



Estyn

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Her Majesty's Inspectorate
for Education and Training in Wales

English in key stages 2 and 3

June 2014

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Introduction

This report has been produced in response to a request for advice from the Welsh Government in the Minister's annual remit letter to Estyn for 2013-2014. The advice is set in the context of the Welsh Government's improving standards agenda. This agenda emphasises the need for schools to accelerate improvement so that learners achieve higher standards.

The report examines standards of English in key stages 2 and 3 and includes case studies of best practice. The report refers to English as a subject taught in both English and Welsh-medium primary and secondary schools.

The intended audience for this report includes the Welsh Government, headteachers and practitioners in schools, and officers and advisers in local authorities and regional consortia. The report draws on the range of evidence noted in the annex.

Background

Oracy (speaking and listening), reading and writing are at the heart of pupils' learning, vital to the learning of English and to success in all areas of the curriculum. In Welsh-medium primary schools, English-language skills are developed through use of the language as a subject and medium from key stage 2 onwards.

The publication of the first of the National Curriculum Orders for English in Wales occurred in 1988. The most recent revision of the curriculum took place in 2008, which set out programmes of study for oracy, reading and writing. At key stage 2, the orders provide for pupils to build on skills they have started to acquire and develop at Foundation Phase. At key stage 3, pupils should build on the skills, knowledge and understanding acquired at key stage 2. At key stage 4, the orders provide for pupils' progress to continue to develop within an integrated and increasingly challenging programme of speaking, listening, reading and writing.

At key stages 2 and 3, most pupils have moved beyond the need to acquire initial reading skills and have gained independent writing skills. As pupils become more effective readers they need to understand that there are different types of reading, such as reading for pleasure or instruction. They need to become more analytical about texts as well as developing and refining different strategies known as higher-order reading skills. The full range of higher-order reading skills is explained in annex 1. Often, higher-order reading skills are linked only to non-literary texts when actually they apply to both literary and non-literary texts. As pupils become more proficient at writing, they need to learn about writing in different forms and for different purposes and audiences as well as to further their knowledge of spelling, punctuation and grammar. The writing skills that pupils need to develop in key stages 2 and 3 are explained in annex 2.

Until 2003, standardised assessment tests, as well as teacher assessment, measured pupils' attainment in English at the end of key stages 2 and 3. Key stage 2

tests ended in 2004 and were replaced with end-of-key-stage teacher assessments. Key stage 3 tests remained statutory until 2005. In 2010, Estyn reported concerns about the reliability of teacher assessment in the core subjects in key stages 2 and 3¹.

In 2008, Estyn published a report on best practice in the reading and writing of pupils aged 7 to 14 years². The 2008 report provides a baseline from which to judge progress and achievement in standards and provision in English since that time.

In 2010, Estyn introduced a new inspection system for schools. The starting point for these inspections is the school's evaluation of its own performance. While inspectors do not inspect all subjects or aspects of work in depth during an inspection, they always examine the literacy skills of oracy, reading and writing in work across the curriculum.

Main findings

- 1 In most lessons in key stage 2 and in a majority of lessons in key stage 3, observed during inspection and for this survey, pupils achieve good standards in English. There are excellent standards in a few primary and secondary schools where pupils read and respond very well to a wide range of texts with complex meanings. These pupils use higher-order reading skills such as inference and deduction confidently, and they display flair, originality and accuracy in their written work.
- 2 In a minority of primary schools in key stage 2, where standards are judged as adequate, too many pupils do not read fluently for their age and with understanding. There are weaknesses in pupils' writing, including younger pupils' lack of independent writing and limited extended writing particularly by older pupils.
- 3 In a significant minority of secondary schools, standards in English lessons are adequate because many pupils make progress that is too variable. Although oracy is often good, these pupils do not read or write well enough. They lack confidence and do not have a secure understanding of what they have read. In these schools, pupils lack an understanding of the writing process, including editing work to improve the content. Their written work is often short, featuring a narrow range of styles and purposes, and has too many punctuation and spelling errors.
- 4 Inaccuracies in spelling, punctuation and grammar continue to mar the quality of writing in a majority of primary and secondary schools. There is not enough emphasis on pupils learning and using a wide range of spelling strategies. It is important for schools to agree how to teach spelling, punctuation and grammar and provide consistency in their approaches, such as teaching spelling rules and strategies.

¹ Evaluation of the arrangements to assure the consistency of teacher assessment in the core subjects at key stage 2 and key stage 3 (2010)

² Best practice in the reading and writing of pupils aged 7 to 14 years (2008)

- 5 Since 2008, the proportion of pupils in key stages 2 and 3 attaining the expected level or above in teacher assessments has increased. Progress has accelerated since 2011 in both key stages. The rate of improvement has been faster in key stage 3 than in key stage 2. The data on standards of writing shows more improvement since 2008, but standards in writing remain lower than in oracy and reading in both key stages. Despite the overall improving trend, the rate of progress is still too slow for pupils in Wales to catch-up with pupils in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. There is a full analysis of performance data on pages 8 to 11.
- 6 Most pupils entitled to free school meals (FSM) do not attain as well as their non-FSM peers in English. The gap in performance widens as pupils progress from primary to secondary school. There have only been modest improvements in the performance data for more able pupils in both key stages over the past five years. Boys do not attain as well as girls, particularly in key stage 3.
- 7 The quality of teaching and assessment of English is good or better in a majority of primary and secondary schools. This is broadly similar to our findings in 2008. In the best practice seen in only a minority of lessons, there is explicit teaching of language skills that helps pupils make fast progress.
- 8 The teaching of writing is underdeveloped in a minority of secondary schools. In this minority of schools, pupils cannot transfer reading and writing skills to their work in other subjects.
- 9 The tracking of pupils' progress in English in primary and secondary schools has improved over the past five years. However, a majority of schools do not implement 'assessment for learning' strategies³ consistently or effectively enough. There is still too much poor marking of pupils' work in both key stages. Across Wales, the reliability and validity of statutory teacher assessments are affected by weaknesses in arrangements for the standardisation and moderation of teachers' judgements.
- 10 English has a high priority in the curriculum of almost all schools in key stages 2 and 3. Generally, schools allocate enough time for teaching English, including developing reading skills. Curriculum planning for English is generally good in a majority of primary and secondary schools. However, in a significant minority of primary and secondary schools, plans do not give enough attention to the skills of reading for comprehension and writing non-literary material. There is not a good balance of non-literary and literary narrative texts. In a majority of primary and secondary schools, work is not challenging enough for more able pupils.
- 11 Support for pupils with additional learning needs (ALN) and English as an additional language (EAL) continues to be a strong feature of the work of most primary and secondary schools. As a result, many of these pupils make good progress in English.

³ This term is explained in the glossary.

- 12 Effective transitional arrangements are lacking in a minority of primary schools and secondary schools and they are poor in a few. This affects pupils' progress in English from key stage 2 to key stage 3.
- 13 Many primary and secondary schools have good leadership. In a few schools where there is excellent leadership, senior managers focus on establishing and maintaining high standards in the teaching of English, so that pupils gain the literacy skills they need for all subjects. In secondary schools, the best senior leaders put as high a priority on standards in key stage 3 as in key stage 4.
- 14 Overall, a majority of primary schools and a minority of secondary schools have quality improvement systems that draw on a wide range of performance and other data to judge the strengths and areas for improvement in the school. However, there are weaknesses in the improvement plans of a minority of schools. Whole-school and subject plans lack enough detail of what action staff will take to improve pupils' English skills, particularly in writing. Plans lack quantitative success criteria, to judge the effect of actions on standards of English.

Recommendations

Primary and secondary schools should:

- R1 continue to focus on raising standards of pupils' independent and extended writing, giving close attention to content, expression and accuracy;
- R2 continue to raise pupils' ability to read for information and use higher-order reading skills;
- R3 tackle the underperformance of pupils entitled to FSM in English, including for more able pupils, by targeting and matching support to their individual learning needs;
- R4 provide challenging work in English to stretch all pupils, particularly the more able;
- R5 agree how to teach spelling, punctuation and grammar and provide consistency in approaches, such as teaching spelling rules and strategies;
- R6 improve 'assessment for learning' practices and the marking of pupils' work;
- R7 achieve a better balance of literary and non-literary material and cover all seven writing genres⁴;
- R8 work with other schools to share effective standardisation and moderation practices; and
- R9 share more information to aid pupils' transition to secondary school.

In addition, secondary schools should:

- R9 improve the teaching of writing as a process by encouraging pupils to plan, review, edit and improve their own work; and
- R10 make more use of oracy prior to reading and writing, in order to help pupils to develop and extend their understanding and improve the quality of their work.

The Welsh Government should:

- R11 improve the reliability and validity of teacher assessment by reviewing assessment criteria and introducing external moderation at key stage 2 and key stage 3.

⁴ The seven types of writing genre are narrative, recount, instruction, non-chronological reports, explanation, persuasion and discussion. These terms are explained in the glossary.

