CHAPTER

1

The pedagogy of teaching English in the primary school

Purpose of this chapter

This chapter aims to:

- look at the nature of pedagogy and examine what the term means;
- explore the knowledge that teachers need to teach effectively;
- look at teachers' decision-making and how this is informed by their knowledge;
- examine how teachers' actions are influenced by their knowledge and by the decisions they make;
- look at the qualities needed to teach English effectively in the primary school.

What is pedagogy?

Pedagogy is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as 'the science of teaching'. Alexander (2000: 540) states: 'Pedagogy encompasses the performance of teaching together with the theories, beliefs, policies and controversies that inform and shape it'. However, not many teachers use the term. Hayes (2000) discusses those experienced teachers who maintain that teaching is a practical activity and that the theoretical study of teaching in higher education is irrelevant once one enters the classroom. However, he counters that:

> Those who are charged with the difficult and demanding task of educating our children and young people must be clear about what they are doing, why they are doing it, and how they will know if it is successful.

(Hayes 2000: 20)

To be effective as a teacher one needs to think about what one does and why. In this chapter, the three important elements identified by Kyriacou (1991: 5) will be used to focus discussion:
• Knowledge: comprising the teacher's knowledge about the subject, pupils, curriculum, teaching methods, the influence on teaching and learning of other factors, and knowledge about one's teaching skills.

• Decision-making: comprising the thinking and decision-making which occurs before, during and after a lesson, concerning how best to achieve the educational outcomes intended.

• Action: comprising the overt behaviour by teachers undertaken to foster pupil learning.

We will see how the three key skills apply generally and then specifically in the teaching of English. We will see that knowledge is essential if decision-making is to be informed and effective, and that the decisions that teachers make affect the actions they take and in turn affect the ways in which children learn.

Knowledge needed by teachers

Teachers need different types of knowledge to enable them to teach effectively.

Knowledge of the curriculum

Fox (2005) uses the term 'pedagogical content' knowledge to represent ‘subject matter knowledge centred on classroom tasks, activities and explanations’ and states that it includes knowledge of the following:

• representation of facts, concepts and methods in the subject, using metaphors and analogies to connect with more general knowledge;

• tasks that are productive for learning, including the relevant resources, their organization, and health and safety issues;

• examples of key ideas, rules and problems which link the particular to the general and thus promote understanding;

• students and their existing levels of understanding and skill in the subject, including common misconceptions and errors;

• how understanding in the subject typically advances from one level to another;

• productive locations for out-of-school work;

• knowledge of research that supports teaching and learning in the subject.

(Fox 2005: 257)

It is important to realise that pedagogical content knowledge is constantly changing, just as do the pupils we teach change each year, leading effective and reflective teachers to constantly review their practice.

The curriculum for English in English schools has gone through several incarnations since the inception of the National Curriculum for English in 1990 (DES 1990). While there are many common features, there have also been changes of emphasis that have demanded that teachers examine their own subject knowledge before planning schemes of work for their pupils. For example, an increasing emphasis in government documents upon
the teaching of phonics culminated in the Primary National Strategy, which placed the teaching of systematic synthetic phonics at the heart of the teaching of reading (DfES 2006b).

The teaching of phonics is discussed in detail in Chapter 7, and so the mechanics will not be explored in depth here. However, as a teacher, you need to ensure that you understand the terminology relating to phonics teaching and that you are able to teach children how to use phonic knowledge to decode unfamiliar words. Remember that not all experienced teachers received adequate training in the teaching of phonics, particularly before 1990, when some training courses virtually ignored phonics in favour of less structured approaches to reading. It is by no means certain, therefore, that you will see good practice in your school, and you may find that you have a more sophisticated understanding of phonics than some of the teachers with whom you work. For a basic knowledge of phonics teaching and learning see Jolliffe (2006) and for more details see Jolliffe and Waugh with Carss (2012).

Another aspect of the curriculum that may challenge teachers is the growing emphasis on ICT, with the 2006 Literacy Framework including many activities related to film and computers, interactive whiteboards, children's writing and so on (see Chapter 13, on using ICT and English).

The levels of subject knowledge required to teach children about language are now considerably greater than many of us acquired during our secondary schooling, and even during teacher training. Chapter 5, on 'Knowledge about language', explores ways of teaching about language through meaningful activities, but many people may initially be confused by much of the terminology that appears there and in the Primary Strategy. Many students arrive at initial teacher education courses thinking that mathematics and science will be the most challenging subjects but quickly discover that English, a subject they had previously felt confident about (after all, they can read, write, speak and listen), is their greatest weakness.

