

A national conversation on the future of English

english 21 | playback



Qualifications and
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Foreword

English 21 was a new way of involving a wide range of people in a discussion about a vital part of our children's education. It was an invitation from QCA to join in a national conversation about the future of the subject of English. It was joined by more than 5,000 people, who gave their ideas freely and seriously.

A wide variety of groups and individuals contributed: school children, parents, postgraduate students, employers, employees, teachers and writers and those in literary associations, the theatre and awarding bodies.

Here at QCA we are delighted that so many responded to the English 21 invitation.

There is nothing more important in education than teaching our children and young people to read, write and speak well. The English 21 national conversation confirmed that this will be true for the foreseeable future. The contexts in which English is used may change but the need to communicate, both face to face and across space and time, is fundamental and will become ever more important.

English 21 participants also reiterated the importance of imagination and creative thinking, and how vital it is for our young people to have close involvement with good literature and their literary heritages.

Playback – this summary of the English 21 discussions – will not be the end of the conversation. QCA hopes you will join us in taking the work forward.

There are some aspects of English 21 that need further debate. We look forward to continuing the discussions as we seek to ensure that learners have the best preparation for life in 2015 and beyond.



Ken Boston AO
Chief Executive, QCA

The English 21 project

Background

In February 2005, QCA launched a project to invite contributions to a discussion about how the subject English should develop in the next 10 years. Children entering school now will be completing statutory education in 2015. English 21 asked what will be important then about the teaching of language and literature.

The questions were divided into four strands:

- English for learners, focusing on the shape of the subject and how developments in society and in knowledge will change what young people need to be able to do
- choice and flexibility for ages 14–19, considering developments in qualifications
- 'e-English' and the impact of new technologies on the nature of texts and assessment possibilities
- assessment, inviting views on how assessment should develop and the range of techniques that should be used in English.

We asked people to get together, discuss some of these issues and send in a summary of their ideas. During the summer of 2005, the English 21 team at QCA were present at discussions, seminars, lectures, symposiums and conferences around the country, listening to a fascinating range of ideas. It has been a great pleasure to meet so many people with such different interests in the English curriculum. We hope that *Playback* gives an idea of the richness of the debates, even though we cannot quote everyone in detail.

The written responses were as varied as the discussions. Over 5,000 people responded, some focusing on a single aspect while others covered a wide range of issues. The details of who responded are in Appendix 1.

There has also been extensive media debate on topics such as the canon of literature, the top 10 films for children, the need to teach keyboarding skills and the significance of spoken standard English.

Why *Playback*?

Playback is not a systematic review of the curriculum, mode by mode, key stage by key stage. We have not conducted an enquiry, weighed evidence or made recommendations. There are some aspects of English that were hardly mentioned during the discussions – so they are not covered in detail.

Playback gathers together the ideas from discussions that have been held all over the country. We have used the words from the responses as far as possible. The various voices do not always agree with each other – we have tried to show where there is strong agreement or disagreement. We have tried to give the flavour of the responses, what was said and how emphatically. We have tried to do this without commenting on how far any of these ideas may be practicable or desirable. It puts on record the voices of a wide range of interested people, what they think is important now and will be important in the future.

The challenge for all of us is to appreciate what this range of people are saying and respond positively. For example:

- if employers want their employees to be able to write concise, clear and accurate English, what are the best ways for schools to respond?
- if teachers want pupils to read widely and enthusiastically, how can they enlist parents who think similarly to help achieve this goal?
- if the value of a literary heritage is recognised by all but needs to be further appreciated, how can teachers and awarding bodies support this?

There are many actions that can flow from *Playback* to take English on. We hope that English 21 will be the catalyst.

What themes emerged from the discussions?

Many people chose to comment on the questions posed by the four strands; others did not. The main topics from the responses are presented in the following pages. The headings should be seen as useful organisers of what was said rather than contexts within which comments were made. The comments (shown in grey in the boxes and speech bubbles) encapsulate the main ideas discussed.

The full range of respondents strongly emphasised the importance of speaking and listening now and in the future, in a world where English is the main global language and where patterns of communication are changing to favour instant contact and response.

Many feel that story, read and written, will remain centrally important for pupils of all ages. The literary heritage is accepted as important, but the idea that it is static is seen as unhelpful to a living debate about reading quality literature.

For older students, there is agreement that flexibility in constructing courses that enable them to focus on literature and language, but also incorporate aspects of drama, media and film, would suit their varied interests and needs.

The main messages about the influence of technology reinforce the idea that it must serve the principles and purposes of the subject, not dominate it. There is general agreement that the range of texts taught must be expanded to include those that have been written and/or can be read on screen.

There is also a strong sense that the curriculum needs to adapt to take account of the changing make-up of society, which includes groups with different linguistic and literary heritages. Some aspects, such as standard English, are seen as essential for all, while the opportunities for recognising and including diversity are also emphasised.

Taking English forward

The most important outcomes of English 21 were not just about what QCA does. In English 21 we worked with a wide range of partners and we want this to continue. We can all take English forward in our different spheres of work. Thinking about ways ahead for English does not stop now.

Translating ideas into practicalities is never easy, but QCA will use English 21 as one of the touchstones for our work. During the coming months the QCA English team will be involved in a range of programmes, including revision to A level and GCSE qualifications, working on functional English, reviewing the key stage 3 curriculum and developing assessment, particularly teacher assessment. The views expressed in English 21 will be significant in our thinking, giving us some directions for developments.

We invite partners to join us in moving English forward.

New emphases

There are some key notes that recur frequently and relate to many of the topics. They seem to reflect peoples' feelings rather than specific content. These include the following:

- a desire from teachers to give more time and space to the creative and arts aspects of English. They recognise the importance of engaging pupils' imagination and commitment, and that encouraging new ways of thinking and using language is fundamental to success in English. Teachers' sense that this has seeped away seems to be a response to a number of pressures, including the perceived demands of assessments, 'crowded time' in the classroom and a loss of confidence
- a sense that English in the classroom is rather remote from the world outside and needs to be connected to the world
 - classrooms need to become more 'permeable' so that there is contact with writers, actors, playwrights, journalists and others whose business is words. This should be a planned part of the curriculum so that it has a lasting impact on pupils' understanding of both the craft and the art of language

- pupils need to be helped to understand how language is used in the world of work and in the community. This can be achieved by helping young people make personal contact with members of the local community, employers and employees and understand what they need to be able to do. This includes the expectations for articulate speech, accurate writing and effective reading.

Time for renewal

Underlying many of the comments is a sense that now is the time for renewal in the English curriculum. Many of the current structures of curriculum and assessment have been in place for some time and some fresh inspiration in the classroom is needed to encourage adventurous and ambitious teaching and learning. The current demands are well understood and the importance of an education that equips young people with competence in language is recognised. Many comments imply that trying to ensure this success has squeezed the opportunities for creativity in the classroom. The place of the literary heritage is secure but the concept now needs to be refreshed in the light of changes in society so that pupils' full cultural backgrounds are included. The need for pupils to be evaluative in their analysis of their own and others' use of language is seen as vital, particularly in reading internet and print texts, but there is uncertainty about the best critical approaches and the place of linguistic and literary frameworks in critiquing ideas and meanings.

Renewal of the English curriculum can only be achieved through collaboration and joint action. English 21 has pointed to aspects that we can work on together to keep the English curriculum exciting and alive. We look forward to picking up the threads of the discussion in different forums, recognising and supporting each other to move English forward to 2015.

Speaking and listening

The importance of speaking and listening

The importance of speaking and listening is unanimously emphasised for pupils of all ages, both in terms of skills to be learned and as a subject of study in its own right.

'There should be more planned/required opportunities for the use of the spoken word in classrooms.'

Trainee teacher

'For the first time, grammars and dictionaries of English are reflecting how we speak the language as well as how we write it.'

English organisation

'If we look at how we communicate in the 'real' world of family, friendship and work, it's overwhelmingly through the medium of conversation. Despite this, it's quite possible for someone to go from nursery school to university without ever gaining a working knowledge of this fundamental life skill.'

Teacher

Talk matters

Talk is seen as an increasingly vital requirement for success in the world of work. By 2105, 50 per cent of communication in business will be taking place through the medium of talk. Others point to the significance of the socially interactive elements of the talk curriculum predicting that by 2015 every child should be an active investigator, using talk as the major mode for learning collaboratively, across the curriculum, in and outside school ... as thinking, speaking, imaginative and feeling citizens.