Standards

Outcomes from inspections and visits to a representative sample of schools

- 15 Many pupils in key stage 2 and a majority of pupils in key stage 3 achieve good standards in English lessons. These pupils speak clearly and effectively in discussions. They respond to and retrieve information from a wide range of texts and write competently and accurately. There are excellent standards in only a few schools in key stages 2 and 3.
- 16 Overall, a minority of pupils in key stages 2 and 3 are making too little progress in their knowledge, understanding and skills in English. Despite recent improvements, pupils' standards in writing, in both key stages, continue to remain a concern. There are also continuing weaknesses in pupils' spelling, grammar and punctuation. In a minority of schools in key stages 2 and 3, pupils do not understand well enough how they are progressing and what to do to improve.

Common strengths

- 17 In key stages 2 and 3, where pupils have good oracy skills, they talk and listen with confidence in a range of contexts and are responsive to others' ideas and views. By the end of key stage 2 and throughout key stage 3, many pupils know how to engage the interest of the listener. When expressing opinions, they provide good reasons to support their view. In a few secondary schools, pupils provide only brief responses and lack confidence in debating and discussing issues and ideas.
- 18 Standards of reading are excellent in a few schools in key stages 2 and 3. In these schools, pupils:
- are fluent, accurate and effective readers who use a range of reading strategies confidently;
 - understand significant ideas, events and characters and more able pupils understand different and complex layers of meaning;
 - express preferences and opinions that they are able to justify; and
 - locate and synthesise different sources of information competently.
- 19 In addition, in key stage 3 in a few secondary schools, more able pupils read critically, analyse writers' techniques skilfully and show a keen awareness of features, such as thematic and linguistic devices.
- 20 In key stage 2 in many primary schools where standards of reading are good, pupils develop their ability to use a range of strategies to read independently and respond well to different texts. Usually, they have a straightforward understanding of ideas, events and characters and can locate and use information from different sources. In a majority of secondary schools in key stage 3, pupils' reading skills are good. They extend their understanding of a range of literature and respond well to the content and style of a selection of information and media texts. These pupils use skills such as inference and deduction, recognise the nature of irony and bias, and provide well-reasoned responses to literary and non-literary texts.

21 In a minority of primary and secondary schools, pupils' writing skills are good or better. Their writing is interesting and varied and organised appropriately for the purpose and reader. In key stage 2, pupils' vocabulary choices become increasing more varied and complex and spelling and punctuation are generally accurate. In key stage 3, a minority of pupils write thoughtfully and clearly, selecting suitable content to support their explanations and arguments. They use a range of sentence structures confidently, vary vocabulary to create effects and organise and present their work accurately.

Common shortcomings

22 Over the past three years, inspectors have made recommendations in a minority of primary school inspections to improve pupils' standards of English. In these schools at key stage 2, too many pupils read at a level below their chronological age and do not make enough progress in reading with understanding. There are also weaknesses in pupils' writing skills.

23 Weaknesses in reading in key stage 2 include pupils':

- lack of secure decoding strategies;
- weak comprehension skills; and
- limited higher-order reading skills.

24 In a few primary schools, at the beginning of key stage 2, pupils' reading and writing skills are not good enough because of weaknesses in their learning in the Foundation Phase. There are misunderstandings about practice in the Foundation Phase, related to insufficient teaching of reading and writing skills, which hinder pupils' progress in English in key stage 2 in a few primary schools.

25 In key stage 3, there are weaknesses in pupils' confidence in understanding more challenging texts and reading for information, such as collecting and synthesising materials for different purposes and then putting such material to further use. This finding is important with regard to Wales' PISA results. In particular, pupils need more opportunities to tackle unfamiliar texts in order to develop skills in paraphrasing content and giving brief answers that show that they have understood the text.

26 In a minority of primary and secondary schools, the weaknesses in writing include:

- pupils' lack of independent writing skills at the start of key stage 2;
- younger pupils in key stage 2 being over-reliant on drawing storyboards and pictorial devices for planning writing, which limit the development of their independent writing skills;
- little extended writing in key stages 2 and 3 that demonstrates how pupils are developing their ideas, information and writing stamina;
- inaccuracies in spelling, grammar and punctuation in key stages 2 and 3, which we also identified in our report in 2008;
- pupils' lack of understanding of the writing process including planning, composing and drafting work in key stage 3; and
- inadequate editing and proofreading in key stage 3 in order to improve the content and eliminate errors.

- 27 In these schools, pupils find it difficult to transfer the skills learned in English sessions to their writing in other work.
- 28 In a minority of schools in key stages 2 and 3, pupils do not understand how they are progressing and what to do to improve. In particular, older pupils in key stage 2 and pupils in key stage 3 do not know enough about how well they are achieving in relation to the levels of the National Curriculum. Not enough schools provide suitable information on National Curriculum level characteristics and success criteria for particular types of reading and writing, for pupils to use to help them know they can improve.

Teacher assessment at key stages 2 and 3

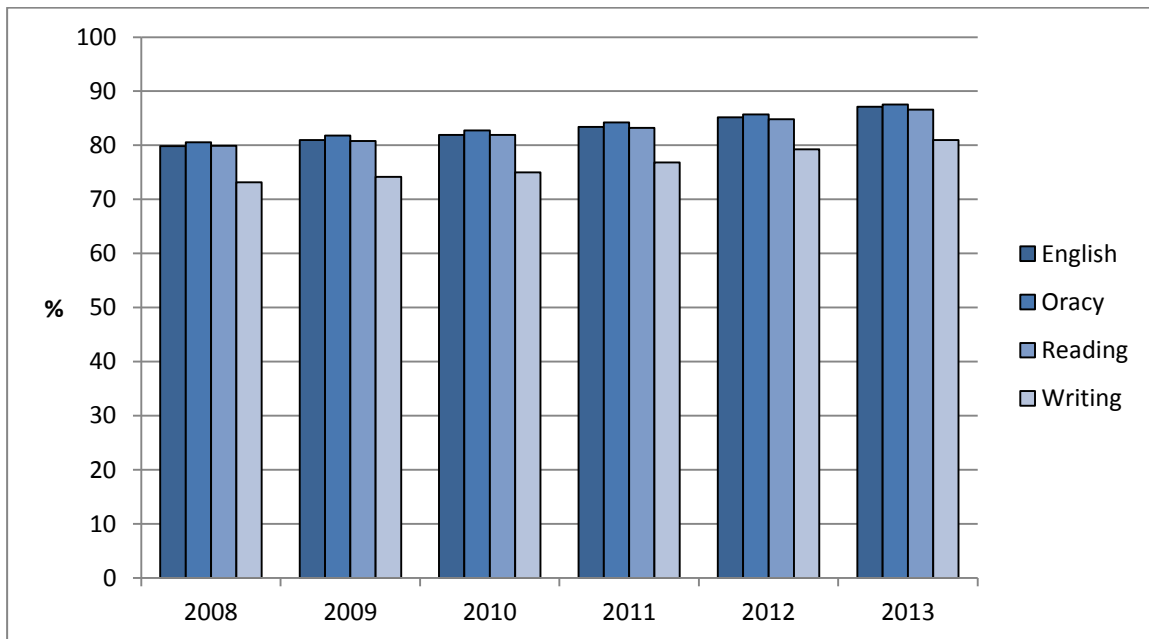
- 29 In 2008, we reported that performance data on English in primary and secondary schools indicated improvement over the previous eight years. Since 2008, data on performance in key stages 2 and 3 has continued to improve⁵. The rate of improvement in English in key stage 3 has been faster than in key stage 2 since 2008. Over the same period in key stage 3 data on performance in English is better than the other core subjects of mathematics and science. Boys do not attain as well as girls particularly in key stage 3⁶.
- 30 There is a strong correlation between lower attainment and FSM entitlement⁷. This correlation is evident in pupils' performance in English where in key stages 2 and 3, pupils entitled to FSM do not achieve as well as their non-FSM peers. While performance data for both key stages over the past five years shows that there has been a slight narrowing in the gap between the performance of pupils entitled to FSM and those who are not, data indicates that standards of English for pupils entitled to FSM remain too low.
- 31 Overall, in English-medium schools in key stage 2, pupils' performance in English has improved year on year, with the most significant improvements taking place since 2011. In Welsh-medium schools, pupils' performance in English in key stage 2 has also improved over the past five years and is around two percentage points higher than pupils' performance in English-medium schools. The greatest improvements over the past five years have been in English-medium schools where pupils' performance in writing at the expected level 4 has improved by seven percentage points.

