

Source: Ofsted <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/ofsted-publishes-research-review-on-languages-education>

Date: 7th June 2021

Relevant parts for primary schools:

Learning a language is 'a liberation from insularity and provides an opening to other cultures'. It helps to equip pupils with the knowledge and cultural capital they need to succeed in life.

It is important to recognise that there is no single way of achieving high-quality languages education.

The statutory requirement to teach a modern or ancient language in primary schools from the age of 7 took effect from September 2014. In September 2018, the first cohort of children who had to study a language throughout key stage 2 made the transition from primary to secondary school. Transition issues between primary and secondary school have not yet been overcome. These include:

- weak communication between primary and secondary schools
- a lack of consistency between primary schools
- limited cross-phase planning between primary and secondary schools

Research on how we learn, and in particular cognitive science, has informed the thinking behind the EIF. In our research reviews, we are not aiming to summarise the totality of research in education. Our work is based on a range of research findings in line with the EIF. These findings include:

- an understanding that curriculum is different to pedagogy. Progress in curricular terms means knowing more and remembering more, so a curriculum needs to carefully plan for that progress by considering the building blocks and sequence in each subject
- an understanding that there is limited capacity in short-term memory to process information and that overloading it with too much information at once will result in limited learning. Information is stored in long-term memory, which consists of structures (schemata) where knowledge is linked or embedded with what is already known. These are built over time, meaning that proficient learners have more detailed schemata than novice learners
- using spaced or distributed practice, where knowledge is rehearsed for short periods over a longer period of time, is more effective than so-called massed practice
- retrieval practice involves recalling something you have learned in the past and bringing it back to mind

There are similarities between learning to read and to write in our first language and learning to do so in another language. Some of the concepts that lie behind early reading and early writing (and in particular, systematic synthetic phonics) are also relevant in the languages' curriculum. The step-by-step, explicit approach to phonics and spelling can transfer to the languages' classroom:

- curriculum plans show clear logic behind progression in phonics, including around when to teach differences between English sound-spelling correspondences and those of the target language
- planned practice and review of phonemes and how these link to graphemes is in place
- curriculum plans show how small differences in sound can unlock meaning for pupils
- curriculum plans recognise that vocabulary is an important component of language knowledge
- curriculum plans recognise the importance of building a strong verb lexicon, especially in the early stages of language learning.
- curriculum planning of vocabulary, grammar and phonic knowledge and progression should go hand in hand, as they are all related and connected.
- curriculum leaders consider both the breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge they will teach. They:
 - make sure that they prioritise high-frequency words
 - consider carefully which topic-based vocabulary (other than high-frequency words) they teach
 - ensure that learners can use these words across different contexts
 - consider how 'deeply' items of vocabulary need to be learned and at what point
- teachers aim to increase learners' automatic and fluent recall through:
 - a schedule of planned revisiting to ensure that words are retained in long-term memory
 - introducing and using vocabulary in comprehension and production, in both the oral and written modalities and across different topics
- curriculum leaders also think strategically about:
 - which words are the most important for the scheme of work so that teachers can focus on these to develop learners' level of mastery
 - making links between words within word families and recognising similarities and differences between English and the language being learned
- leaders make sure that all pupils can understand grammatical concepts and structures rather than being required to work it out for themselves, through:
 - an explicit but succinct description of the grammatical feature to be taught
 - practising the grammar point (through listening and reading)
 - practice in productive use of the features being taught (through speaking and writing).
- teachers consider productive use of grammar in free writing and speech in a range of contexts. Using a language spontaneously is central to pupils' language ability and based on their ability to manipulate language.
- the curriculum includes ample opportunity to revisit the same grammar in different contexts, for different tasks, with a range of vocabulary
- teachers support pupils' development of reading, listening, writing and speaking abilities over time.
- learning in a language classroom is largely intentional and not left to chance.
- teachers' use of the target language is carefully planned, is tailored to pupils' language ability levels and builds systematically on pupils' prior knowledge.

- teachers create opportunities for pupils to practise using the target language, including helping them to apply their knowledge in an unscripted way, which may be slower and more error-prone than planned speech
- meaningful assessment is part of the curriculum in primary languages classrooms
- assessments are carefully designed so that they are valid (for example, pupils cannot guess the meaning of vocabulary by a process of elimination)
- assessment is aligned to a clearly structured and sequenced curriculum
- school leaders committed to ensuring that language teachers have both a strong understanding of curriculum progression in languages and strong subject knowledge
- well-considered transition processes and a curriculum that builds step by step across key stages