In part these views are about restoring a balance: there is a massive bias in our education system towards written communication at the expense of verbal communication. They are also based on a firm belief in the value of talk: effective verbal communication is and will continue to be a vital skill, important for the personal development, effective citizenship and educational attainment of all young people from all backgrounds.

Learning to use talk ...

Many emphasise the desirability of 'real contexts' for talk and learning more about the spoken language. Evidence from respondents of different ages – adults as well as pupils – suggests that they do not think that they learnt in school how to use, adapt or vary their talk for a range of purposes. Adults responding to a short questionnaire agree that they were unprepared for oral activities and situations such as arguing for a particular point of view in a public debate, chairing a public meeting or making a point from the floor or presenting a report or project proposal. They felt they learnt these skills on the job; by watching other people; through trial and error; I only learnt to speak in public as a postgraduate.

Students studying A level English language, looking back on their previous work in speaking and listening, tell us they were very rarely taught, overtly, about the role of intonation, expression and gesture in speech, and that they were not familiar with specific criteria for assessing these or their listening skills at classroom level. They comment that even at GCSE, speaking and listening are something of a poor relation in terms of actual teaching.

Such perceptions are echoed in the call for a coherent pedagogical framework for speaking and listening. 'Dialogic teaching' is specifically mentioned as the most effective teaching tool there is [for engaging pupils in] a constant flow of interactions [in] cognitively demanding conversations.

... and learning through talk

Before children start school, the vital role of talk in the parent's own language is stressed: that way, your child will learn to talk confidently, and will be ready to learn English when [they] start nursery or school. For the youngest pupils, speaking and listening is reaffirmed by many as the bedrock of literacy.

Particularly for pupils whose language is not English, an emphasis on speaking and listening is essential in extending the language range and use. Observation of the work of experienced primary teachers leads one respondent to say there are particularly clear indications that experience of learning through drama is positively associated with progress in literacy.

Secondary students say they welcome opportunities to discuss in groups, learning from each other and developing their own views. Group discussions are popular as between themselves students feel they can be more productive and generate engagement with the topic, using effective negotiation and reasoning skills and ending up with a product of higher quality. Many students contrast collaborative work with individual presentations that are often seen as embarrassing, humiliating and not valued by the class.

Creativity and the grammar of talk

Creativity is a feature of everyday spoken language ... students are often at their most creative in talk or when talking about the choices they have made to inform, instruct, entertain ... persuade. This respondent is drawing attention to ways speakers play with grammatical patterns, reforming them to shape new meanings jointly and co-creatively.

Such observations about the creative potential of spoken language are supported by several respondents who specifically note that we now have many more resources for finding out how spontaneous talk works: for the first time in history there are collections of naturally occurring everyday spoken English available for study and research. Some teachers are drawing on these resources in the classroom and tell us that understanding what to look for in the grammatical dimension of speech ... enables pupils to make full use of its potential.

Speaking and listening in a technological society

Speaking and listening skills are even more important in a digital world because children need to be able to articulate thoughts and ideas about what they are reading and writing, and question its reliability.

There is a generally positive view of the potential contribution of technology to speaking and listening, and its assessment: technology highlights the importance of talk ... verbal dexterity, reasoning and explanation, skill development. Assessment of talk or the quality of group discussion is now feasible with portable technology ... Mobile devices provide ways of capturing data for pupils of all abilities [so that their talk is] more easily assessed. This is crucial for pupils learning English.

A minority feel that some 21st century forms of communication reduce face-to-face contact and so could be harmful to the development of oral skills. On the other hand, technological advances may emphasise some aspects of language in use: voice-capture applications of various kinds will have an impact on speaking and listening. It will mean more deliberate oral composition.

Parents and employers comment on the growing importance of speaking and listening and the ways in which technology fosters and enhances communication, for example in presentational speaking and attentive listening. Many see the provision of real and varied audiences for speaking and listening as a major advantage of communications technology. There is a significant minority view that at the moment schools are not making effective use of computers or video to develop pupils' skills.

Drama as part of the speaking and listening curriculum

English and drama subject associations believe that in the curriculum of 2015 all young people [should] continue to have a statutory entitlement to [drama] approaches. They make the case that drama should be part of the 'functional' English entitlement: drama provides an excellent model of the skills required for employment – negotiation, problem solving, creativity, interpretation, evaluation.

Drama as a way of learning

In a future curriculum, teachers tell us that drama should be central to children's experience in school from the foundation stage onward: From an early age children learn by engaging with the real world through the world of imagination in the form of play. Others develop the point further: pretending allows [children] ... to take control and ownership of prior experiences and make meaning of them. They also note drama's potential to engage pupils through the different learning styles it offers: The experience of drama involves visual, auditory and kinaesthetic stimulus and experience. This enables access for a broad range of learners. They argue that drama has a key role to play in engaging pupils and deepening their responses, combining emotional engagement with a text or an issue with the ability to think and reflect on it.

Pupils' views of drama

Pupils' attitudes towards the role of drama in the English curriculum of 2015 are more equivocal. Some secondary students favour the use of drama: being active and bringing English 'alive' helps students remember and relate to their set texts more easily. However, other students feel that the implementation of drama-based activities is not a particularly effective method of engaging us in the subject matter. Overall, the balance is in favour of drama as one of a range of teaching methods, with pupils reporting that they favoured a diversity of approaches.

Writing

Writing at home and school

By 2015 computers are likely to be even more pervasive in home and school than now. Many feel that it will be even more important to ensure that teaching writing builds on the skills, knowledge and understanding of texts that children bring to school. Some from those working with community and parent groups suggest that easily transportable devices, such as palmtops, will mean that in the future more writing will be done outside the classroom, for example drafting, writing and editing will all be done on screen and probably emailed to the teacher.

'Pen and paper will not disappear but it will be essential to teach onscreen writing.'

English adviser

Spelling

Overwhelmingly, teachers, employers and parents feel that spelling should remain as an appropriate baseline skill. There is a common expectation that children should be able to spell accurately and that it should not slip out of the frame of essential literacy, despite spell-checkers. Some teacher responses emphasise the value of approaching word meaning and spelling through attention to structure and others focused on the idea of word play and the joy of playing with words as a way to celebrate our language. There are a few individual responses offering a range of alternative spelling systems.

Keyboarding

Many express the view that children should learn proper keyboarding skills at a early age, just as they learn handwriting skills early although there some difference of opinion about when it is best to introduce keyboarding. Some feel that it should be taught from the very early years while others feel that it is better left until key stage 2. Some suggest teaching keyboarding is essential to equity: introducing touch typing into primary schools is an excellent way of removing barriers to learning and including as many children as possible.

On the other hand there were some fears about the likely effects on handwriting. One parent writes: my concern with computers is that the actual written word may become a little obsolete and that handwriting may ... falter a little. Secondary teachers worry that if word-processing becomes widely used in examinations the ability of students to write by hand in a legible and accurate fashion will be eroded. Most recognise that some forms of communication will always need to be handwritten, with variations on the theme that you wouldn't type a birthday card. There were also aesthetic and intellectual gains associated with handwriting.

'When you do a good piece of writing, you feel good when you get a good grade.'

Pupil

Supporting writing

Many propose supporting writing through contact with those whose job is the business of writing. A general view is that visits by professional writers are always essential. Some responses are more specific, suggesting that pupils should meet a range of writers, including authors and poets, who write as part of their jobs and those who write for pleasure. In many cases this is seen as an entitlement: it is essential that in their primary and secondary years, pupils meet and work with poets, novelists, storytellers and actors and that there should also be opportunities to work with other creative artists such as scriptwriters, graphic artists, film makers and web designers.

Forms and formats

Writing as creating, constructing, communicating and producing in a variety of media will become increasingly important. There is a general opinion that more use of technology will bring greater choice of formats and tools for writing and that these are likely to proliferate. There is some ambivalence about whether technology has brought genuinely new forms of writing or greater variety in presentation formats: there will be a continuum of texts on paper and on screen, including those which are purely print - or word-based to those which fully integrate the modes of sound, word, image and gesture.

Composition and creativity

Many see digital technologies as helping the process of composition, although it is important not to lose dedicated crafting of writing related to purpose and commitment. Composing on screen is seen as different from composing on paper. Many echo the view that most of us are more or less fluent in moving bits of text around and adding the introduction last, along with a final spelling check and formatting. This in itself has lessened the burden of composition and removed the stigma of messy work. A key advantage of on-screen production of texts is that pupils can more easily see themselves as authors with the responsibility to proofread and craft their own writing.

