., 2020), *Improving Literacy in Key Stage 2* (2021) and *Preparing for Literacy* (2021) are productive starting points for English leads.
- The *Teaching and Learning Toolkit* (2021) is also helpful when thinking about curriculum and lesson design, as well as how to support teachers to become more effective in their practice.
- *A School's Guide to Implementation* (2024) provides clear structures and systems that can help us when implementing new strategies in our schools.

The Chartered College of Teaching

The Chartered College of Teaching is a professional body for teachers. Membership gives access to research, resources and the journal *Impact*. The College produces evidence summaries that review and collate research into short digests, and the journal has regular contributions from practitioners as well as researchers.

English-specific resources

Subject associations and local networks are useful gateways for staying up to date with emerging research and discourse within the subject. They also offer training and guidance on the teaching of English at primary school level.

ASSOCIATIONS	LOCATIONS
The English Association offers support, teaching resources and networking opportunities for colleagues in primary and Early Years education.	https://englishassociation.ac.uk/
The National Association of Teachers of English offers publications and training for English teachers at all key stages.	https://www.nate.org.uk/
The National Literacy Trust is a charity focused on supporting children, young people and adults with the literacy skills they need to succeed.	https://literacytrust.org.uk/
The UK Literacy Association provides PD guidance, and research focused on language, literacy and communication.	https://ukla.org/
English Hubs promote a love of reading and support schools in providing excellent phonics and early language teaching, through tailored support.	https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-hubs-list-of-primary-schools
ResearchED is a grassroots organisation that aims to bridge the gap between research and practice in education. It brings together researchers, teachers and policy makers at conferences, which often feature subject focused sessions. The organisation also publishes short books with chapters from many of the speakers. The ResearchED guides to Literacy, Primary English, Leadership and Direct and Explicit Instruction, for example, are very useful for us as English leads.	https://researched.org.uk/

Social media, blogs and podcasts

Social media platforms offer helpful starting points for engaging with researchers and school-based practitioners. Podcasts can help you absorb information while 'on the go', and blogs can provide useful sources of practical advice and research papers.

USEFUL RESOURCES	LOCATIONS
SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS	
BlueSky	#EduSky #PrimaryEduSky #Team English
X (formerly Twitter)	#edutwitter #Team English
PODCASTS	
Thinking Deeply About Primary Education: Researchers and teachers discuss teaching, learning, pedagogy, knowledge, curriculum and all things education.	https://www.youtube.com/@TDaPE and available on most streaming platforms
Science of Reading: the Podcast: Each episode takes a conversational approach and explores a timely topic related to reading.	https://amplify.com/science-of-reading-the-podcast/
The Evidence Based Education Podcast: Hosts discuss key issues in the field of evidence-based education, particularly focusing on how gaps between policy, research and practice can be bridged.	https://evidencebased.education/podcast-archive/ and available on most streaming platforms
Mind the Gap: The hosts interview experts from the UK, US and beyond to share timely insights on trends for Early Years to Year 13, research-based approaches in need of greater reach and strategies to close global gaps.	https://www.youtube.com/c/mindthegapwithtomemma (Also available on most streaming platforms.)

USEFUL RESOURCES	LOCATIONS
BLOGS	
The Reading Ape: A series of blogs explore the teaching of reading.	https://www.thereadingape.com/
Shanahan on Literacy: The site features blogs and resources related to the teaching of reading.	https://www.shanahanonliteracy.com/
The 3Rs: The site provides resources and access to a fortnightly newsletter discussing writing, reading and research from the world of education.	https://alexquigley.co.uk/

What does the research say about cognitive science?

It's crucial for all subject leads and teachers to have a solid grasp of cognitive science and to stay current with its research findings on learning processes. These insights should be the foundation for all our teaching and learning strategies. In this next section, we outline key points all teachers need to understand and then provide worked examples linked to teaching the English curriculum. In particular we hope the worked examples will demonstrate how knowledge of cognitive load theory helps us ensure children remember their learning over time.

In his book *Why Don't Students Like School?* (2021), D. T. Willingham draws on the simple model of memory propounded by A. D. Baddeley and G. Hitch (1974). He explains the theoretical model and its impact for teaching in the classroom.

Here's a concise overview:

- **Working memory** acts as our brain's processing centre, briefly holding small amounts of new information. On average, an adult can hold and actively process about four chunks of new information in their working memory at a time. For children, it's likely to be fewer.
- **Learning** occurs when we successfully move new information from working memory into long-term memory.
- **Cognitive overload** can hinder or halt learning if working memory becomes overwhelmed. This happens when we're faced with too much new information to process simultaneously.
- **Optimising load** means reducing cognitive load that's unrelated to new key learning (such as new rules for a game) in order to increase capacity for essential cognitive load. This could be assisted by linking new content with information already stored in long-term memory, as this doesn't take up lots of space in working memory.
- **Long-term memory** organises and stores information in structures called 'schemas'. These schemas can range from simple, containing just a few pieces of information, to highly complex, encompassing a vast quantity of data. The capacity of long-term memory may be finite.