⁵ <http://wales.gov.uk/statistics-and-research/end-foundation-phase-outcomes-national-curriculum-teacher-assessment-core-subjects-key-stages-2-3/?lang=en>

⁶ <http://wales.gov.uk/statistics-and-research/academic-achievement-pupil-characteristics/?lang=en>

⁷ <http://wales.gov.uk/statistics-and-research/academic-achievement-free-school-meals/?lang=en>

Figure 1: Percentage of pupils achieving the expected level (level 4) in English key stage 2 teacher assessments, 2009-2013 (a)



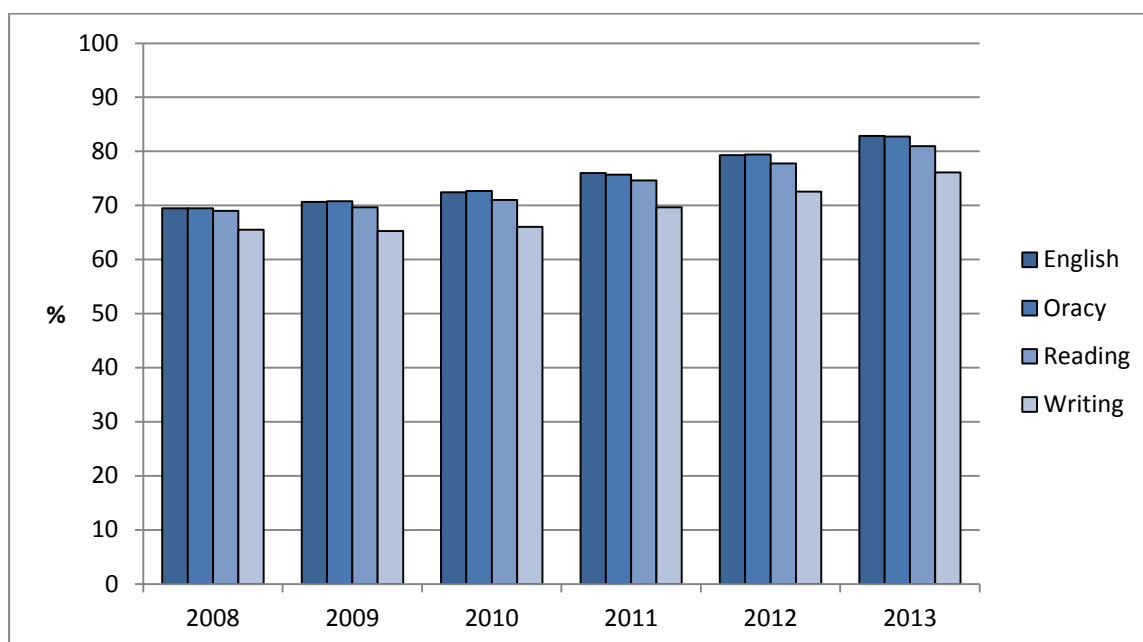
Source: National Data Collection (NDC), Welsh Government⁸

(a) Oracy, Reading and Writing are components of English.

32 In key stage 3 in English-medium schools, pupils' performance at the expected level 5 has improved year on year, with the most significant improvements taking place in 2013. At the higher levels 6 and 7, overall performance in English has also improved. The greatest improvements have been in oracy and reading, where pupils' performance increased by 13 and 12 percentage points respectively since 2008. There has been a modest improvement in writing at the higher levels 6 and 7 since 2008. In key stage 3 in Welsh-medium secondary schools, pupils' performance in English has been consistently higher than in English-medium schools by around five percentage points. In Welsh-medium schools, pupils' performance in oracy and reading in English is stronger than their performance in writing in English.

⁸ <http://wales.gov.uk/statistics-and-research/end-foundation-phase-outcomes-national-curriculum-teacher-assessment-core-subjects-key-stages-2-3/?lang=en>

Figure 2: Percentage of pupils achieving the expected level (level 5) in English key stage 3 teacher assessments, 2009-2013 (a)



Source: National Data Collection (NDC), Welsh Government⁹

(a) Oracy, Reading and Writing are components of English.

- 33 In 2008, around one in six pupils who achieved the expected level in English in key stage 2 did not go on to achieve the expected level in key stage 3. By 2012, this proportion had reduced to around one in 12 pupils. At the same time, the proportion of pupils not achieving the higher level 5 in English in key stage 2 but achieving the higher level 6 in key stage 3, three years later, has increased by six percentage points to 21% over the same period.
- 34 In key stages 2 and 3, pupils entitled to FSM continue to perform at a lower level than their non-FSM peers¹⁰. In key stage 2, the gap in performance between these groups of pupils has been narrowing steadily since 2008, despite a slight widening in 2010. In key stage 3, the gap in performance has narrowed very slightly over the last five years. In both key stages, there is a wider gap in performance in English than the other core subjects. While the overall rate of improvement is similar for pupils entitled to FSM and their non-FSM peers, the gap in performance widens as pupils progress from primary to secondary school.

⁹ <http://wales.gov.uk/statistics-and-research/end-foundation-phase-outcomes-national-curriculum-teacher-assessment-core-subjects-key-stages-2-3/?lang=en>

¹⁰ <http://wales.gov.uk/statistics-and-research/academic-achievement-free-school-meals/?lang=en>

Academic achievement and entitlement to FSM

Figure 3: The percentage of pupils achieving at least the expected level 4 in English teacher assessments in key stage 2

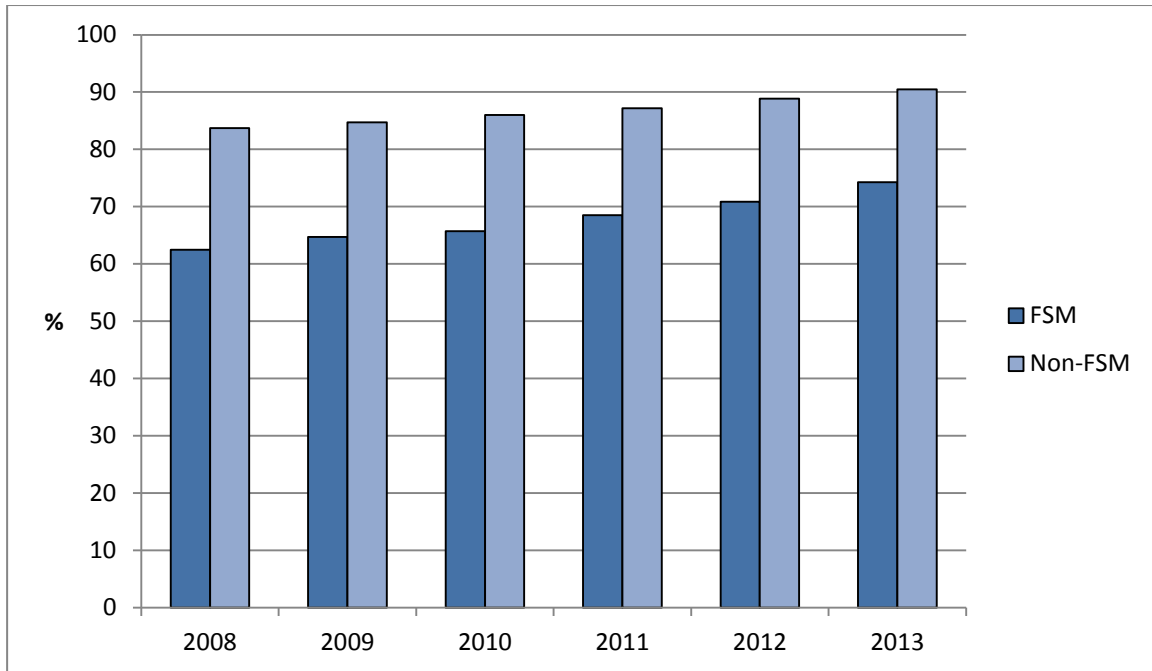
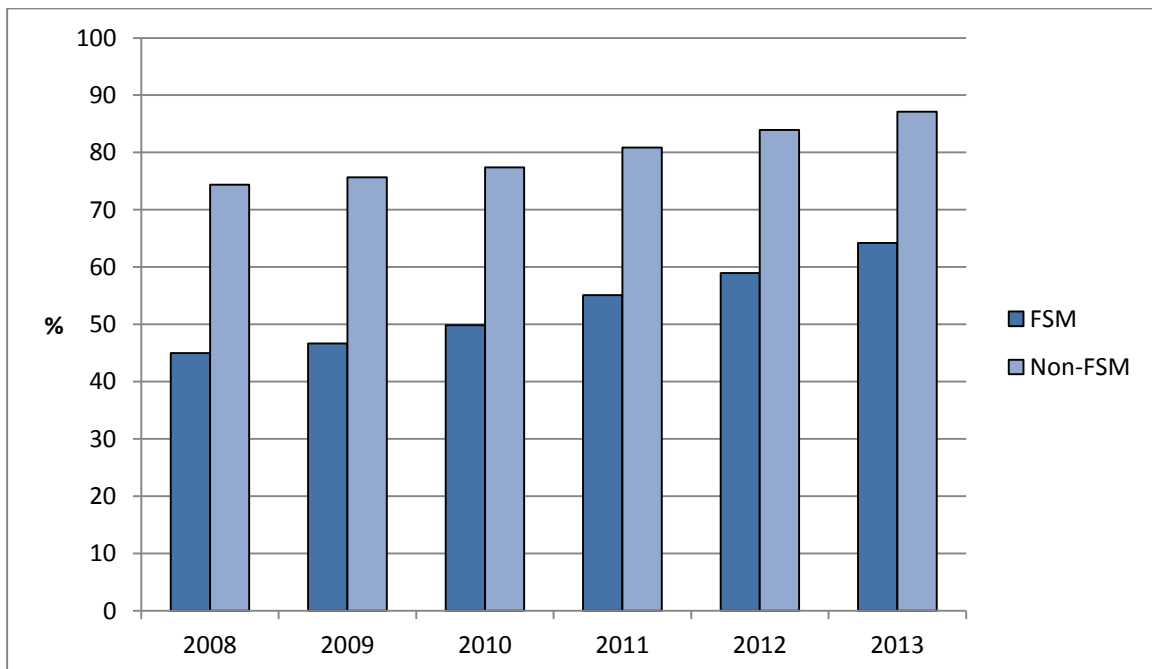


Figure 4: The percentage of pupils achieving at least the expected level 5 in English teacher assessments in key stage 3



35 In 2008, we reported on the wide gap between boys' and girls' achievements in English and which was most evident in the standards of writing. Girls continue to do better than boys, although the gap in boys' and girls' performance has steadily narrowed in key stage 2 with the narrowest gap of seven percentage points in 2013.