These views are balanced by the sense that extended writing on paper must remain a key part of the writing curriculum. Teachers are confident that sustained, extended writing is important because it provides practice, it supports self-confidence and it teaches pupils that writing is costly in terms of time and effort – but also rewarding. Sixth-form students feel that children and young people need to have the opportunity to be quiet and write creatively.

Reading

The value of reading

Teachers place great emphasis on the enjoyment of reading, commenting that it is particularly important that reading as a leisure activity is not neglected. One group of teachers described the characteristics at the heart of reading like this: it is important to have a subject in the curriculum that can engage students by providing an emotional response, by developing an appreciation of wit and humour, by surprising and unsettling them. This is accompanied by the overwhelming view that reading whole novels, picture books and short stories is essential and that all students should leave school with a substantial knowledge of literary texts. Extracts and fragments from longer texts are seen as distinctly harmful to developing satisfaction in reading and directly in opposition to the development of life-long reading habits: please, please let pupils read whole books, not just extracts. Sustained narrative reading and reading for pleasure are high priorities; teachers feel that storytelling, and the opportunity to enjoy reading, writing, drama and speaking should have a central place. In addition, many see sustained reading as important not only for pleasure and satisfaction but because, as one librarian comments, sustained reading has been shown as key to raising literacy levels.

The majority support the view that reading uniquely enables us to enter the inner worlds of people who are both like and unlike ourselves, and to experience others' experiences ... Coming to understand how others think and feel, and how this can be expressed through words, is going to be even more essential in a shrinking world. Personal development is also seen as important: in an increasingly technological age, imaginative and creative texts are even more vital in terms of developing the rounded, reflective individual – new forms of text must also be taught to enable people to operate in a technological age.

Reading books and screens

The book will not die! The overwhelming consensus is that there are particular satisfactions – sensory, aesthetic, tactile – and specific purposes and places for reading which are not available from onscreen reading. At the same time, most recognise the importance of extending the repertoire to include onscreen reading; as one governor puts it: students need to develop the ability to assess the quality, provenance and usefulness of written and electronic information. One parent confirms that it is important to encourage children to value books as well as what they see on a screen.

Reading choices

Pupils see value in both books and screen narratives: I just pick up anything and read it and I watched 'David Copperfield' on television and I actually went and read the book. Similarly, student teachers comment that texts such as films and other media-based examples provide a useful basis for encouraging pupils to relate to literature. Secondary teachers generally agree about the importance of studying longer texts but make varied suggestions about the kinds of texts and whether studying film texts should be included in English. Primary teachers' interests lie in extending the repertoire to include a wider range of texts including on-screen ones: graphic novels, picture books and TV drama are all worthy subjects for discussion and enjoyment in the classroom. One parent's comment reflects a general view about the importance of teaching discrimination: make children aware of the choices between reading on a large screen, for example an interactive white board, reading on a small portable screen or picking up a book – and that they all count.

'If young people have not been encouraged by their teachers to develop the habit of reading demanding and extended texts with insight, critical awareness and close attention to language, they will be unlikely to acquire these skills in later life.'

Awarding body

'... it is particularly important that reading as a leisure activity is not neglected.'

English organisation

Reading skills

Teaching a wide range of reading strategies is seen as important for developing discriminating readers confidently able to choose the most appropriate reading practices for the text with which they are faced.

Opinion is divided about whether existing reading skills can support on-screen reading or whether the skills needed for reading and writing on paper are substantially different from 'technological' reading. The type of text is a significant factor since the skills needed for reading a novel effectively may not be appropriate for reading a website. A more widely held view is that, whether reading was on screen or from books, English teachers will need to teach a wider range of reading strategies including how to navigate non-linear types of text and help pupils to make choices about ways of reading different types of texts – on screen and off. These may be on a continuum from handwritten through printed to visual and multimodal and include both long, cohesive texts and shorter disconnected gobbets of information.

A number of responses stress the need for pupils to learn how to vary the speed of reading since much emphasis, when teaching the appropriate use of e-technologies, is properly given to techniques of scanning, selection and speed-reading. Others emphasise that it will be increasingly important for English teachers to have the time and incentive to teach slow reading.

Reading critically

Almost all responses indicate that the curriculum of 2015 will need to include a repertoire of analytic and critical skills. In addition to its intrinsic value, teachers see the critical study of literature as the basis for critical appraisal of any material – a fundamental skill. There is general agreement that a crucial role for teachers will be to develop confident critical readers, able to distinguish quality, authentic texts from their poorer counterparts. Many teachers, advisers and employers were specific that pupils will need greater skills to evaluate what they read: The ever-increasing range of information will require more sophisticated ways of selecting and evaluating information.

With the greater availability of unmediated information conveyed by electronic means, a majority view is that readers will need to develop the confidence to investigate the provenance of text, to challenge its authority. A large number of responses see web-reading as an essential element of the reading repertoire in 2015 but warn that the internet is information-rich, requiring a selective, critical approach if it is to serve the needs of learners. Overall, reading critically is seen as important to help readers form their own views about what they have read, heard, seen or experienced.

Literature

The value of literature

The value and purpose of the study of literature is widely endorsed: literature changes the landscape outside our heads and helps us to see things differently; it informs us by admitting us to new knowledge and new worlds ... all pupils ... can explore and deepen their own understanding, their cultural backgrounds ... allegiances ... their place on the map. **This means that** it is essential that the rewarding enjoyment of literature and literary study should continue as a central aim of English teaching and learning from primary school to higher education. It is a major concern that future generations of English teachers should be equipped with the skill and enthusiasm to teach literature effectively and to develop young people's skills as independent and reflective readers of texts of all kinds.

'Literature should lie at the heart of the subject English.'

Writer

The literary heritage

The majority of teachers emphasise the significance and value of classic literature: by depriving children of the classics, we're depriving them of the cultural and social references that come with these works. We're trying somehow to keep their world smaller than it should be ... It's the mediocre novels that they are being given that turns them off reading.

Many see this as an entitlement to varied literary experiences regardless of ability, but some anxieties are expressed by teachers working in an inner-city school with massive literacy needs, [where] the compulsion to study Shakespeare and classic writers seems wasteful when time would be better spent on basic literacy skills.

Trainee teachers consider that the literary heritage is part of everything we read and write, it should be considered a representation of its time. Students should know they are part of a new heritage, they should see themselves as creators and critics of it.

From an employer comes this view: English literature provides not only a sense of history and a set of values, but is also there to stimulate creativity. Others share the belief that the literary heritage plays a central part in students' moral and social development, their understanding of identity.

'We need to keep hold of our literary heritage because it gives us a sense of who we are and where we come from. This entails introducing students to great works of the past while not neglecting those of the present.'

English teachers

Choosing what to read

Debates among respondents focus on ideas of relevance and quality. There is no dissent to the idea that among the texts made available to young people should be those whose language and range of resonance provide the most for mind and imagination to get to grips with, but there are competing views about the criteria for choosing texts that provide such resonance and who makes the choice.

While recognising that having a canon of literature is an unpopular idea, Andrew Motion comments it is a deep crime never to have come across things like *Paradise Lost*, some key Shakespeares, William Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, *Great Expectations*. Some think it best to dispense with the concept of the literary heritage altogether as an outdated term which alienates and excludes, preferring to think simply about entitlement to a range of literature.

The previous Children's Laureate, Michael Morpurgo, wants every primary school day to end with a creative half hour where children enjoy stories and drama, and recommends soak them in stories. But he is cautious about prescription, the minute you write down the right books to read, you are going against the grain. Another writer thinks that children from the earliest age should read narratives additional to the genre deemed 'children's literature' on the grounds that they need to encounter different adult heroes and heroines to help shape their own identities.

Many secondary teachers want to exercise a greater role in making choices about what pupils should read: I believe that the vast majority of English teachers ... want greater autonomy to exercise their own judgment about how to engage students' interest in literature; no set texts – more choice and relevance; there are no substitutes for whole texts and teacher professional judgment in choosing them.

Pupils are also keen to have a say about what texts they should read: students are more likely to enjoy and effectively engage with a text if it is one of their own choosing and applicable to themselves ... they would welcome the opportunity to have a greater input into the range of texts put forward for study.

Texts and authors

Specific mentions of texts or authors are rare, apart from some well-established novelists and Shakespeare. An underlying assumption seems to be that fictional narrative is central: it is vital that there is a balance between non-fiction and fiction but it is also vital that the power of storytelling and narrative is retained at the core of the curriculum.