Among student teachers' main concerns are:

- understanding the parts of speech and their functions;
- understanding punctuation, especially possessive apostrophes;
- understanding linguistic terminology;
- understanding how to teach reading.

Fortunately, each of these areas can be taught and learned so that the overwhelming majority of primary teachers begin their first job quite confident about them. However, with several other subjects to understand, as well as class management (the major concern of most trainees), training and induction-year programmes have become increasingly intensive. One would hope that, by the time the children who were educated through the Literacy Framework and National Strategies reach higher education, teacher trainers will need to give far less attention to explaining the first three items in the bullet list, which, on the whole, remain constant. As for the fourth item, teaching reading, this highly important part of the curriculum is a matter for constant debate and frequent changes of emphasis. Even those teachers described by Hayes (2000) who argue that teaching is a purely practical profession must find out about the latest theories on reading and consider adapting their teaching accordingly, if only because a failure to do so might be damaging if Ofsted comes calling.
Knowledge of pupils

Knowledge for the teacher is not restricted to the curriculum. It is vital that you know and understand your pupils and are able to differentiate your teaching to meet their needs. Also, you should assess pupils’ progress in informal, semi-structured and formal ways, not only because teachers need to plan for progression but also because children, parents and colleagues will want to know how the children are progressing too. Information about children can be acquired from other teachers but must be kept up-to-date and modified as children progress.

Then there are children’s special needs, which must be identified and acted upon. Good teachers will know a range of strategies for supporting pupils and will regularly seek professional development to increase their understanding of the needs of children with English as an additional language (EAL), various physical disabilities or learning difficulties such as dyslexia and dyspraxia. Where children in their classes receive external learning support, teachers will ensure that they know what this support entails and learn how it may be linked to how they work with the children in class.

Teachers also need to be aware of children’s changing interests and that, by sometimes relating teaching and learning to children’s hobbies and interests, teachers may be able to engage them, hold their attention and provide stimuli for discussion.

Knowledge of factors that affect teaching and learning

The classroom environment will impinge upon the way in which teachers teach and children learn, and this will be discussed in relation to language in the section on decision-making. However, besides understanding the features of a language-friendly classroom, teachers also need to be aware of the impact that the weather and classroom ventilation and temperature can have. Experienced teachers tend to be alert to the effects of the physical environment and even anticipate these and modify their teaching accordingly, especially on windy days (notorious for affecting pupil behaviour!) and days when children are kept inside all day due to bad weather. Attempting a lesson that requires lengthy periods of sitting still when children have been inactive can be very challenging, and teachers often modify tasks to make them more active and vigorous in such circumstances, perhaps using drama or debate.

Knowledge of how to teach the curriculum

Besides understanding the content of the curriculum, the needs of their pupils and the environmental factors that may affect their pupils’ learning, teachers need to be aware of current thinking on how to teach the curriculum. We will explore this further in later chapters, but at this stage we will focus on some of the knowledge teachers need to acquire. For example, it is important to keep up to date on the latest government initiatives and to be aware of key pieces of educational research. While most teachers do not have time to read academic journals and government documents, they can find concise reports and reviews in the *Times Educational Supplement* on Friday and *Guardian Education* on Tuesday. Without an understanding of what is actually being said, teachers are as susceptible as the rest of the population to tabloid press misinterpretations and may find it difficult to justify their teaching methods when questioned by parents.
Knowledge of one's own teaching skills

Central to professional development is self-knowledge and an ability to reflect upon one's teaching and pupils' learning. Reflection and self-evaluation are key elements of teaching placements during initial teacher training programmes, with trainees usually having to write lesson evaluations or reflective diaries. Teachers are helped to reflect during training via frequent observation and written and oral feedback, with strengths and weaknesses highlighted and targets being set.

While teaching observation is now a part of teachers' professional development, it is seldom as intense or as frequent as during training. Thus, teachers who wish to develop their teaching skills need to invite constructive criticism from respected colleagues on their teaching style, manners, resources used, classroom organisation and class management. This interaction should not be something to fear but should form part of a continuing professional dialogue.

ACTIVITY: REFLECTING ON YOUR TEACHING OF ENGLISH

- What do you do well?
- What could you do better?
- What do you really struggle with?
- What could you do to improve your teaching of English?