The gender gap fluctuates year on year in key stage 3 and was at its widest in 2012. In 2013, in key stage 3, there was a difference of 12 percentage points between boys' and girls' performance in English.

- 36 In key stage 2, in English over the past five years, pupils in Wales have performed better than or similar to their counterparts in England.¹¹ In key stage 3, pupils in Wales do not perform as well as their counterparts in England although the gap was at its narrowest in 2013 when pupils' performance in key stage 3 was three percentage points behind performance in England.

The outcomes of Wales' first National Reading Test

- 37 In May 2013, the Welsh Government required all schools to implement a National Reading Test for pupils in Years 2 to 9. Previously, schools used different commercially produced reading tests, which made it difficult to make local and national comparisons of pupils' reading achievement and progress. Test data, published as 'experimental statistics' by the Welsh Government, is still undergoing evaluation and the results should therefore be treated cautiously.
- 38 Test data results indicate that, generally, pupils in primary year groups scored more highly than pupils in secondary school year groups. More girls than boys achieved a standardised score¹² higher than 115, while more boys than girls achieved a standardised score lower than 85. These overall findings are similar to the outcomes of teacher assessment in key stages 2 and 3.
- 39 Baseline scores were also collected for each pupil to enable the measurement of pupils' year-on-year progress in developing their reading skills. The information should also help identify pupils who require additional support in order to improve their reading skills.

Performance in international surveys

- 40 The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a survey of the educational achievement of 15-year-olds organised by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The survey takes place every three years and assesses pupils' skills in reading, mathematics and science when they are in key stage 4. Wales took part in PISA surveys in 2006, 2009 and 2012. In each survey, one of these areas is the main subject. In 2009, there was an in-depth assessment of reading.
- 41 PISA reading tests are different from reading assessments of the National Curriculum at key stage 3. In PISA, there are multiple-choice questions for pupils to interpret and select the most appropriate response. PISA requires general skills in paraphrasing content and giving brief opinions.
- 42 Wales' performance in PISA reading tests in 2012 was significantly lower than the OECD average. In general, this performance was at a similar level to that of the other two PISA surveys in 2009 and 2006. The results of the PISA survey in Wales

¹¹ <http://wales.gov.uk/statistics-and-research/key-stage-2-3-assessment-performance-wales-comparison-england-regions/?lang=en>

¹² This term is explained in the glossary.

are widely acknowledged as disappointing in terms of comparison to prior performance and internationally. Reading performance in Wales in 2012 was lower than in Scotland, England and Northern Ireland and lower than in most European countries.

- 43 In PISA, fewer pupils in Wales performed well at the higher PISA levels (levels 5 and 6) of the tests, and there were more pupils at the lower levels (level 1a and below). In general, pupils who perform at the higher levels can handle unfamiliar texts competently and conduct in-depth analyses of text. Whereas pupils, who perform at the lower levels, can at best, recognise the main theme or author's purpose in familiar contexts but cannot analyse unfamiliar texts adequately.
- 44 As in other PISA surveys, girls scored significantly higher than boys in Wales. However, this outcome also occurred in every country which participated. The gender difference, while statistically significant, was not as large in Wales as in the majority of other countries.

Provision

Teaching and assessment

- 45 Overall, the quality of teaching and assessment of English is good or better in a majority of primary and secondary schools. This is broadly similar to our findings in 2008. Systems of tracking pupils' progress in English have improved over the past five years with many primary and secondary schools recording pupils' progress against characteristics of progression linked to the National Curriculum. There is still too much poor quality marking of pupils' work, particularly in key stage 3.

Teaching

- 46 Many English lessons in key stages 2 and 3 begin well as teachers share clear learning objectives with pupils. In the best practice seen in only a minority of lessons, there is explicit teaching of language skills. The best teachers make skilful use of approaches, such as modelling, to develop pupils' reading and writing skills. Well-planned activities enthuse and motivate pupils and meet their learning needs. The following case study shows how a bilingual primary school uses technology for teaching English.

Case study 1: Using the motivating power of technology

Ysgol Y Faenol, Gwynedd

In this school, staff recognise how technology can enthuse and motivate pupils as well as provide exciting opportunities for developing pupils' English skills. There is innovative use of devices such as laptops, interactive whiteboards, tablets and other electronic devices to develop and improve pupils' oracy, reading and writing skills. For example, teachers prepare pre-recorded text on tablets and download BBC clips to support pupils when making oral presentations. When younger pupils undertake puppetry work, they have access to applications that have been downloaded onto laptops to help them. Pupils use their higher-order reading skills of skimming and scanning when searching websites for information.

The effect of this strategy is evident in the enthusiasm and attitude of pupils and the high standards they achieve, particularly boys and more able pupils.

- 47 Where there are weaknesses in lessons in key stages 2 and 3, these include:
- not enough sharing of success criteria, which helps pupils understand what they need to do to achieve;
 - low expectations of pupils and the work they can tackle;
 - over-use of closed questioning that does little to advance pupils' learning;
 - over-long introductions to lessons and time spent listening to the teacher;
 - limited time for pupils to engage in extended writing; and
 - lack of use of technology integrated fully into pupils' English work, for example using tablet devices for writing.
- 48 In lessons in key stage 2, there is usually a good focus on linking oracy, reading and writing so that pupils understand that these language modes are interdependent. For example, teachers organise pair and small group work when pupils have opportunities to discuss, explore and rehearse ideas and information before undertaking reading and writing activities.
- 49 In lessons in key stage 3, teachers usually organise specific oracy activities to help pupils develop their talk purposefully, support their views with valid reasons and evaluate their own and others' contributions. However, the use of oracy prior to reading and writing is much less common in key stage 3 than it is in key stage 2. Talking about information and ideas can help pupils develop and extend their understanding and improve the quality of their work.
- 50 Since 2008, most schools use a teaching approach known as guided reading¹³ as the most common way of teaching reading in key stages 2 and 3. Individualised reading, which was previously the most popular approach, is now usually only used to provide support for less able pupils. Research and inspection evidence indicate that guided reading helps pupils make good progress in gaining reading skills, when used appropriately. In many primary schools in key stage 2, teaching and support staff use guided reading effectively to help pupils gain a wide range of reading skills. In the most effective practice, pupils develop their word attack, comprehension and higher-order reading skills very well through skilled teaching and questioning within similar ability groups. In a very few primary schools, guided reading does not occur frequently enough to enable pupils to make suitable progress or staff remain unconvinced of the benefits of this approach.
- 51 In key stage 3 in a minority of secondary schools, weaknesses in teaching guided reading limit the progress of pupils' reading skills. This is often because staff are not English specialists and lack training and confidence in using this approach. In a minority of secondary schools, there is not enough continuity in the teaching of guided reading as pupils progress from key stage 2 to key stage 3.

¹³ This term is explained in the glossary.

- 52 The teaching of writing has improved over the past five years in key stages 2 and 3 but there are still weaknesses similar to those we reported in 2008. The teaching of writing is underdeveloped in a minority of secondary schools. In this minority of schools pupils cannot transfer reading and writing skills to their work in other subjects.
- 53 The best writing is stimulated by discussion or a practical activity, such as drama, or a non-literary stimulus such as a thought-provoking programme or information leaflet. In these schools, pupils learn how to:
- recognise the features of different texts;
 - organise their ideas and set out a piece of writing;
 - construct sentences in different ways; and
 - choose the best vocabulary and use specific techniques, such as imagery and rhetoric, to convey meaning.
- 54 In a minority of primary and secondary schools, pupils' writing activities are often dull and predictable. The work focuses too much on one genre, particularly narrative, and there are too few opportunities for pupils to engage regularly in extended writing. Too often, in secondary schools, when pupils' writing activities come directly from studying literature there is an over-emphasis on character-based approaches or events in the text. As a result, pupils have too few opportunities to develop different techniques, styles and types of writing.
- 55 Inaccuracies in spelling, punctuation or grammar continue to mar the quality of pupils' writing in a majority of primary and secondary schools. Where schools have been successful in helping pupils improve the accuracy of their written work, staff teach the skills explicitly and use agreed approaches consistently across the school. In a minority of primary and secondary schools, there is not enough emphasis on pupils learning and using a wide range of spelling strategies. It is important for schools to agree how to teach spelling, punctuation and grammar and provide consistency in their approaches, such as teaching spelling rules and strategies. Information about teaching spelling is included in annex 3.
- 56 There are weaknesses in the teaching of writing in key stage 2. These weaknesses include not enough promotion of independent writing skills at the beginning of key stage 2 and insufficient opportunities for pupils to develop their extended writing skills. In a few primary schools, a lack of teaching phonic and writing skills in Year 2 is affecting pupils' progress in Year 3 and beyond. This is because of misunderstanding about the practice of the Foundation Phase.
- 57 The teaching of writing as a process has weaknesses in key stage 3 in a minority of secondary schools. There is not enough development of the important stages of planning, drafting, revising, editing and sharing work with others. In these schools, many pupils are not secure in their knowledge of ways to improve the content, expression and accuracy of their work. Often, these schools do not provide stimulus material for writing that is sufficiently complex and challenging so that pupils are able to experiment in writing for different purposes.