There are only isolated references to poets and poetry, whether classical or modern. It is noticeable that secondary students' views about poetry are somewhat negative, perhaps overly influenced by examination practices or what are perceived as didactic methods of teaching. There is a suggestion that too much emphasis has been laid on poetry as a linguistic training ground, a repository for poetic features, figures of speech and recognisable verse forms. This is contrasted with the particular value of poetry as a way of shaping and expressing ... meanings accessible to children of all abilities.

The position of Shakespeare in any reconfiguration of the literary heritage is rarely contested, despite unease about assessment and testing; there is little comment on any other dramatist. Some support the idea of introducing Shakespeare earlier: Shakespeare is started too late – caught in the trap between inspiration and cynicism ... needs to start in primary with emphasis on saying, doing, playing [in order to avoid the] 'heart and mind' split. Anxiety about methods of teaching Shakespeare as overly preoccupied with plot and character is contrasted with theatrical production that deals with ideas.

Suggestions for broadening the forms of texts that might be 'read' include references to those that are not only paper- or book-based [but] the rich resource of sound-archive material including poetry, personal witness, sound performances and read-aloud texts. Alongside views that media and screen-based texts [can] have their place in English 21 there is the caveat that these should never be at the expense of our rich book-based literary heritage – a point more fully elaborated in terms of the purpose and value of engaging with verbal language: the study of literature has one conspicuous advantage over the study of film and television media, in that it develops the skills of analysis, argument and discourse alongside language skills.

Cultural diversity

The strongest set of views around redefining the heritage centre on the wish that schools should tackle a wider and more representative range of serious literature from the many cultures whose writers are working in English or are available in high-quality translations.

'Any concept of literary heritage needs to take account of the ever-changing composition of society and the diversity of cultures.'

English subject organisation

'It is important that the modern writing pupils read reflects the culturally diverse world we live in. There is no shortage of good writing by ethnic minority authors.'

Teacher

'The starting point needs to be a significant expansion of what we understand by the literary heritage ... there should not only be an entitlement to experience, learn about and enjoy a wide range of texts, but to debate the very criteria on which these texts are, or are not, agreed to be worth reading.'

Writer

Working with literature

A theme in many suggestions for change is about engaging pupils more deeply with their reading, for example by allowing more time: profound, structured and personal responses to literature ... require time, within a broader, more various, more densely interconnected and more continuous culture of texts, conversation and production. Students stress the importance of live experience of Shakespeare in particular – dry and irrelevant if simply read through – wanting at least to have opportunities for seeing the plays performed as films or on television, if not in the theatre.

Teachers argue that the study of plays should link more clearly to an understanding of performance: Dramatic literature is central to our literary heritage and learners should be given the opportunity to assimilate these texts through activities that reflect what they were written for. Theatre practitioners emphasise further the need to establish the unique qualities of live drama performance, as distinct from watching a performance on video, at the heart of pupils' experience of drama.

Working actively with texts is seen as a crucial feature of engagement with literature and needing more prominence in a future curriculum: our literary culture needs to be more vigorously promoted and incorporated. In this way pupils' literary study, including fiction and non-fiction texts, is enriched by offering opportunity to develop the skills of language not alone through analytical and interpretative writing but through activities that develop the linguistic arts/ creative writing ... across traditional boundaries: between the digital and printed domains as also across the boundaries conventionally separating criticism and creativity or the study of literature and that of language. Respondents mention the opportunities for young people to work with writers in their communities as a way of encouraging a deeper understanding of how meaning is shaped and the ways literary texts are created.

A changing heritage for the 21st century

Overall, respondents want to see that the curriculum has built-in procedures for refreshing and updating reading requirements. Many acknowledge there is a fine balance to be achieved between allowing pupils to discover, and indeed debate, the literary 'canon' while not de-motivating some learners. They agree we mustn't ever ... think of the canon as something that can simply be handed down by some committee that we've never met, and we're just told to lump it.

English language

A standard language for global communication

There is unanimous support for pupils to develop confident use of written and spoken language for a range of purposes and situations with appropriate choices of register and dialect, including standard English. For many this entitlement is specifically linked to the rise in importance of English as a global language, in the context of which respondents tell us we feel that all young people in Great Britain should, through their education in the uses of formal English, have the opportunity to maximise their chances of entering both higher education and employment.

Respondents use different terms to describe the language needed for public communication, referring to it as standard English, formal English, or informal standard English. Distinctions are not always made between speech and writing, but often it seems that spoken language is uppermost in respondents' minds. There are strong views from teachers and employers that formal spoken English will remain, and that what is needed is for all learners to become confident and competent users of standard English, which will remain the dominant mode of communication in public life in this country.

In a number of responses, there is also explicit recognition that English is an internationally dynamic language ... changing and developing, most notably in its spoken forms and registers: Notions of 'standard English' will need aligning with shifts in English as a result of its use as a global dialect (or set of dialects) to ensure access by learners who have diverse linguistic experiences and resources. However, there is no lessening of the emphasis on the vital importance of precision and clarity in spoken communication and no dispute as to the remarkable homogeneity of written English published worldwide.

'English is the world language.'
Employer

'The 'global role' of English is probably the most striking aspect of English in the 21st century with implications for English in education in England as well as worldwide. But what English, and whose English?'
Teachers

English in a multilingual world

A number of respondents make reference to the projected increase of English as an additional language and consider the impact this will have on classrooms of the future for all pupils: we can no longer assume that the typical classroom contains mainly students who have English as their first language. A teacher trainer looks forward to a pedagogy that focuses on linguistic diversity by recognising and using that diversity, from both the monolingual and multilingual pupils. Such an approach would inform and make explicit pupils' individual knowledge bases ... Comparison across languages would also support pupils' understanding and recognition of English as a language to be studied.

On behalf of pupils learning English as an additional language, teachers particularly stress the value in recognising and valuing skills in home languages. Members of the Poetry Society suggest that translation and etymology should provide significant learning opportunities for the pupils of 2015.

For many teachers, the prospect of a multilingual society leads to a range of suggestions for building a greater general knowledge about languages into the curriculum for the future: It is important for all students to be taught the implications of speaking a global language and valuable for them to learn the cultural history and positioning of their language. Some elaborate this suggestion further: a deep understanding of how the language of English sits beside and is different from other languages across the world, ideally supported by a facility in at least one other tongue, will be essential for citizens and the workforce of the future.

For others, the priorities remain unchanged: voices from the business community recommend that English expression be given a much higher priority in schools than learning foreign languages.

A linguist makes specific suggestions about the English that monolingual pupils would benefit from learning in order to communicate more effectively in the 21st century. These include learning how to rephrase as necessary those aspects of vocabulary and usage perceived as complex ... idiomatic ... figurative and about ways of monitoring their own and others' cultural assumptions.

'For the first time in history non-native speakers of English out-number native speakers, and by 2015 it is predicted that half the world's population will be speaking or learning English.'

Academic

Why study language?

Respondents are enthusiastic about the place of language study and what it offers to pupils, making connections between pupils' effective use of English – spoken, written, formal, informal – and their knowledge of it. Teachers mention the benefits of drawing on the growing expertise of their A level English language sets in work with younger pupils, for example, with the older students acting as observers of discussions and presentations, and providing brief transcripts for on-the-spot analysis and feedback. Work on the language of texts is also seen as valuable: whatever pupils read ... being aware of grammatical features can often tip the balance in judgements about whether the book was worth the trouble.

Some make connections to the ways in which knowing more about how English works can encourage more creative expression: approaching English as a language will encourage pupils to engage with it as something they can exploit and explore; if pupils understand how language works, they are better able to adapt and design [it] for their own purposes. Some respondents want to see more links made between teaching about English and teaching modern foreign languages, to enrich pupils' awareness of patterns of language.

'Students can grow and learn in all kinds of ways from a close study of topics such as language change, language and gender, language and power and language and literature. And, of course, developing greater awareness of how language works and how effects can be produced feeds back in all kinds of ways into uses of language.'

Academic

'Grammar as the organising feature of language needs to be understood as part of the process of knowing more about the way language works and can be used ...the study of grammar can develop abstract thinking and a strong argument could be made for the creative link between the analysis of language and the development of critical thinking.'

Teachers

'To be creative with language, students need two things: knowledge about language, and the opportunity to play with language.'

Linguist

The scope of language study

The value of studying the development of language over time is a theme in several comments, not least in those from students, who see this a means to create [their] own links with the roots of language. There are also suggestions that, for teachers, understanding the history of the English language would be helpful, in order to better understand the fluid and changing nature of global English.