Once information is stored in the long-term memory, it is accessed by the process of retrieval. All teachers should also be familiar with research on retrieval practice, as explained, for example, by Pashler et al. (2007):

- **Frequent recall** of learned material can enhance pupils' retention. The act of retrieving information reinforces the information in memory and reduces the likelihood of forgetting.
- **Spaced retrieval** is the most effective form of retrieval. Retrieval is most effective when pupils have started to forget the material: this requires more mental effort during recall, thereby strengthening memory connections. For optimal results, retrieval practice should be spread out over time rather than concentrated in a single session.

This research helps us to understand how learning occurs and has several implications for the classroom:

- **Implementing targeted planning**: Pupils need to concentrate on essential knowledge, skills and concepts. Teachers should be directed and assisted to design activities that direct pupils' focus to these core elements.
- **Building on existing knowledge**: Pupils understand new ideas by relating them to what they already know. Planning should be shaped by assessing and building upon pupils' prior knowledge.
- **Managing cognitive demands**: Pupils' working memory can easily become overwhelmed with new information. Teachers should be guided in how to be mindful of the cognitive load they impose, and plans should introduce new material in manageable segments.
- **Fostering fluency**: To develop deep understanding and fluency, pupils need to revisit and apply important content regularly. Plans should include spaced practice: frequent reviews, retrieval tasks and ample opportunities for pupils to apply what they've learned.
- **Adjusting support levels**: As pupils develop a more-sophisticated understanding in a subject area, they require less guidance. Teachers should be encouraged to assess pupil understanding continuously and be allowed the flexibility to adjust their levels of support accordingly, matching it to pupils' growing expertise.

Building background knowledge

Building vocabulary knowledge is probably the most impactful thing we can do to build pupils' background knowledge. The more vocabulary they have, the easier it is for them to join in conversations, understand what they are reading and express themselves in their writing.

In the 1990s, B. Hart and T. R. Risley published a study identifying that children in the households of professionals heard on average 11 million words a year, in comparison to approximately three million words for children in families claiming welfare support (1995). This study was the first of its kind to link vocabulary size to socio-economic status explicitly. Its methodology has been widely critiqued (see Shanahan, 2018 for a helpful summary), and subsequent studies have not identified as large a gap, but they have all reported noticeable

vocabulary gaps in their overall findings (Fernald, Marchman, & Weisleder, 2013). However, as Alex Quigley argues, further research prompted from Hart and Risley's original work has taught us that early language exposure matters (Quigley, 2022).

Children who have not had plentiful exposure to rich language may find it difficult to engage with the more-academic language used in schools, whereas children who have heard a lot of rich, discursive language are more likely to experience this academic language at home. J. Law et al. identified in their research that pupils with language difficulties upon entry to Year 1 are four times more likely to have reading difficulties in adulthood than those who don't (Law, et al., 2017).

In Chapters 6 and 7, on reading, we explore the important role of vocabulary instruction for reading. In Chapter 11, on oracy, we reflect on the importance of discrete vocabulary teaching to develop oracy from Early Years Foundation Stages (EYFS) to the end of Key Stage 2.

Vocabulary development in your context

We suggest reflecting on and discussing these findings with the EYFS lead in your school. Are you seeing pupils joining you in Early Years with less well-developed vocabulary than in previous years? Is it all pupils or groups? What impact is this having on their ability to access your curriculum?

Implications for the classroom

The research evidence for how learning happens demonstrates that we need to always think about how we can reduce the load on working memory when introducing new learning. Very often, gaps in children's learning happen because teachers have moved through the curriculum too quickly. They may not give enough examples of a new concept to help children build their schema around it or they may not revisit learning over time through spaced retrieval. Using worked examples is a very useful way to build children's schema by linking new learning to their existing background knowledge. In our writing chapter, we outline why writing is such a cognitively challenging process. The case studies below are linked to writing to show how two teachers address common errors by planning learning sequences that take account of cognitive load theory. These case studies show how two teachers use worked examples to build background knowledge and allow for spaced practice in their writing lessons.

Case study: worked examples to build knowledge of sentences

Freya teaches a Year 2 English class in Peterborough. Many of the pupils speak in incomplete sentences (fragments) and, for many of them, English is not a first language. At the beginning of the year, Freya notices that many of her pupils do not know the difference between full sentences and fragments. She works with the school's English lead to build a teaching sequence to address this.