- 58 Many primary schools have achieved some success in narrowing the gap between boys' and girls' achievement in key stage 2. However, the gap is wider in key stage 3 and continues to increase in key stage 4 in secondary schools. While gender is a significant factor in boys' and girls' performance, it is not the only reason for boys' lower performance. Teachers play a particularly important role in determining how individual pupils develop as readers and writers, when they choose particular texts to study and when they determine writing tasks. In primary and secondary schools that have been successful in reducing the gap between boys' and girls' performance, staff have taken good account of boys' reading and writing preferences and attitudes. They encourage pupils to read a wide range of non-fiction material and provide real contexts and audiences for writing, not only those that stem from the study of a novel or poetry. In one secondary school, staff set up a boys' book club, pairing younger boys with other older boys in the school. In a primary school, a boys' writing squad has galvanised their interest and helped boys to see how writing is relevant to them.
- 59 Primary and secondary schools that have been successful in raising performance in English recognise that boys' underachievement is a complex issue with many interlinking factors, such as social and emotional aspects that influence staff and pupils' behaviour. They do not over-simplify boy/girl issues but they do recognise that many boys:
- often read less and find it difficult to comprehend literary texts;
 - may have less enthusiasm for fiction as a school or leisure activity as much as girls;
 - enjoy and respond well to a rich and varied mix of fiction and non-fiction materials, including visual multimedia experiences;
 - may prefer fiction that focuses on action, such as science fiction or fantasy genre and may dislike narrative genre that focuses on emotions and relationships;
 - like drama and enjoy social interaction, including working in small groups and having opportunities for talking about and sharing ideas and information;
 - value modelling and scaffolding approaches to learning;
 - usually prefer writing activities that are relevant and authentic with specific and clear objectives and success criteria;
 - thrive on the visual language of television, cartoons and video games and are usually motivated by technology; and
 - can be influenced positively by male role models.

Assessment

- 60 Assessment continues to be one of the weakest areas of work in schools despite some improvements over the past five years. Many schools have developed systems to track pupils' progress in English. However, not all of these schools track the progress of different groups of pupils, such as those entitled to FSM, boys and more able pupils, well enough and use the information to adapt their planning and delivery of English.
- 61 In key stages 2 and 3, most schools set specific tasks in English each term that help them gather evidence for teacher assessment. In the most effective practice in a minority of schools, staff use different tasks appropriate to pupils' ability and judge pupils' performance consistently against characteristics of progression. The outcomes are then used effectively to plan the next stage of learning for pupils.

- 62 Most primary and secondary schools use 'assessment for learning' strategies but only a minority of schools implement them consistently and effectively. This finding is very similar to the findings published in our report on the developing thinking skills and assessment for learning programme¹⁴. Peer and self-assessment are powerful tools for pupils' learning. However, in a minority of primary and secondary schools, these approaches are used superficially and without understanding and they do not contribute to improving pupils' work. For example, pupils make little or no use of success criteria, such as matrices that show features of reading and writing, often linked to different levels of the National Curriculum. These kinds of approaches help pupils to determine for themselves where they are on a continuum of development and what they have to learn next. The case study that follows illustrates how a primary school has used assessment for learning strategies very effectively

Case study 2: Excellent teaching and assessment practices help pupils to achieve high standards in English

Context of the school

Glan Usk Primary School in the city of Newport has around 650 pupils on roll aged three to 11 years. There are 22 single-age classes in the school. Approximately 22% of pupils are entitled to free school meals, which is above the national average. About 15% of pupils have English as an additional language.

Strategy

The school recognises that assessment is central to effective teaching and learning. In the classroom, staff use assessment for learning strategies as a powerful tool to help pupils understand where they are in their learning, where they need to go next and how best to get there. The development of other whole-school learning strategies, such as 'Building Learning Power' and 'Philosophy for Children', has also been an important influence on pupils' learning resilience and ability to understand what they must do to improve.

Across the school, there are robust systems of data analysis and standardisation and moderation of pupils' work. Staff focus sharply on improving the performance of pupils and make judgements about this performance that are accurate and consistent.

Action

The school has developed a structured and systematic assessment and tracking process. This helps staff to make regular, useful, manageable and accurate assessments of pupils and their progress. Guided by a clear assessment policy, teachers keep detailed assessment records on each pupil and use them systematically to track pupils' progress and inform the planning of the next steps for pupils' learning.

¹⁴ The 'Developing thinking skills and assessment for learning programme' (2011)

Across the school, staff know what a difference it makes to pupils' learning of English when pupils and their teachers have a good understanding of where pupils are in their learning, where they need to go next and how best to get there. There is intensive sharing of assessment criteria in key stage 2, linked to the National Curriculum level descriptors for older pupils, as well as well-expressed learning targets agreed between teachers and pupils.

During lessons, pupils use a range of self-assessment strategies to understand how well they are doing. Pupils' learning diaries help them to reflect on their learning and progress. There is also very good use of peer assessment: for example, the school has developed pupil learning reviews, where pupils teach others having just learned a skill themselves, which helps to consolidate and reinforce their own learning. These approaches operate very effectively and systematically throughout lessons.

Staff use part of their planning, preparation and assessment time to monitor pupils' work within and between year groups. A robust system of moderation, involving all staff across the school, ensures that judgements about pupils' performance are accurate and consistent within and between classes. Staff benefit from termly standardisation and moderation workshops with other schools in the cluster and regular in-house training by the English subject leader. They use clearly annotated portfolios of levelled work to judge pupils' work. All of these arrangements contribute greatly to the consistency and accuracy in their judgements about pupils' performance in English.

Evaluation

Effective assessment for learning strategies are central to classroom practice across the school and help pupils to know how to improve. Building on work in the Foundation Phase, these strategies develop pupils' capacity for self and peer assessment in key stage 2, and promote their understanding of learning goals and assessment criteria. Importantly, the school's approach has fostered most pupils' motivation and self-esteem to very high levels.

Most pupils' ability to critically analyse and assess their own and others' work is outstanding. Older pupils are familiar with the National Curriculum level descriptors for writing and regularly use these to provide feedback to their peers as well as to improve their own work.

Rigorous data analysis has had a direct impact on provision and the standards of pupils' performance. The improvement is measurable. A skilled senior member of staff leads the subject very well, promoting best practice across the school. Overall, the school is promoting high standards of attainment, strong consistency in teaching and a clear learning focus throughout each year group.

Outcomes

For the past five years, there has been a rising trend in pupils' performance in English. Over the past two years, performance has accelerated at the expected level 4 and the higher level 5 in English. Performance is significantly above the family, local authority and Welsh averages. Pupils with special educational needs and those

with English as an additional language also perform very well in relation to their ability and stage of language acquisition. There is parity in the performance of pupils entitled to FSM and non-FSM pupils.

63 Pupils' work in English is marked regularly in most schools. The quality of marking is good in a majority of schools in key stages 2 and 3. However, in a minority of primary and secondary schools there is still too much poor marking, where comments:

- refer only to the efforts of pupils;
- identify weaknesses without explanation, such as saying 'you can do better than this';
- do not offer enough written guidance on how to improve;
- focus only on spelling and punctuation without also guiding pupils on how to improve the content; and
- are not followed up by pupils;

and where there is no checking by staff to see if pupils have made the necessary corrections and improvements, and no planning to address pupils' common errors or opportunities to reinforce accuracy of expression.

64 School cluster-group standardisation and moderation meetings are intended to help ensure the accuracy and consistency of end-of-key stage 2 teacher assessments. Usually, staff from a secondary school and its partner primary schools and a representative from the local authority attend these meetings. Secondary schools also have separate arrangements in place to standardise and moderate their judgements in the core subjects at key stage 3.

65 In 2010, Estyn published a report on arrangements to ensure consistency in teacher assessment in key stages 2 and 3. The weaknesses reported then are still largely evident. For example, the regularity and frequency of cluster meetings vary unduly across Wales. In some areas, school clusters do not include a local authority or regional consortia representative in meetings. This representation is important to aid consistency and reliability in teacher assessments across clusters of schools. In a few schools in key stage 2, not all staff understand the difference between standardisation¹⁵ and moderation¹⁶ activities.