Vocabulary development continues to be one of the most accessible and instantly rewarding aspects of language study, as a group of teachers points out: pupils enjoy the challenge of learning new words and find it exciting to know something that their friends don't. English teachers should capitalise on this.

'Teaching grammar and the study of language, whether in spoken or written contexts, is exciting and motivating because it gives pupils opportunities to be intellectually ambitious, linguistically precise and appreciative of their own place in the history of the English language.'

Teacher

'Through an exploration of the linguistic variation that surrounds them on a daily basis, and through an analysis of their own creative use of spoken and written language, all children should acquire a greater structural understanding of structural and functional characteristics of English.'

Linguists

'There is significant value in learning how the English language developed, how it has progressed, how words change meaning ... the origin of individual words.'

Students

English for life

Functional English

Respondents' views on what functional English should include cover a wide spectrum. Some employers foreground the everyday communication skills needed for working life and leisure that they feel are lacking in today's school leavers. You can't get through 21st century life effectively unless you are functionally literate ... it's more fun to go to the match if you can read the programme. Others speak of the necessity for wide reading in literature and an understanding about language. Some teachers accept everyday functionality as an important entitlement, but others fear it leads to reduction, limitation and loss of creativity: describing a particular form of English as functional and separating it from other forms of English makes it appear a discreet and arid entity and 'basic' to English is a mind that connects, interprets, questions, associates, values and imagines.

These redefine functionality to include a range of literacies. We reject limited notions of adequacy or reductionism, dumbing down and form-filling in favour of critical, creative, cultural and emotional literacies.

'Confidence and competence in language continues to be a fundamental necessity.'

Teachers

'How can we possibly think that our children can be more progressive than we are if they are not taught the basics and taught them well?'

Parent

Skills for both life and work

What respondents generally reject is a difference between learners' personal development and English for employment. If the core functional communication skills are defined broadly as skills that will ensure students do not let themselves down by their performance, as speakers and writers, in different formal and informal circumstances, most functions are covered. This student-centred approach characterises many submissions, which accept that a core of communication skills is something that all learners need, whatever other additional English-related skills they acquire. The everyday skills suggested by the respondents have a great deal in common with each other. Other responses emphasised broad conceptual ideas rather than specifics.

Critical thinking and broader skills

Most respondents see reading, writing, speaking and listening as indivisible in the future, all underpinned by the skills of critical thinking, developed and enacted in a wide range of contexts. Self-reflection, working with others, collaboration between agencies and more links with industry are suggested as ways forward for functional skills at work. It is also the case that many employers believe in a broad, well-rounded education in English as a whole, such as literature and language study. Creative activities are seen as good preparation for imaginative responses to problem-solving in the workplace, as in other parts of life.

Speaking and listening

Speaking and listening is proposed to continue in 2015 as the vital medium of negotiation and collaboration in a more technological society, but also as part of the simple necessity for taking a phone message or answering a query. Some respondents express anxiety about a loss of appropriate register at times (too much slang and swearing at the wrong time said one employer); they would like to see an increased repertoire of language use taught to students and available for speakers in 2015, for example through a 'talk in the workplace' unit. Early drama approaches, including role play, provide the best foundation for such developments in the eyes of many teachers.

Standard English

Standard English appears in a majority of submissions as a definite requirement. It is just common sense that people should be given every encouragement and opportunity to learn the dialect that has become the standard one in their society and to employ it in many formal settings. The need for speakers of other languages to be fluent in English is also featured, though less extensively. One employer says business in the UK is conducted in English and no other language is acceptable or necessary.

Reading

All acknowledge the possibility of more complex employment demands in the future and advances in technology, with an emphatic plea for the primacy of advanced reading skills. Reading is the key to life ... even in the most basic jobs, process instructions become more precise and complex.

The definition of text will have developed to encompass a much wider range than is generally accepted today. Reading on and off screen, appreciation and incorporation of visual material and a requirement for non-linear reading skills are all cited as future necessities.

A key skill will be the ability to analyse, synthesise and evaluate texts. Selection and prioritising, abstraction of salient points and the evaluation of bias feature in many responses. The learner of the future must be taught to skim and scan written texts quickly when necessary, but also to read closely for meaning and implication. It will be important to read attentively and critically, even with a degree of scepticism knowing what to trust and what to disbelieve becomes even more important as we cannot instantly understand the pedigree or authenticity of texts arriving through electronic routes.

Writing

Students as well as teachers and employers assert the importance of generally accurate grammar, punctuation and spelling, whatever further advances in technology take place to smooth out the inadequacies of the individual writer's style. The ability to use concise and precise language, to summarise and take notes are all valued. Broad, flexible vocabularies continue to give an advantage. Life-related skills feature clearly: all children should be given the opportunity to develop life-related skills such as filling in forms, basic letters and booking holidays.

Writing skills remain vitally important, though several voice doubts over the essay as a necessary form in the future. But other more complex skills are acknowledged, for example employers see report writing as increasingly important in the workplace, combined with skilled reading to select the most appropriate material. The dangers of plagiarism are widely recognised in a culture where information can be cut and pasted ever more readily.

Starting out in English

Talk and creativity

Early years and primary teachers tell us their aspirations for the future: putting speaking and listening as a central focus in learning and teaching for children [from infancy to age seven]. They see the importance of provision that promotes high-quality interaction and ensuring imagination and creative thinking, social and emotional well-being.

Teachers repeatedly emphasise the value of activities such as telling and listening to stories and rhymes, engaging in discussion, chat, roleplay, drama and singing. They are keen to engage parents in the language development of their children from the beginning, stressing the importance of all kinds of talk in the acquisition of language and social skills. Practitioners value close links with parents and suggest communicating simple powerful points about the central place of creativity in nurturing children's development, for example unravelling for parents the significance of children's comments, questions and ways of representing things.

Sustained talk

The significance of talk in the early years is underlined by a contribution from an expert in child language development whose research shows the strong links between eventual attainment in reading and the numbers of words a child has heard by the age of three: if parents only exploit all opportunities for conversation, their children's vocabularies will expand. Primary teachers acknowledge the importance of widening children's expressive resources when they say perhaps the most important role for the teacher of spoken language is to expose youngsters to a wide vocabulary, focusing on the meaning and usage and providing opportunities to try this out in realistic situations.

Finding more time and space to really listen to children, sometimes individually, sometimes in small groups is a priority for a group of nursery teachers who tell us there is a need to slow things down ... less emphasis on being busy. They want opportunities for both adults and children to think, discuss and theorise. Participation in preschool education can have similar advantages through providing sustained interaction of the type most needed to embed language skills and understanding in young children.

Parents support the emphasis on developing oral language in the early years, saying children need to be able to communicate well, listen carefully and speak confidently.

Learning to read

There is strong agreement that all young children should have a rich experience of stories as the basis for future work in literacy: it should be axiomatic that reading encompasses literature drawn from as wide a range of cultures as possible. A number of respondents support the idea of having a nationally recommended list of high-quality books, available to all nursery schools and settings. Many parents favour this idea, saying that they are not sure what to choose or that they lack confidence to visit libraries and bookshops. Some suggest that such a list might be displayed in doctors' and dentists' waiting rooms.

Primary teachers point out that children will continue to use a range of reading strategies and skills according to their stages of reading development: these will include the use of phonic strategies, of particular importance during the early stages of reading, syntactic and contextual cues and comprehension strategies for exploring and developing understanding.

Parents more often than teachers say that they would like the curriculum to reflect the increasing range of texts and technologies in the 21st century, without diminishing children's competence in reading and writing print-based texts.

Learning to write

Various methods of developing children's own writing are linked to the provision of a range of media, including information and communication technologies. Teachers recommend that a higher profile be given to the recognition of children's own voices as the basis for writing. Parents remind us that different types of communication, such as mobile phone texts, emails, formal letters and forms need to be reflected in the curriculum.

Among teachers, there is a significant emphasis on drawing not just as part of early mark-making, but as an essential means of communication – drawing must be valued more by early years practitioners than it is presently.

Learning to spell

Teaching children to write legibly and spell correctly remains a priority for primary teachers. For younger children, understanding about spelling is mostly phonetic, and sound–symbol relationships are important in knowing how to spell. For children aged seven onwards, findings from research show the approach through word meaning is particularly advantageous for poor spellers, whereas already able spellers benefit directly from explicit teaching about the structure of words. Children learning English as an additional language are very responsive to teaching about word structure and meaning as it enables them to draw on their wider linguistic knowledge.