- Freya focuses on statements as the most basic variety of sentences. She explains that they consist of two parts: a subject (who or what the sentence is about) and a predicate (the words that contain the verb and tell us what the subject is doing, feeling or being).
- She shows examples of statements using content from the curriculum and annotates the two parts under a visualiser. She repeats this for several lessons to build pupils' mental models of simple statements from across the curriculum. Using her knowledge of cognitive load theory, Freya knows that repeating this learning over time will help all children to internalise that a sentence contains two parts.
- Once children have built their schema around simple sentences in a range of contexts, Freya provides a selection of statements and fragments and asks the pupils to identify the fragments. She models 'fixing' the fragments by adding the subject/predicate. She keeps the structure the same as the complete sentences she used earlier in the sequence. This means they have enough free space in their working memory to 'fix' the fragments. She does this repeatedly over a series of lessons using the principles of spaced practice to help transfer this knowledge into long-term memory.
- When the pupils are confident identifying the fragments, Freya gives them examples to identify and fix orally. As children become competent at this, Freya is able to lengthen the spaced practice.

Case study: worked examples to build cohesion across sentences

Juan teaches a combined class of pupils in Years 3 and 4 in a school in Wisbech. His Year 4 pupils are not linking paragraphs using fronted adverbials as cohesive devices (such as 'Firstly', 'Consequently' or 'The following day'). Juan knows from cognitive load theory that it is important to reduce the load on working memory by introducing new learning in small steps and linking it to existing knowledge. He therefore addresses the problem as follows.

- After modelling the use of the fronted adverbials 'Firstly' and 'Next' for the Year 3 pupils, and asking them to write pairs of sentences beginning with them, Juan works with the Year 4 pupils.
- He has pre-prepared two linking sentences to model writing. Both sentences begin with adverbials – 'Suddenly' and 'In response' – which have been encountered by the pupils previously, so they are only focusing on how to use them as cohesive devices.
- As he writes the first sentence, he discusses his thinking and decision-making.
- He repeats this with the second sentence.
- He draws pupils' attention to the impact of the devices, and how they changed the meaning of the sentences. He then asks the Year 4 pupils to say a sentence that uses one of the adverbials to a partner.
- After taking feedback to check for misconceptions, he repeats the process with the second adverbial.
- He provides the pupils with a series of statements closely linked to his worked examples, and asks them to select the most appropriate fronted adverbial for each statement.
- Knowing learning happens over time, Juan plans to give the Year 4 pupils a range of adverbials to link a range of sentences over the rest of the week, to continue to build their mental models. By doing this, he is building their background knowledge so they can link this new learning to existing knowledge.

Chapter summary

- There is a range of evidence bases we can use to navigate our way through the debates surrounding English and to inform our planning and teaching.
- When evaluating research, we should focus on large-scale studies with consistency of participants, be sure to consider studies' contexts, be wary of simplification and the fallibility of researchers, and be aware of common educational myths and misconceptions.
- Learning is a cognitive process. Key insights from cognitive science help us understand the process of learning and, importantly, how these can be applied to teaching English.
- Perhaps the most-important factor of applying cognitive-science principles in the classroom is the augmentation of prior knowledge.

Questions for reflection

- How do I use research evidence to help inform curriculum choices?
- In what ways am I currently considering my school context and the research evidence when implementing new teaching strategies?
- How confidently could I explain cognitive load theory? What do I want to explore further?
- How well does our English curriculum support learning and progression, based on what we know about cognitive load theory?
- How well do staff understand the limits of working memory?
- Do all staff understand the evidence base for and importance of teaching vocabulary?

Example PD session: building background knowledge

You could conduct a PD session on building background knowledge as follows:

TIMING SUGGESTION	SESSION GUIDANCE
10 mins	Use the section on cognitive science research to explain to colleagues the importance of building background knowledge in English lessons.
15 mins	• Ask a colleague to describe a scenario in which a pupil (or group of pupils) either did not achieve a learning goal or said the learning was boring. • Elicit the learning points covered in the lesson, and discuss whether all pupils are likely to have had sufficient background knowledge before starting the learning. • Discuss which components may have been missing, and what could have been included in the teaching sequence. • Repeat with other scenarios as necessary.
10 mins	Prompt colleagues to consider their learning sequence for next week: • Are there any background component steps on which they need to spend more time? • Do they need to build knowledge in advance for particular pupils?

Explore further

- *The ResearchED Guide to Explicit and Direct Instruction* (2019) edited by Adam Boxer
- *How Learning Happens: Seminal works in educational psychology and what they mean* (2020) by Paul Kirschner and Carl Hendrick
- The Learning Scientists' podcast: https://www.learningscientists.org/podcast-episodes

- *Understanding How We Learn* (2019) by Yana Weinstein and Megan Sumeracki, with Oliver Caviglioli
- *Why Don't Students Like School?* (2021) by Daniel Willingham
- *Urban Myths about Learning and Education* by de Bruyckere, Kirschner & Hulshof (2015) and *The ResearchED Guide to Education Myths: An evidence-informed guide for teachers* (2019), edited by Craig Barton and Tom Bennett.