66 Most primary and secondary schools have produced portfolios of pupils' work in English to demonstrate achievement at different levels of the National Curriculum and help them standardise their judgements. School cluster meetings have usually contributed well to the production of these portfolios. In a small minority of primary and secondary schools, portfolios of pupils' written work are extensive, covering a wide range of genre. In a few schools, there are also portfolios of work about oracy and reading that help support consistency in teachers' judgements in these areas. However, a majority of schools' portfolios focus only on a limited range of examples of pupils' writing and are therefore less useful in supporting teachers' judgements.

¹⁵ This term is explained in the glossary.

¹⁶ This term is explained in the glossary.

- 67 Despite school cluster-group standardisation and moderation there continue to be different perceptions of what constitutes appropriate standards in English at different levels in end-of-key stage 2 and 3 assessments. Over recent years, we have reported that the proportion of pupils entering secondary schools with some skill gaps is typically 40% or more of pupils.

Curriculum planning

- 68 Primary and secondary schools give a high priority to English in their curriculum arrangements. Planning for learning experiences in English is good or better in a majority of schools. However, the shortcomings in plans that we reported in 2008 are still evident in a minority of primary and secondary schools. In particular, there is not enough attention to the skills of reading and writing non-literary material and a lack of challenge in the work for more able pupils.
- 69 Most primary schools allocate enough time for the teaching of English in key stage 2. Generally, English-medium primary schools teach English for at least five hours each week with a further two or three hours for reading activities, such as guided reading sessions. In key stage 2 in Welsh-medium primary schools, English and Welsh first language share teaching time on a fortnightly basis. In the best practice in these schools, pupils transfer their knowledge and skills competently from one language to another. Using communication skills in Welsh/English to support and enhance the development of skills in these languages is a premise of the National Curriculum¹⁷.
- 70 In most English and Welsh-medium secondary schools, English is timetabled for six hours a fortnight with additional time for reading sessions. While this is adequate, the time is not always evenly spread over the two weeks to ensure continuity of learning. All secondary schools also provide regular weekly additional time for reading sessions in key stage 3, where guided reading or peer and class reading take place.
- 71 Overall, many subject plans for teaching English are detailed, coherent documents that set out clear teaching objectives. Over the past five years, schools have amended and refined their plans in response to changes, such as the revision of the English Orders in the National Curriculum in 2008. As a result, many primary and secondary schools have comprehensive plans for English that are clearly linked to the requirements of the National Curriculum.
- 72 In the best practice, in a few schools in key stages 2 and 3, there is planning for progressively challenging work providing rich and varied contexts for reading and writing. In these schools, the planning for reading takes full account of:
- promoting reading of increasingly demanding texts;
 - the importance of pupils developing a wide repertoire of reading strategies;
 - opportunities to help pupils progress from simple personal responses to a critical appreciation of what has been read;
 - the way that pupils need to learn to read in different ways and for different purposes, including developing higher-order reading skills;

¹⁷ English in the National Curriculum for Wales, Welsh Assembly Government (2008)

- using reason to draw correct inferences or deductions from information gathered from texts; and
- opportunities for making comparisons, summarising and synthesising the main messages from texts as well as presenting logical arguments.

Case study 3: Developing planning for English that ensures continuity and focuses on skills

Context of the school

Flint High School is an English-medium 11 to 18 secondary school. Most pupils come from the Flint and Bagillt. Around 20% of pupils receive free school meals, which is slightly higher than the national average of 17.7%. There are 727 pupils on roll, including 92 in the sixth form.

The school receives most of its pupils from three main partner schools and from 13 overall. Over the past four years an average of 85% of pupils have entered with at least a level 4 (the expected level) in English. However, tests conducted by the school when pupils begin Year 7 indicate that, on average, 37% are below functional literacy levels. In addition, a further 31% of pupils are more than six months behind their chronological age.

Strategy

The culture of the school is one of continuous improvement. There is a clear sense of purpose in the new schemes for learning, which are focused on skills and build explicitly on learning in key stage 2. The regular assessments support future, well-planned learning opportunities for pupils.

Action

Teaching groups are set using data and target assessment grades within a banding system. This approach provides flexibility and helps staff to deliver well-focused, challenging lessons. There is a clear focus upon assessment for learning in lessons. Aspirational targets challenge pupils' and teachers' expectations of their achievement. Underachievement is identified through a careful analysis of data. Regular meetings of the school's Achievement Board help staff to identify factors that lead to pupils' underachievement, such as poor attendance or behaviour. Staff then put appropriate interventions in place to support pupils.

Around a third of pupils begin Year 7 with reading skills below functional literacy levels. The school's very good plans for learning help pupils to focus on developing a wide range of reading strategies and higher-order reading skills. Skilful modelling of writing styles and the creative use of mini webcams in classrooms, which support the 'live' display and analysis of pupils' work, advance pupils' writing skills very well.

Links with the main partner schools are good and a novel-based transition scheme for learning has had a positive impact. The head of department visited the partner schools to deliver structured taster sessions. Considerable profiling of work, with the help of the local authority, has created a standardised bank of work, including higher-order reading tasks.

Evaluation

The revised schemes for learning, the enhanced assessment of pupils' work through a thorough analysis of data and the flexibility in groupings of pupils provide a more consistent and appropriate level of challenge for pupils. As a consequence, they make good and often excellent progress from Year 7 to Year 9.

Outcomes

There has been a rising trend in pupils' performance in English at the expected level over the past four years (from 75% to 84%). Standards have been above the family and national averages in each year. In four out of the last five years, the progress made by pupils during key stage 3 has been significant, placing the school in the top quarter of schools according to free-school-meal entitlement for three out of the past five years.

- 73 In a minority of secondary schools, reading activities do not enable pupils to engage in a wide enough range of work to further their knowledge and understanding of English. There is not enough focus on considering alternative interpretations and responses to texts, undertaking detailed reading using devices such as text marking and note-making grids and gaining and using higher-order reading skills. Also, in these schools there is not enough use of challenging and thought-provoking material. As a result, pupils are less able to tackle tests such as PISA, where they need to be able to problem-solve and assimilate a range of information.
- 74 The National Curriculum Orders for writing in key stages 2 and 3 require schools to provide a balanced programme of narrative and non-fiction writing genres. There are six non-fiction genres, including recount, instruction, non-chronological reports, explanation, persuasion and discussion¹⁸. Most primary and secondary schools include this range of genre in their planning but in a minority of schools there is a lack of balance between the genres. Each writing genre has different grammatical features and style characteristics, which pupils need to explore in order to be successful writers. Early on in key stage 2, the straightforward exploration and use of single text types are a necessary first step in learning transactional or non-fiction writing¹⁹. However, this type of writing can be in many different forms, such as letters, reports, posters or leaflets, and the structure and layout of each will differ according to the purpose of the writing. More mature writers need to experiment with combinations of text types and styles to suit different purposes. Older and more able pupils in key stage 2 and pupils in key stage 3 achieve excellent standards when they can manipulate the rules confidently and use the characteristics of each form in their writing.
- 75 As in 2008, too many primary and secondary schools continue to give greater priority in their planning to the use of literary texts. In these schools, not enough attention is paid to the skills of reading and writing non-literary material. Often, not enough attention is paid to a range of genres beyond narrative in activities that require extended writing.

¹⁸ These terms are explained in the glossary.

¹⁹ These terms are explained in the glossary.

- 76 In a minority of primary schools, usually in Years 3 and 4, there is too much emphasis on drawing storyboards as an aid to planning writing, which results in pupils not having enough time in lessons to develop and improve their independent writing skills. In a very few primary schools, there is insufficient planning for developing handwriting. In a few secondary schools, written work is often limited to gap-filling exercises and dull, undemanding work that does little to advance pupils' learning. In these schools, pupils' handwriting is poorly formed and presentation is untidy.
- 77 It is common practice for secondary schools to use an organisational strategy known as setting for the teaching of English in key stage 3. Setting means that groups of pupils of similar ability are taught together. Setting by ability has become increasingly common in key stage 2 and is now a feature in a majority of primary schools. Where this practice is most effective, schools have:
- used a range of up-to-date performance information to determine the membership of sets;
 - maintained flexibility in the composition of the sets so that pupils move to a different set as they progress or need additional support;
 - not relied solely on setting to meet pupils' different learning needs but also planned different work for pupils within the same sets; and
 - used setting innovatively, such as forming single-gender sets to improve the performance of boys.
- 78 In many primary and secondary schools, the provision for more able and talented pupils is limited. Often these pupils are only required to produce more of the same work rather than different work that challenges and stretches them. This is particularly evident in writing, where there have been fewer improvements at the higher level 5 in key stage 2 and the higher levels 6 and 7 in key stage 3 over the past five years. Planning different stretching work for more able pupils means that these pupils have better opportunities to use and adapt their vocabulary, grammar and overall style to the degree of the challenge in the task, its intended purpose and the needs of the reader. This is in line with the higher level descriptions in the National Curriculum for writing, where the impact of the writing and its interest to the reader are significant.