Activities in and out of school

Many teachers and parents speak of the availability of a stimulating outdoor environment, available in all weathers, as a crucial entitlement, and one that encourages talk, imagination and creativity. A number mention the potential for making greater use of the local context both for visits outside school and for inviting creative artists into school: writers, theatre companies, performers, musicians are seen as contributing greatly to young children’s communicative development.

'In the early years, children learning English as an additional language need to be allowed to develop their mother tongue, otherwise their thinking will be affected.'

Early years and primary teachers

'Bilingual parents should continue talking, and where possible, read to their children in the home language. The skills are transferable.'

Teachers

Links between learning English and other languages

Respondents draw attention to the importance of valuing the language background and heritage of every child. They point out that recognising children's abilities in their first language allows for English language, grammar and vocabulary to develop from understanding of these concepts in their first language.

Teachers and parents alike comment on young children's interest and facility with language as something to build on, linking this to the desirability of learning more about other cultures and countries.

'All children are taught Makaton sign language. It is part of the inclusive climate in the nursery and supports all children's language development.'

Nursery teacher

'Foreign languages will be more important in the future.'

Parent

Choice and flexibility 14–19

For and against the modular curriculum

There is widespread support among English 21 respondents for an English curriculum with a core of essential learning with optional units in the 14–19 phase. 14–19 should include choice and flexibility ... a secure yet experimental environment ... tailored, flexible and modular curricula to suit all needs. Many refer specifically to the Tomlinson proposals and offer enthusiastic support for the approach expressed there: We welcomed the radical thinking expressed in the Tomlinson report ... a flexible innovative 'pathways' approach to suit the varied interests and needs of students. Such flexibility is thought to suit a wide range of abilities as well as interests: a variety of modules provides access points for low-ability and English as additional language learners. The notion of multiple pathways post 14 clearly appeals and some groups sent in detailed plans for what subject areas should be included in a 'core and elective' list. The core, for example, would include basic English skills, some literature, critical reading, oracy and a range of writing; the optional units would include drama, media, business English, creative writing, film and TV, and history of language, among others. Paradoxically, the concept of a unitised curriculum is one that causes anxiety for some teachers: the danger of unitisation preventing pupils from extending and broadening their education ... students may be guided down too narrow a path at 14.

The special place of English literature

A counterpoint to the support for a unitised system, and often from the same advocates of it, are a great many expressions of concern for the preservation of English literature and its centrality in the English curriculum.

'In addition to its intrinsic value, the critical study of literature provides the basis for critical appraisal of any material, a fundamental skill.'

Teacher

'Literature should not be optional ... Literature should not be marginalized.'

Awarding body

'Drama, media and film must not become alternatives to literature.'

English organisation

Concerns for English-related subjects

Although not so numerous as the pleas for literature to be preserved, similar concerns for the integrity of drama, media and film as separate subjects is also voiced. We need more media and sound texts in GCSE and we need a renewed focus on understanding of media ... it is not a soft option.

There is a strong sense that English language too needs to be taught earlier in the curriculum than at present (such as pre-AS/A level). We need more English language 14–16 ... It's important to distinguish language from literature as separate skill/study areas ... These subjects are different but equal.

A unit of creative writing

The possibility of a unit or whole qualification in creative writing in the 14–19 phase is widely welcomed, though there are some concerns expressed about assessment. It should not be a recipe of skills/techniques taught and assessed rather than leaving true scope for students to develop a personal voice and experiment with a variety of language/multimodal communication forms. Those already involved in assessment, for example higher education creative writing departments and A level English teachers, feel confident that writing, including the personal and experimental, can be effectively assessed. There are a small number of dissenters, often writers themselves, who feel that creativity is naturally subversive and should remain out of the formal curriculum and beyond the reach of targets and assessment objectives.

Modular assessment

Many teachers feel at key stage 4, modular exams would be desirable as these allow students to see progression, are paced/spaced over time thereby reducing stress/pressure for both students and teachers. This view also finds favour with a group of secondary pupils: Modular tests ... break up the curriculum and make it clearer to students what they are being assessed on. Others agree that a variety of modules provide access points for a wide variety of learners including students learning English as an additional language. This view is not unanimous: The modular assessment model encourages a retake and redrafting culture, which inhibits the breadth of the curriculum and the validity of the tests. At AS level in particular, there are concerns that the modular AS level has destroyed ... a broadly based foundation course in English literature.

Practical difficulties

Advocates of a unitised 'pick and mix' curriculum are honest about some of the administrative difficulties they can foresee in implementation: financial constraints ... timetabling ... not enough hours in the day ... They offer a number of practical solutions: blocked units to ensure range ... the right combination of courses ... supported collaboration through federations of schools to maximise the offer.

E-assessment

Potential gains of e-assessment

There were comparatively few responses about e-assessment but these agree that some assessment of English in 2015 will take the form of e-assessment. Those responding were mainly secondary teachers and awarding bodies. The general sense is that there are potential gains in e-assessment but developments should be trialled and monitored. Responses emphasise the importance of ensuring technological developments do not drive what is assessed.

E-assessment offers opportunities for supporting personalised learning through online tests. E-portfolios, including multi modal presentations would provide a broader base for assessment. Computer-based assessments can be closer to the demands of the workplace. There could also be benefits for the training, monitoring and supervising of markers.

Opinions differ about computer programs for marking writing. Some feel that only a person can adequately assess writing; others see computer marking as an exciting possibility. Some express concern about measurability and reliability in e-assessments and a need for safeguards to prevent plagiarism.

'Although many aspects of English are or will be amenable to e-assessment, assessment systems will need to have both electronic and non-electronic elements.'

**Education
organisation**

Equity and validity

A group of experts note the unequal information technology experiences individuals have and the likely relevance of this for on-screen assessment. It is frequently the case at present that young (primary age) children cannot use a keyboard but are very adept at using the mouse. In some schools, however, keyboard skills are explicitly taught so that the entry of sentences or texts poses few problems. This leads to a view that all children should be taught keyboarding skills including rapid text-entry and that this skill should be assessed. In addition, students have differential access to equipment and varying experience in its use. These factors may contribute to scores attained in e-assessments. Hence it is vital that e-assessment should only utilise procedures familiar to all candidates, and that interface requirements should be explicitly taught with the curriculum.

Electronic marking

Computer-based assessment can provide marking of questions instantly or quickly, saving teacher time and marker costs: At the simplest levels – multiple choice and its variants, single-word answers – this poses few problems. For short answers, say up to a sentence, marking by computer is currently reasonably well advanced and will be available routinely by 2015. This instant marking gives possibilities for more immediate feedback to pupils.

There are also developments in software that can score longer texts such as essays. There is evidence that this scoring can be done as reliably as by human markers. Some suggest the marking by computer of multiple-choice answers is acceptable for parts of some factual topics, but pupils must be able to write essay-type answers in coherent sentences in grammatical, clear English. We doubt that computer marking of these would be adequate, and believe that teachers should mark them, giving constructive feedback on facts, style, clarity and use of English.

There are potential disadvantages to these programs, particularly public acceptability of computer scoring of a complex human skill in a high-stakes environment. The group of experts recommended that computerised marking of extended prose would be best balanced by double marking (both human and computer).

The possibilities of e-assessment

Onscreen assessments echo paper-based practice where text and information can be presented on screen, questions asked on screen and answered interaction with the computer ... it can move on to the entry of words, sentences or longer texts.

There are possibilities for tailoring testing to the particular candidate: for security of the test material, to provide individual diagnostic information, to tailor the level of difficulty to the ability of the test taker, to provide stimulus material of interest to every candidate or to provide a more valid testing experience.

Others comment traditional paper-delivered assessments are limited in their content and administration and cannot be personalised to the interest and abilities of individuals in the way that computer delivery can.

Another possibility is to expand the nature of the stimulus material [by] providing a fully searchable text of a novel, the complete works of an author, an encyclopaedia of information, limited access to a suite of websites or full access to the internet.

Assessment

Views on assessment

The great majority of views on assessment comes from secondary teachers and pupils. They feel they are placed under considerable pressure due to an overemphasis on the results of tests and examinations, which often leads them to negative views of the value of external assessment. There is also a consensus that future assessment needs to be more flexible and responsive to the needs of the learner; there is less agreement as to how this is best achieved.