The way in which your knowledge affects your teaching can be compared with the way in which professional snooker players play a shot. In deciding which ball to aim for, snooker players draw upon past experience of the consequences of similar shots, an understanding of angles and where the balls are likely to end up after the shot, as well as considering the bigger picture and the next shots they will play. They also use prior knowledge to determine how to strike the ball to give it back spin or power. Experienced snooker stars make many of these decisions almost subconsciously because their knowledge base is so great that they can sum up their next move very quickly. Skilled teachers, too, often act instinctively, making hundreds of decisions every day about resources to use, ways of conveying information, classroom organisation, responses to children's questions, and questions to ask. Most of these decisions will be made quickly and will be based upon knowledge and experience. At other times, teachers have the luxury of being able to plan independently or with colleagues, reflect upon past lessons and observe how others work. Good teachers tend to make an increasingly high percentage of their decisions instinctively but still take time to reflect and plan, just as good snooker players build up their knowledge by practising.

In the next section we will look at decision-making, focusing in particular upon decisions that teachers can make about the environment in which they and their pupils work.

Decision-making

Wragg (1997: 94) stated that 'decisions about how pupils should learn and how teachers should teach need to reflect both purpose and context'. He went on to illustrate this point with examples:
When teachers are telling a story to a class of 5-year-olds, it is usually best sense to read the story to the whole class, rather than individually to each of 30 or more children. By contrast, if 30 people aged from 17 to 70 want to learn to drive, then they will expect individual practice in actually driving a car, not a mass lecture on the function of the clutch. Anyone wanting to sing in a quartet will need three like-minded people. Matching what is desirable to what is feasible is part of the art of teaching effectively.

(Wragg 1997: 94)

In exploring the kinds of decision-making that teachers of English engage in, we will look first at the nature of the classroom and then at planning for teaching, before examining ways in which teachers might reflect upon their teaching in order to improve and develop it.

Creating a classroom environment for language

At the heart of good English teaching is the environment in which teaching and learning takes place. Some classrooms are rich in language and opportunities for language. Walls are not only redolent with brightly coloured displays, including pictures and objects for children to discuss, but also adorned with pieces of text, lists of useful words and examples of children's writing that can be read by the class and by visitors. There may, especially for younger children, be an area in which role-play activities are focused on, say, a shop, café, house or train. There will be language games, newspapers, books, timetables and advertisements, as well as, perhaps, football league tables, interesting lists and facts about topics that interest children.

As children move through the school, they will find that the language stimuli in their classrooms change and increasingly cater for their different needs and interests. It is part of the teachers' decision-making process to ensure that they create an appropriately stimulating environment for their pupils that conveys the idea that language, both written and spoken, is valuable and to be celebrated.

Many of the children we teach will come from clean, tidy, well-decorated homes in which there are many stimulating things with which to play. They may have video recorders, computers, music systems, iPods, iPads, DVDs and electronic games. By contrast, the classroom can appear dull and uninviting. However, the provision of an attractive and linguistically stimulating classroom does not necessarily involve the inclusion of large amounts of sophisticated electrical equipment. Nevertheless, there are times when equipment such as an interactive whiteboard can provide almost instant access to a wealth of material that could never be so readily available using printed texts.

The language-friendly classroom will include a range of stimuli both written and aural and the presence of tactile displays that children are encouraged to discuss. It will also provide opportunities for children to use language and explore its possibilities within a secure setting. In Key Stage 1 classrooms, in particular, the presence of structured contexts for play may lead to variations on the traditional home corner. Ross (1992) suggested that such contexts should reflect some of the children's experiences outside school and asserted that children are aware of a wide range of environments and places, particularly through television, and that they will use these naturally in play. Ross (1992) also suggested the following variations on the home corner, each of which may be created with a minimum of resources:
To this list might be added pizza restaurants, fast food shops, cars, lorries, dental surgeries, offices and factories. Within these, children might be presented with different scenarios and invited to adopt the roles of a variety of people. There might also be opportunities for reading and writing – for example, using menus in a restaurant, taking customers' orders, making tickets or writing prescriptions or recipes.

The organisation of the furniture in a classroom can affect the possibilities for language development. Tann (1991) maintained that, although in many classrooms children are seated in groups around a table or cluster of desks, research had shown that 90 per cent of teachers never used collaborative group work. However, this figure may have changed since 1991, particularly as the Primary National Strategy (DfES 2006b) increased the emphasis on speaking and listening, and it is hoped that this has led to an increase in collaborative work. Seating arrangements in a classroom affect communication, even if this occurs in a way that the teacher does not intend. When children sit in groups, they have eye contact with all the others in the group, which may lead to greater interaction between them. Teachers who wish to reduce the level of talk in their classrooms often introduce alternative seating arrangements such as rows and horseshoes. These, too, may promote conversation, but this may be limited to pairs and trios (see McNamara and Waugh 1993). Teachers should consider the nature of the interaction that they wish to foster when arranging the furniture in their classrooms, and be flexible in changing. Such decision-making may well involve seeking the views of classroom assistants and the children themselves.