Support and transition

- 79 Support for pupils with additional learning needs (ALN) continues to a strong feature of the work of most primary and secondary schools. Support for pupils with English as an additional language is also often a strong feature of the work of schools. There are usually many successful intervention programmes, which improve pupils' reading and writing skills in primary schools. In secondary schools, there is usually a good range of reading interventions but fewer support programmes for improving pupils' writing skills. Effective curriculum transitional links are lacking in a minority of primary and secondary schools. They are in poor in a few schools.

Support

- 80 There are usually good and effective intervention programmes in schools, which help pupils with ALN make progress according to their ability. In the most effective practice in primary and secondary schools, staff:
- know which pupils are not making enough progress in reading and writing;
 - intervene swiftly to provide the right support; and
 - carefully monitor the effects of the programme on pupils' progress.
- 81 In most primary schools, a range of reading and writing support programmes, often provided by well-trained support staff, are effective in helping pupils improve their skills in English. In many secondary schools, there are often very effective catch-up reading programmes, which have helped pupils in Years 7 and 8, in particular, to progress in their reading. However, in a few secondary schools, withdrawal from classes for reading support is not planned well enough to minimise the impact on pupils' access to the wider curriculum. In 2008, we reported that there were fewer support programmes in secondary schools to help pupils improve their wider writing skills, which is still the case.
- 82 Visit the best practice section of our website to find out how [Maesteg Secondary School](#) provides an extensive range of intervention strategies, which include individual mentoring and highly specialised additional learning support for pupils.
- 83 Support for pupils with English as an additional language is also often a strong feature of the work of schools, helping these pupils to make good progress. Usually, schools receive good support from specialists in their local authority. In a few cases, schools have been innovative in supporting these pupils: for example, by hosting a Saturday morning school for Polish pupils to help them improve their English skills and carefully pairing pupils with English as an additional language with their older peers to improve pupils' oracy and reading skills in English. Read about how Cathays High School in Cardiff has created stronger links with parents and the local community and helped pupils gain better communication skills in our report on '[Effective Practice in Tackling Poverty and Disadvantage](#)' on our website.

Transition

- 84 In most primary schools, pupils transfer successfully from Year 2 in the Foundation Phase to Year 3 in key stage 2. This report has already referred to issues in a few primary schools, where pupils have had to cover work they should have completed earlier in Year 2. There are also usually well-established pastoral transition arrangements between primary and secondary schools to help pupils to move from key stage 2 to key stage 3. However, in general, there is not enough shared curriculum planning between primary and secondary schools, and this hinders pupils' learning and progress in English at the start of key stage 3.
- 85 In the best practice in a few secondary schools, English departments receive detailed information from their partner primary schools about the work pupils have undertaken in key stage 2. Staff use this information to avoid unnecessary duplication and repetition for pupils and ensure progression in their work. In a few primary and

secondary schools, transition practice is very undeveloped. There is little or no sharing of curriculum information or joint planning of approaches to teaching and learning.

Leadership and quality improvement

- 86 The role of senior leaders and middle managers is crucial in securing good outcomes in English for pupils. Many primary and secondary schools have good or better leadership, which is broadly similar to our findings in 2008. A majority of primary schools and a minority of secondary schools also have effective quality improvement systems. These systems help schools to monitor and evaluate standards and provision rigorously and systematically.

Leadership

- 87 Excellent school leaders recognise the central role of English in ensuring pupils reach high standards in this and other subjects. They know that good and excellent teaching of English provides the basis for pupils to gain secure literacy skills, which the teaching in other subjects cannot provide as directly. As a result, English has a high priority in the school and there is a strong focus on developing teachers' professional skills and expertise. The leadership role of staff with responsibility for English in the school is also crucial to the core business of teaching and learning of the subject. In the best practice, in a few primary and secondary schools, these leaders demonstrate high levels of expertise and knowledge of English, flair and innovation in their work and a relentless drive to raise standards.
- 88 In schools where pupils achieve high standards in English, school and subject leaders make certain that there are:
- clear aims, plans and processes focused on meeting pupils' specific learning needs;
 - leadership roles, which are defined strategically, distributing clear and interdependent responsibilities within a structure designed to improve standards;
 - clear lines of accountability with rigorous and robust systems to challenge and tackle issues of underperformance;
 - a clear focus on standards and provision in key stage 3 as well as key stage 4;
 - high expectations of consistently good or better teaching and learning of English;
 - frequent good-quality training opportunities and a responsive learning culture from staff; and
 - challenging performance management targets linked to pupils' progress and achievements.

Case study 4: Excellent leadership secures high standards in English for pupils

Context of the school

Cwmtawe Community School is an English-medium 11-16 secondary school close to the centre of Pontardawe in Neath Port Talbot. Around 19% of pupils receive free school meals, which is slightly higher than the national average of 17.7%. There are almost 1,280 pupils on roll.

The school receives pupils from up to 14 different feeder primary schools. For the past five years, most pupils from these schools are reported to have achieved the expected level in English when they leave Year 6. However, tests conducted by the school at the start of Year 7 indicate that typically 35% of pupils are below functional literacy levels. Of this group, 60% are more than six months behind their chronological age.

Strategy

The school operates on the principle of distributed leadership and there is a culture of continuous improvement. Comprehensive and robust quality improvement systems secure improvements. English has a high priority in the school.

Action

The school's comprehensive scheme of work covers all aspects of English in detail and provides a good balance between literary and non-literary work. There is good coverage of the six non-fiction text types, which is well established and embedded in the planning. There are good opportunities for pupils to develop their skills in the craft of writing through planning, drafting and editing work.

Carefully planned lessons have precise learning objectives and staff use teaching and learning approaches such as modelling and scaffolding successfully. A strong emphasis on oracy, such as think, pair and share activities, and assessment for learning strategies help pupils to develop their language and thinking skills well.

There is a long established and highly effective pupil data and tracking system, known as XLCwmtawe, embedded throughout the school. The system helps staff to set challenging targets for pupils. Performance data informs planning, intervention and support for pupils. For example, the analysis of data has led to the targeting of underperforming groups, such as boys who are unlikely to achieve level 5 in English at the end of key stage 3 without additional input.

The good range of support systems for pupils includes:

- three additional literacy support sessions fortnightly;
- withdrawal classes providing skilled and effective support for pupils;
- basic skills lessons;
- holiday catch-up sessions;
- daily reading sessions; and
- workshops for parents to enable them to better support their children.

Evaluation

The good quality curriculum and teaching in the English department together with the careful use of a wide range of data and effective intervention strategies meet pupils' learning needs well. Pupils progress well from Year 7 to Year 9.

Outcomes

For the past five years, there has been a strong rising trend in pupils' performance in English at the expected level (from 65% to 83%). Standards at the higher levels 6, 7

and 8 are usually well above family and national averages. In 2013, standards were above the family and national averages. The good performance of pupils in key stage 3 is accelerated further in key stage 4, where outcomes for pupils are excellent.

- 89 In a very few secondary schools, senior leaders have skilfully used the work of high-performing English departments to provide the lead for improvement work across the school: for example by using staff to mentor and coach others as well as develop a culture of sharing best practices.
- 90 In a minority of primary and secondary schools, senior leaders and middle managers do not communicate high expectations for securing improvement or challenge staff enough to ensure pupils achieve high standards. In a few primary schools, leaders are too slow to act on proven approaches to improve teaching and learning. For example, they do not promote the use of guided reading enough. In a few secondary schools, there is not enough focus on pupils' performance in key stage 3.

Quality improvement

- 91 English has been a priority in the improvement plans of most primary and secondary schools for over 10 years. For the past five years, improvement plans have increasingly focused on improving pupils' writing. There are weaknesses in the quality of improvement plans in a minority of primary and secondary schools. Plans lack enough detail and quantifiable success criteria to judge whether actions are successful in terms of pupils' learning.
- 92 In excellent schools, leaders understand that improving teaching and learning should be the main focus of school improvement. They ensure that effective self-evaluation processes judge the school's strengths and areas for improvement accurately. Performance data is analysed in detail and the outcomes are acted on quickly to tackle underachievement and raise standards. In these schools, self-evaluation processes are robust and rigorous and draw on a wide range of evidence.
- 93 In a minority of primary and secondary schools, staff take account of pupils' views about teaching and learning English. For example, these schools canvas pupils' opinions about reading and writing approaches and if they have time to undertake extended writing. In this way, teachers are better able to meet pupils' learning needs.
- 94 Most senior and middle managers, such as headteachers, heads of English departments in secondary schools and English subject leaders in primary schools, review and scrutinise samples of pupils' written work during the school year. However, in a minority of these schools there are weaknesses in this work, including:
- lack of frequency in the scrutiny of pupils' books;
 - in a minority of secondary schools, a focus on samples of work from across the whole school without enough attention to English;
 - not using the outcomes of the scrutiny well enough to improve the quality of teaching and learning; and

- not enough checking to make certain that marking is undertaken in a consistent manner that is beneficial for pupils.
- 95 In a few schools, mainly secondary, the scrutiny of pupils' English work is superficial. Senior staff do not examine the work and teachers' comments in enough detail to identify issues, such as poor marking and a lack of focus on pupils improving content as well as spelling and punctuation. In these schools, there is not enough consideration of how pupils will improve the quality of their work in English and inadequate monitoring to ensure consistency in teachers' marking of pupils' work.
- 96 In 2008, we reported that a majority of primary and secondary school had good library and learning-resource centres. A minority of both primary and secondary schools have maintained these facilities and use them very well to support pupils' learning. Find out about how [Casllwchwr Primary School](#) recently developed its library into a learning pod by visiting the best practice section of our website.
- 97 Often, however, school library facilities are limited or lack up-to-date resources. In a very few primary schools, pupils no longer have access to the library because the accommodation is used for teaching groups of pupils. A few secondary schools no longer employ a trained librarian or have dedicated time on the timetable for pupils to use the library. Libraries and learning resource centres remain important for the contribution they can make to pupils' enthusiasm for reading and important research skills.