High-stakes testing

There is a strong consensus among teachers that the current emphasis on high-stakes summative assessment should change by 2015 as it is having a negative effect on teaching and learning as well as narrowing the curriculum. Many teachers tell us they feel constrained by the demands of tests and examinations and their use for accountability purposes. This has led to a widely-held belief that the tests drive, rather than support, the English curriculum.

Many teachers report the focus on meeting the requirements of external examinations and tests reduces their willingness to take risks and introduce more creative, challenging texts and teaching approaches. Some respondents accept that this is not the best way to approach tests or examinations and recognise that many teachers lack the confidence to realise that broad-based teaching and divergent thinking are the key to success in the tests.

Classroom assessment – a repertoire

Many teachers expressed a strong commitment to the principles of assessment for learning and favour a model of classroom-based assessment that draws on a range of methods embedded in ongoing teaching and learning. This would provide summative judgements on pupils' attainment as well as offering feedback to help them progress. Assessment methods suggested included:

- portfolios of the work of the course
- individual and collaborative presentations
- profiles of achievement
- pupil self-assessment
- peer assessment
- extended research projects
- short tasks
- extended prose.

Many teachers believe that the flexibility afforded by using a variety of assessment methods would allow them to assess a broader range of skills, knowledge and attributes using the most appropriate means to do so: if we are to capture the spontaneous and reward it, then we must learn to trust the judgement of qualified teachers. This approach means that assessment could [inform] good practice as well as acting as a diagnostic tool, allow the process as well as the end product to be assessed, and ensure that students themselves are involved in the process of assessment and subsequent target setting.

Teachers' views

The overwhelming view from teachers and professional associations is that in any future system, the responsibility for assessing students should reside with those people that know them best, their classroom teachers. They believe that placing ongoing teacher assessment at the centre of the assessment system would allow assessment [to] arise out of what is taught rather than dictate the focus at the outset.

The case for a greater role for the teacher in assessing pupils is made most forcefully at key stage 3 where many teachers propose replacing tests with ongoing teacher assessment [which] can be genuinely formative, whilst also providing reliable and rigorous summative judgements. There were fewer concerns voiced about assessment at key stage 2, though several respondents favoured an extension of the key stage 1 assessment model which places a greater emphasis on teachers' judgements based on pupils' ongoing work.

Teachers recognise that in order for summative teacher assessment to be credible, there must be a rigorous system of moderation to ensure that judgements are reliable. Suggestions to manage this process include the use of regional [moderation] consortia and ... the accreditation of appropriate individuals and institutions. Some teachers suggested the moderation process could be organised through LEA advisers and would offer powerful opportunities for their continuing professional development on assessment. Few responses commented on the implications for the manageability of this system.

Teacher assessment

Pupils' views

Secondary pupils are ambivalent at the suggestion that in the future their teachers would have the main responsibility for their assessment: [Students] were almost equally split between those who favoured independent examiners over known teachers [to assess their work]. Students had concerns that teachers tended to build up a profile of a student based on their overall character, which, at times, might adversely affect the teacher's perception of the student's coursework. One pupil's response recognises the potential of teacher assessment to better deliver guidance on how to improve their performance: Students will get more feedback on their work, as they will be better able to communicate with the person assessing them, so their skills develop much better. Another expresses a more cynical view of the value of coursework in preparing students for the world of work: this method of assessment [is] as much about gaining favour with the teacher as doing good work which, I'm told, is how a real workplace functions.

Formal coursework assessment

A contradictory picture emerges of teachers' views on the future role of coursework in the assessment system. Many believe there should be a greater emphasis on coursework as the fairest, most valid way of assessing pupils. A significant number simultaneously express anxiety that, partly due to the easy availability of material on the internet, plagiarism is increasing and is rendering coursework at best an unreliable measure of students' ability. Many teachers are also concerned about how much help pupils receive from parents or home tutors and how much support they should give in the drafting process. This ambivalence is summed up in one teacher's view: The grey area of 'appropriate assistance' is problematic. Naturally teachers want to use coursework as a means of developing their students' abilities, but they worry about how involved they ought to be. On the other hand, coursework brings out the best in many students and raises their commitment to study and the quality of their writing in valuable ways.

There is general agreement among teachers that the amount of time spent on coursework at GCSE and A level is out of proportion with the weighting given to it in the specifications: The percentage [of marks awarded for coursework] bears no reflection of the time and effort involved. There is less consensus about how this should be addressed. Some feel strongly the amount of coursework should be reduced: [Students] find it a huge burden, particularly conscientious, dutiful, aspirational students ... I think we should be looking to lessen the weight of this millstone. Others propose increasing the proportion of marks awarded for coursework.

The future of tests and examinations

While many responses focus on the need for a greater emphasis on ongoing teacher assessment, most pupils and teachers recognise external tests and exams still have a significant, if more restricted, role to play in 2015. The majority of those surveyed by the National Literacy Trust agreed that formal assessment is necessary to measure an individual's attainment in a nationally comparable way and a focus group of year 9 pupils found that the majority [believed] that external marking was the fairest and most reliable system. Another survey of parents reported that on balance parents think that [tests] were the most effective at providing parents with information about their child's progress. The consensus is that by 2015 external tests and exams should be used sparingly and thoughtfully, in other words only when it is the most reliable method of assessment, or as a 'check', a reliable but partial 'snapshot' of achievement.

Teachers' views

The majority view among teachers that speaking and listening should play a more equal role in the curriculum of 2015 is reflected in its perceived under-assessment, particularly at key stage 3: The current model of assessment ... misses vital elements including speaking and listening. Several responses comment on the increasing importance of assessing presentational skills that are valued in the workplace and will help pupils to enter the adult world with more social and academic confidence.

There is also support for taking account of a wider range of contexts when assessing speaking and listening, including more informal and spontaneous responses. Several teachers mention the potential for increasingly accessible technology, such as digital video recorders, to assist both formative and summative assessment, allowing what is often ephemeral evidence to be recorded more easily.

Despite strong support for increasing the profile of speaking and listening assessment, teachers have mixed views of the reliability of the current system at GCSE. Some are convinced that the current system works well, is clear and effectively moderated at all stages, others question its validity and feel that it is open to abuse: teachers and students alike doubt how meaningful or accurately assessed speaking and listening coursework is.

Assessing speaking and listening

Pupils' views

Many students say they would like to see a greater role for oral assessment in English. At the same time, they also report a deep dislike of having to make individual presentations resulting from a perceived lack of say in the choice of topic as well as a lack of confidence in performing in front of their peers. There is general agreement that presenting to an unknown audience is preferable.

Students are interested in a greater emphasis on vocational contexts for assessment and feel that this would make oral tasks, such as mock interviews and presentations, more relevant and meaningful. Many also feel that students with strengths in verbal communication should be given the option of being assessed for the quality of their understanding orally. Examples included making using a presentation programme as an alternative to writing an essay.

Some final words

'To get on with people and communicate with them'

'To be able to write without a grown-up sitting next to you'

'I think that we'll have to write much more and people will want much more from us'

Pupils of different ages gave their ideas on what they need to learn and do, both now and in the future

'To know where to find out information'

'To be safe on the internet

To know what's true on the internet and what isn't'

'To be able to use a computer'

Appendix 1: Organisations, groups and individuals involved in English 21

Organisations, groups and individuals who responded in writing

Types of organisation/group/individual submitting responses	Number involved	Number of responses
School pupils and higher education students	422	14
Teachers, teacher associations and school advisers	2,348	138
English subject organisations	1,319	26
Diversity and inclusion organisations	34	7
Employers	81	7
Parents	158	11
Literary and arts organisations	307	11
Higher education departments	587	12
Librarians, governors, awarding bodies, individuals and publishers	168	42
Total	5,424	268

Organisations, groups and individuals who participated

Agencies and public bodies

Adult Learning Inspectorate
 Arts Council England
 Basic Skills Agency
 BECTA
 Commission for Racial Equality
 Construction Plus
 Department for Education and Skills
 General Teaching Council for England
 Key Stage 3 National Strategy
 National Assessment Agency
 Office of Communications
 Office of Standards in Education
 Primary National Strategy
 Secondary National Strategy
 School Libraries Group (London and SE)
 Universities and Colleges Admissions Service

Arts and Literary organisations

Action for Children's Arts
 ARC Theatre
 Booktrust
 National Association of Writers in Education
 The Poetry Society
 The Reading Agency
 Royal Shakespeare Company
 Royal Society of Literature
 The Royal Society for the Encouragement
 of Arts, Manufactures & Commerce
 Shakespeare's Globe
 The Trollope Society
 Write Away