Teachers need to decide how they want children to enter the classroom and what they will find when they get there. There may, for example, be written guidance on what the children should do, with instructions for the first task of the day written on the board. The drawers and cupboards may be labelled so that children can find things easily without constant reference to the teacher. This should not only develop reading skills but also encourage independence and free the teacher to concentrate on teaching rather than managing resources.

The teacher in a language-friendly classroom will take on many roles and will make almost subconscious decisions about these. The teacher may act as a writer or reader to provide a model for pupils, and may be an audience for their ideas and an arbitrator when disputes arise in discussions. The teacher may provide stimuli for language activities and initiate and facilitate their development. The teacher will also be a source of information and direct teaching of language skills as well as being an assessor and recorder of children's progress.

The language-friendly classroom is more than an attractively adorned room filled with words and literature. It is an interactive environment in which teachers play a leading role.
in fostering the development of pupils' language skills through extensive use of the resources that they provide and that they encourage the children to bring to school. It is also an environment in which teachers constantly evaluate and assess what is happening and make decisions about what will happen next.

**ACTIVITY: EXAMINING A CLASSROOM'S FEATURES**

Think about a classroom you have worked in or are currently working in and answer the questions below:

- Are books attractively displayed and changed regularly?
- Are instructions provided in writing as well as orally?
- Is extensive use made of labelling so that children can find things independently?
- Are children encouraged to share ownership of the classroom?
- Are displays of writing a regular feature?
- Are displays interactive?
- Are ICT resources readily available and well used?
- Are writing and reading areas provided?
- Are children's interests taken into account when reading materials are selected?
- Are displays of writing a regular feature?
- Are words discussed with the children regularly?
- Is teaching style and the teacher's role adapted to different circumstances?
- How are adults other than teachers involved?

**Planning and preparation**

Chapter 15, on planning, gives details of how to plan effectively for English, but a chapter on pedagogy would be incomplete without highlighting the need for careful preparation and planning, which takes into account:

- the abilities of the children;
- the resources available;
- the environment in which the lesson is to take place;
- ways of extending the most able children and engaging those that are less able.

Planning should be based upon realistic goals that children can reasonably achieve and that they can identify and relate to. It should also be done in conjunction with colleagues teaching the same year groups where possible, and should involve teaching assistants, who have a key role to play in classrooms and whose expertise should be recognised and drawn upon.

One aspect of lesson planning that is often neglected by inexperienced teachers, who otherwise tend to plan in great detail, is deciding how to introduce a lesson. A lesson's opening is crucial to children's attitudes to it, and it is vital that teachers show that they are enthusiastic about the lesson and that they share this enthusiasm with their pupils. Good lessons might begin with an activity, a DVD, a clip from YouTube, a piece of music, a visual aid or a reading from a text. They will also probably include:
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- reference to previous lessons;
- differentiated questioning to involve everyone;
- use of children's prior knowledge;
- sharing of learning objectives;
- involvement of pupils.

**Actions**

If our knowledge helps to inform our decision-making, then both will determine how we teach and how we are perceived by our pupils, their parents and our colleagues. Before we examine teachers' actions in more detail, look at the following activity.

**ACTIVITY: REMEMBERING YOUR OWN FAVOURITE TEACHER**

Think back to your own schooldays, either primary or secondary.

- Who was your favourite teacher?
- What qualities did this teacher have that you appreciated?
- Did you work better and learn more with this teacher than with others?

When asked similar questions at interviews for teacher training courses, candidates tend to refer to strictness but fairness, enthusiasm, sense of humour and knowledge of pupils. Some talk of lively, outgoing teachers while others mention quiet, calm ones who never raised their voices.

There is no recipe for the perfect teacher, but, without enthusiasm for the subjects and children, teachers are unlikely to be successful or remembered fondly. Teachers' actions profoundly affect children's perceptions of subjects and of learning. We will now turn to ways in which their knowledge, decision-making and actions can impact upon the teaching of English in the primary school.