Annex 1: Higher-order reading skills

When reading for different purposes, higher-order reading skills usually include:

- reading closely to absorb information;
- skimming a text quickly to gain an overall impression;
- scanning a text to search for a piece of information;
- reading critically, such as assessing the force of an opinion or argument;
- reading analytically to consider the writer's use of language;
- reading with awareness of the writer's viewpoint as opposed to the behaviour or viewpoint of a character in a text;
- making inferences and deductions;
- recognising that the text does not always mean what it says, such as in the use of irony, bias and ambiguity;
- understanding the existence of multiple levels of meaning;
- reading appreciatively, such as recognising the writer's skills in using ideas, techniques and effects;
- locating appropriate sources and retrieving information;
- using device such as text-marking and note-taking;
- identifying key points, making comparisons and synthesising information and materials from different sources; and
- evaluating texts in terms of quality, effect and reliability.

Annex 2: The writing skills that pupils need to develop in key stages 2 and 3

In order for pupils to develop as competent writers in key stage 2, they need to write clearly, coherently and with increasing accuracy in a range of forms and for a range of purposes. Pupils also need to acquire a growing understanding of how to adapt their writing to suit purpose and audience. In key stage 3, pupils need to write in a range of forms and styles with increasing accuracy, adjusting their language to suit purpose and audience and know how to use an appropriate level of formality.

In both key stages, pupils should learn how to:

- engage their reader(s) through interesting and suitable content;
- adapt their writing in order to suit the audience and purpose of the work;
- use and vary a range of sentence structures;
- choose and use appropriate vocabulary;
- use grammatical and stylistic features for clarity and to create effects;
- organise their writing clearly, such as linking ideas coherently and using paragraphs effectively;
- use punctuation correctly to clarify meaning;
- spell accurately and use a range of spelling strategies; and
- present their work clearly, in handwriting or by using technology.

Annex 3: Spelling strategies

Spelling errors are usually highly visible in written work and can mar the impact and quality of pupils' work. In both key stages, pupils need to be able to spell accurately and edit and proofread their work to eliminate errors.

The English language and its spelling are complicated. For example, about 25% of words are phonetically irregular, making it difficult for pupils to spell them. There are strategies that pupils should learn in order to spell correctly in English. When pupils are confident about spelling and know how to check a word, they are more likely to choose a wider range of words that will add interest to and improve the quality of their writing.

In key stages 2 and 3, the accuracy of pupils' spelling is helped when they:

- know how to spell all of the high-frequency words²⁰ commonly used in their writing;
- know and can apply spelling rules and patterns;
- refer readily to dictionaries and thesauri;
- use but understand the limitations of the spellchecker on their computer in helping them check their work;
- use personal spelling journals;
- readily use words displayed in the classroom;
- know how to break long words into sections and use their knowledge of prefixes, suffixes, roots and words within words;
- learn and apply effective strategies and approaches, such as strategies to help remember how to spell and *look, say, cover, write and check*; and
- use editing and proofreading readily to identify and correct errors.

Many primary schools, and at the beginning of key stage 3 a few secondary schools, regularly use weekly spelling tests taken from commercially produced lists of words. While learning spellings in this way works for a minority of pupils, it is often less successful for others. Some pupils still find it difficult to spell a word when they want to use it later because they do not remember how to spell it. Schools that favour spelling tests usually provide lists of words matched to pupils' ability. Random lists of words, common to all pupils in the class, are particularly unhelpful as they are unlikely to match pupils' specific spelling needs.

An increasing number of primary schools no longer use commercial spelling tests because they believe that there is not enough benefit for pupils. These schools use spellings taken from errors in pupils' own writing because they are personal and specific to that learner. In the best practice, pupils keep their own spelling journals, where they list their problem words. Pupils use their journals readily and their peers and parents help them to learn how to spell these words.

²⁰ This term is explained in the glossary.

The Welsh Government's publication 'Guidance on the teaching of writing skills – INSET opportunities for teachers of all subjects across the curriculum in key stages 2 and 3' (2010)²¹ includes guidance on strategies for spelling and pupils' preferred learning styles strategies. The guidance also includes information about teaching English spelling in Welsh-medium schools.

²¹ <http://learning.wales.gov.uk/resources/guidanceteachingskills/?lang=en>

Evidence base

The findings and recommendations in this report draw on evidence from inspections of primary and secondary schools conducted during 2010 to 2013. The report also draws on visits to a representative sample of 13 primary schools and seven secondary schools. This sample takes account of geographical locations, socio-economic backgrounds, size of school and linguistic contexts. In these visits, inspectors:

- observed lessons in key stages 2 and 3;
- scrutinised curriculum documents, school portfolios and improvement plans;
- examined pupils' work;
- met with representative groups of pupils; and
- held discussions with teachers and senior managers.

Additional evidence is drawn from teacher assessment outcomes at the end of key stages 2 and 3.

List of schools visited

Blaenhonddan Primary School, Neath Port Talbot
Bishop of Llandaff Comprehensive School, Cardiff
Cwmtawe Community School, Neath Port Talbot
Fenton Primary School, Pembrokeshire
Ferndale Comprehensive School, Rhondda Cynon Taf
Flint High School, Flintshire
Glan Usk Primary School, Newport
Gowerton Primary School, Swansea
King Henry VIII Comprehensive School, Monmouthshire
Hirwaun Primary School, Rhondda Cynon Taf
Johnston Primary School, Pembrokeshire
Llanidloes Comprehensive School, Powys
Llansawel Primary School, Neath Port Talbot
Llewellyn Primary School, Conwy
Montgomery Church in Wales Primary School, Powys
Peter Lea Primary School, Cardiff
Tongwynlais Primary School, Cardiff
Treorchy Comprehensive School, Rhondda Cynon Taf
Ysgol Y Faenol, Gwynedd
Ysgol Glan Clwyd, Denbighshire
Ysgol Gymunedol Pentraeth, Gwynedd

Glossary

Assessment for learning	This is the process of finding out where pupils are on a learning continuum, where they need to go and how best to get there. Assessment for learning is also known as formative assessment.
Expected level	The expected level for pupils at the end of key stage 2 is level 4. The expected level for pupils at the end of key stage 3 is level 5.
Expository texts	The main purpose of an expository text is to inform or describe. Examples of these types of text include recipes and other instructions, news stories and factual reports.
Functionally literate	A learner with a reading age above nine and a half years of age
Guided reading	In guided reading, a small group of pupils of similar ability are guided through the text by the teacher. The teacher will draw pupils' attention to a range of features in the text and model ways of predicting and summarising etc.
High-frequency words	These are essential words that pupils use regularly and which often have irregular or difficult spellings.
Higher order reading skills	See Annex 1
Literary texts	These texts are to do with imaginative or creative writing and have the characteristics of narrative texts, identified below.
Moderation	Moderation occurs when pupils' work is assessed at the end of a key stage and a 'best fit' judgement on an individual pupil's level of attainment is made.
Narrative texts	A narrative text has a beginning, middle and end, characters, plot or conflict, and setting. Usually, narrative texts are written from the author's imagination.

Non-literary text types

It is generally agreed that there are six main non-literary text types. These are:

Recount – used to retell events, such as autobiographies and diaries;

Instruction – used to describe how something is done through a series of sequenced steps;

Non-chronological reports – used to describe characteristics; the ways things are or to give information, such as book or play reviews;

Explanation – used to explain a process or how something works or cause and effect, such as an event and its subsequent effects;

Persuasion – used to persuade the reader to agree or to argue the case for a point of view, including posters and advertisements; and

Discussion – used to present arguments and information from differing viewpoints, such as the pros and cons of a newspaper article or TV programme.

OECD

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

PISA

The programme for international student assessment. PISA is an international study that was launched by the OECD in 1997. It aims to evaluate education systems worldwide every three years by assessing 15-year-olds' competencies in the key subjects of reading, mathematics and science.

Standardisation

Standardisation involves a process of using samples of the work of the same learner or of different learners to enable teachers to reach agreement on levels of attainment by confirming a shared understanding of the characteristics of a level.

Transactional or non-fiction writing

Transactional writing is writing to inform or persuade, such as reports and letters.

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