Awarding bodies

Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA)
 Council for the Curriculum Examinations
 and Assessment (CCEA)
 OCR
 University of Cambridge Local Examinations
 Syndicate (UCLES)

Education organisations

Afasic
 Campaign for Learning
 Committee for Linguistics in Education
 English Reform Group 14–19
 English Secondary Students' Association
 The English-Speaking Union
 Ireland in Schools
 London Association for the Teaching of English
 London Gifted and Talented
 National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth
 National Centre for Research in Children's
 Literature
 National Foundation for Educational Research
 National Literacy Trust
 Queen's English Society
 Royal College of Speech and Language
 Therapists
 Royal National Institute of the Blind (RNIB)
 Special Educational Needs Joint Initiative for
 Training (SENJIT)
 Specialist Schools Trust
 Storycode
 Talk to Your Baby b

Employers

Arriva
 BMW
 BT
 Confederation of British Industry
 Data Connection
 Federation of Small Businesses
 Kent and Sussex Courier
 Peugeot Citroen UK
 PricewaterhouseCoopers
 Ricoh UK
 Southwark Education Business Partnership
 Tesco
 Unilever
 Westminster Education Business Partnership

Higher education

Bath Spa University College
 Bishop Grosseteste College
 Bristol University
 Brunel University
 Canterbury Christ Church University
 College of York St John College
 The English Subject Centre
 (Higher Education Academy)
 Institute of Education, University of London
 Keele University
 King's College/NATE
 Kingston University
 Knowledge Lab
 London Metropolitan University
 Newman College of Higher Education
 Nottingham Trent University
 Nottingham University
 The Open University
 Oxford University English Faculty

St Martin's College
 Universities Council for the Education of Teachers
 University College London
 University of Brighton
 University of Cambridge
 University of Derby
 University of Durham
 University of East Anglia
 University of East London
 University of Exeter
 University of Gloucestershire
 University of Hertfordshire
 University of Leeds
 University of Leicester
 University of London
 University of Nottingham
 University of Oxford
 University of Plymouth
 The University of Reading
 University of Sheffield

Individuals

Bernard Ashley
 John Bartle
 Angela Butterfield
 Jayanta Chatterjee
 Dan Clayton
 Allan Coleby
 Pauline Hawkesford
 Sue Hornbuckle
 Laura Huxford
 Jenny Keates
 Theresa Lum Wai
 Carol McEachran
 John Moisson

Alison Morrison
 Kate Norgate
 Sally Ratcliffe
 Fazal Shabanah
 Myra Stokes
 Sue Webb

Local authorities

Barking and Dagenham
 Barnsley
 Cambridgeshire
 Cheshire
 City of York
 Cornwall
 Devon
 Dorset
 East Sussex
 Essex
 Gateshead
 Herefordshire
 Hillingdon
 Kent
 Kirklees
 Lancashire
 Leeds
 Leicestershire
 Lincolnshire
 Liverpool
 Newham
 Norfolk
 Nottingham
 Nottinghamshire
 Peterborough
 Reading
 Richmond

Rotherham
 Sandwell
 Slough
 Staffordshire
 Suffolk
 Wiltshire
 Wirral
 Wolverhampton

Media organisations

Attic Media
 BBC Radio
 Big Heart Media
 British Film Institute
 Glashead Television and Web Ltd
 Granada Media
 Lone Star
 Teachers' TV
 Television Junction

Publishers

BBC
 CGP Books
 The Dialogue Company UK
 Educational Publishers Council
 Immersive Education
 Letterland International Limited
 Longman (Pearson Education)
 Open University Press
 Oxford University Press
 Publishers Association Children's Book Group
 Random House Children's Books

Schools and colleges

Alton College
 Beacon Community College

Churchill Community School
 Cirencester Deer Park High School
 City and Islington Sixth Form College
 Cranbrook School
 Earlsheaton Technology College
 Edgbaston High School
 Elliott Durham School
 Eltham College Library
 Emmer Green Primary School
 Enfield County School
 Eton College
 Eton Group Schools
 Farnborough 6th Form College
 Frome Community College
 Greenhead College
 The Gryphon School
 Hardenhuish School
 Haygrove School, Somerset
 Hymers College
 Kendrick School
 Knowles Hill School
 Matthew Boulton College
 North London Collegiate School
 Oakwood Technology College
 Parkside Community College
 Portsmouth High School for Girls
 Reading School
 Round Diamond School
 Roundhay School, Leeds
 South Downs College
 St Augustine's
 St Catherine's School
 St Hubert's Catholic Primary
 St Laurence School
 Stanborough School

Stratford-upon-Avon College
 Sussex Road School
 Sutton Grammar School for Boys
 Thomas Rotherham College
 Varndean College
 Waldegrave School
 West Kent College
 Westwood High School
 Wilbury Primary School
 Willenhall Comprehensive
 Wolverhampton Girl's High School
 Wolverhampton Grammar School
 Woodcote High School

Teacher and subject associations

Association of Teachers and Lecturers
 Centre for Literacy in Primary Education
 Common English Forum
 The English and Media Centre
 English Association
 Girls' Day School Trust
 Incorporated Association of Preparatory Schools
 Linguistics Association of Great Britain
 London English Group
 National Association for Language Development
 in the Curriculum
 National Association for the Teaching of English
 National Association of Advisers in English
 National Association of Head Teachers
 National Association of Schoolmasters Union
 of Women Teachers
 National Drama
 National Literacy Association
 National Union of Teachers
 Professional Association of Teachers
 United Kingdom Literacy Association

Appendix 2: English 21 events and seminars

	Event	Organiser/partner(s)	Location
April	Literature for Life public debate	Royal Society of Literature	London
	Technology in English 2015 conference	National Association for the Teaching of English and United Kingdom Literacy Association	Cambridge
	E-assessment of English Group	National Foundation for Educational Research	Slough
	English as an additional language workshop	QCA, Curriculum Division	London
	Entitlement to creative reading and writing seminar	Booktrust	London
	Bridging the divide in English	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service	Cheltenham
	RSA Curriculum Network	Royal Society of Arts	London
	Parents of pupils with English as an additional language	National Literacy Trust	Southampton
May	English 21 conference	London Association for the Teaching of English	London
	Views from school librarians	School Libraries Group, Chartered of Library & Information Professions	London
	Laureates head-to-head public debate	Barbican Education	London
	Assessment of reading seminar	National Literacy Trust	London
	Alternative forms of assessment	King's College	London
June	PGCE English students event	University of Sheffield	Sheffield
	SEN and inclusion web event	British Education and Communications Technologies Agency	Online
	Business event	National Literacy Trust	London
	Texts and technologies seminar	Office of Communications and British Film Institute	Sheffield

	Event	Organiser/partner(s)	Location
	Grammar, written and spoken, public debate	Nottingham University	Nottingham
	Creative writing seminar	Salford University	Salford
	Functional literacy – employers' needs	Westminster Education Business Forum	London
	Assessment and literacy in primary education	National Foundation for Educational Research	Slough
	English 21 conversation	National Literacy Association	London
	Inspiring future growth	Roundhay School	Leeds
	Creative writing seminar	Sheffield Hallam University	Sheffield
July	The future of English	London Gifted and Talented	London
	Creative writing seminar	Keele University	Keele
	NUT education conference workshop	National Union of Teachers	Nottingham
	Future directions in assessing Shakespeare	Shakespeare's Globe Theatre	London
	Starting out in English seminar	Primary National Strategy	London
	Learners' views workshop	English Secondary Students' Association	Exeter
	Symposium at annual conference	United Kingdom Literary Association	Bath
	Reading workshop	Centre for Literacy in Primary Education	London
	Watch this! debate	British Film Institute and Barbican Education	London
	Shakespeare discussion	Royal Shakespeare Company	Stratford
	Learners' views workshop	English Secondary Students' Association	Leeds
	Learners' views workshop	English Secondary Students' Association	Newcastle

	Event	Organiser/partner(s)	Location
	School of education discussion	University of Brighton	Brighton
	Learners' views workshop	English Secondary Students' Association	Sandwell
	Creative writing seminar	Royal Holloway College	London
	Employee and employer views	Peugeot Automobiles UK	Coventry

About this publication

Who's it for?

All those with an interest in the future of English as a subject

What's it about?

This report is a summary of the views expressed during 'English 21', QCA's national conversation on English, which took place February to July 2005

What's it for?

Information and guidance

Related materials

Taking English forward (QCA/05/2131)

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