**Qualities needed to teach English effectively**

The Primary National Strategy cited three pedagogic approaches – *direct*, *inductive* and *exploratory* – and teachers will make decisions about which is appropriate when (DfES 2006b). Let us look at these approaches in the context of English.

**Direct**

The direct approach is often used when the purpose is to acquire new skills. Typically, this is the mode employed in whole-class literacy work and includes shared reading and writing, and teaching and learning about word- and sentence-level features. This might be followed by individual or group work in which children are able to demonstrate that they have acquired the skills and knowledge taught.
Inductive

Inductive approaches are designed to develop a concept or process and involve the teacher setting up a structured activity that has directed steps. For example, children might be given a list of words and their plurals and be asked to work out a spelling rule for making words ending with ‘y’ plural (see Chapter 12, on spelling).

Exploratory

The exploratory approach enables children to consolidate or refine their skills and understanding and might involve children in testing a hypothesis set up by the teacher – for example, ‘Sentences cannot begin with “Because”.’ Children could then look for examples in texts and attempt to write their own before drawing conclusions. Because children may arrive at misconceptions, teachers should complete such activities with a plenary session in which conclusions are shared.

The cooperative learning strategies discussed in Chapter 6 (‘Talking to learn’) underpin a pedagogic approach that provides opportunities for children to interact and learn together. Such strategies are ideal for exploratory work, and can be linked to both direct and inductive approaches.

Teachers can draw upon a knowledge of different pedagogic strategies when teaching English, but what constitutes ‘good literacy teaching’? Towards the end of this chapter an activity focuses on the things effective teachers of English do and invites you to consider the extent to which you possess these qualities. However, before looking at the activity, we will examine the qualities of good literacy teaching identified in the Primary National Strategy (DfES 2006b: 19). The Primary National Strategy referred to lively, engaging teaching with ‘a carefully planned blend of approaches’ with children being ‘challenged to think’. There will be both support for children and independence when necessary. Rather than arguing for a brisk pace (as its predecessor, the National Literacy Strategy, did), the Primary National Strategy maintained that in good literacy teaching ‘the pitch and pace of the work is sensitive to the rate at which children learn’. The increased emphasis on speaking and listening is reflected in the assertion that ‘the strong interdependence between speaking, listening, reading and writing should underpin planning and provision for learning’ (DfES 2006b: 19).

The final paragraph is worth quoting in full since it neatly sums up the themes that run through this chapter:

Leading children’s learning requires a broad repertoire of teaching and organisational approaches. There are lessons where the emphasis is on techniques and the teaching is quite directive: there are lessons where the directing is less evident and teachers use carefully chosen activities and well-directed questioning. Good literacy teaching requires a good knowledge of the subject; an understanding of the progression in the curriculum being taught and recognition that some teaching approaches are better suited to promote particular learning and outcomes.

(DfES 2006b: 19)

In addition, we would argue that good teachers see a bigger picture – they make links between aspects of lessons (see Medwell et al. 1998) and they see teaching and learning in a wider context, including across the curriculum as well as within a subject. At the level of a
literacy lesson, this means making clear links between text-, sentence- and word-level work, rather than treating these as discrete units. In phonics teaching, for example, the Rose Report (DfES 2006a: 39) found that the best practice 'took advantage of opportunities to reinforce aspects of phonics knowledge and skills throughout the curriculum'.

**ACTIVITY: ANALYSING EFFECTIVE TEACHERS OF ENGLISH**

Wray *et al.* (2002) identified the following features of effective teachers of English:

- make explicit the purpose of teaching and how this contributes to making meaning;
- centre much of teaching around shared texts;
- teach aspects of writing and reading in a systematic way;
- have strong philosophies about teaching literacy;
- have well-developed systems for monitoring progress;
- have extensive knowledge about literacy;
- undergo regular in-service training.

Think about yourself as a teacher of English and rate yourself on a scale of one to ten for each of the items above. Discuss your self-assessment with a colleague and talk about ways in which you could improve in those areas in which you scored the least well.

**Key points**

- To teach effectively, teachers need to reflect upon their practice and understand why they do what they do.
- A key element of pedagogy is knowledge, and this includes knowledge of the curriculum, of pupils, of factors that affect teaching and learning, of how to teach the curriculum and of one's own teaching skills.
- Teachers' knowledge influences their decision-making and influences the ways in which they organise their teaching and their classroom.
- The way in which teachers act affects the way in which their pupils learn and their pupils' perceptions of them.
- There are identifiable qualities in good teaching of which teachers need to be aware.

**Further reading**

