

In January 2011 the Secretary of State for Education announced a review of the National Curriculum in England. Rhea Williams, a former teacher who chairs the Queen's English Society, wrote a thought-provoking letter to the review. It first appeared in edition 108 of *Quest*, the society's newsletter. Here's an edited version.

Dear Sir/Madam

Time to let teachers teach and pupils learn

I am writing this letter both as Chairman of The Queen's English Society, which aims to stop the decline in standards of the use of English and to provide a website where good English can be found (queens-english-society.com), and as an ex-teacher with nearly 30 years' experience.

We feel that the following are policy changes that could be implemented to improve the standards of English in our schools:

- 1 Teach children to read using phonics, as those of us over 50 were taught.
- 2 Teach English as a foreign language, teaching tenses, rules for spelling, word order etc.
- 3 Allow teachers to do their jobs unhindered by constant changes.
- 4 Give teachers and schools power to deal with indiscipline so that status and morale are raised.
- 5 Teach children about responsibility rather than 'rights'.

For many years I taught English in secondary schools in England. When I started my teaching career, in 1974, I was shocked to find that children of 11 had no idea how to use capital letters and full stops, never mind any other punctuation. When I mentioned this to the deputy head, he informed me that reading and writing were dying arts and it didn't matter if children couldn't do either.

I was horrified. It came as no great surprise to discover that this man was about to go on a trip to look at teaching methods in Barbados. The Initial Teaching Alphabet, which had been going since 1961 in selected schools, was already destroying the confidence of many children who never recovered from having to re-learn ordinary spelling – yet another hurdle for the kids.

Over the course of my teaching career not much changed; certainly things didn't get any better in the teaching of English.

In about 1984, the government decided that we were no longer allowed to teach grammar and spelling in English. When we marked exam papers we were not allowed to mark for spelling or bad grammar; it was all empathy. Nobody seemed to care that writing is a tool for communication and if one cannot write in a way that someone else can understand huge problems occur. A child might be able to tell you about 'Romeo and Juliet', but they couldn't write a note for the milkman that he would understand. And when it came to moderating exams, I was constantly told that I marked too hard; I wasn't to penalise for poor spelling or terrible English. Imagination counted for everything, language for nothing.

It had always been my *modus operandi* to say, 'yes, yes', to whatever I was being told to do but then to teach what I knew the children needed. I had always done a spelling lesson a week and the kids loved it. I told them a story that used all the words they had to learn and the difficult ones we did by rhythm. Most of the children I taught could spell accommodation because we learned it in rhythm. But my head of department in that particular school was so adamant that he and the education authority were right that I resigned from the job.

Nothing ever got any better. In every school it seemed that English was supposed to be learned by osmosis. Instead of English language being taught as a foreign language is taught, it wasn't taught at all. The children were allowed to speak badly, no-one corrected their speech, and their written work was still not marked in a way that noticed the use of language, spelling or grammar. Even worse was the fact that many of their teachers no longer knew what was correct and what wasn't because they themselves had not been taught correct use of the language.

All this was compounded by the steady eroding of teacher status. Not only had all disciplinary power been removed from teachers and schools, but students and parents were constantly being told about their rights, but never about their responsibilities. At one point we were told we were not to touch a child, ever.

Now, imagine you are walking along a school corridor and you see a child you know, of either sex, crying. Is it normal to just stand there and ask if everything is okay, or do you want to put your arms around the child, or a hand on the arm and offer comfort? Those children I taught could have been mine, and had my child been crying in school I would hope that someone would have comforted them. How could I not offer comfort?

And as teachers' teeth were pulled, so parents became more demanding and rude, teaching their children that they could behave in the same way because there was nothing that the school could do. Successive governments put more and more onto teachers' workloads, both by constantly tinkering with the curriculum so the wheel had to keep on being re-invented and by stupid Ofsted inspections that involved so much ticking of boxes that it was laughable. A whole term could be spent by a school, preparing for an Ofsted, and for what? Surely any fool can recognise that an inspection that is prepared for is hardly going to be worthwhile? Why were HMIs (Her Majesty's Inspectors), who could just appear in school at any time, done away with?

So finally, the job that had been so wonderful when I started teaching that I would have done it for nothing, became so horrible and arduous and unrewarding that I finished teaching, years before I should have done.

We need to give teachers some status again, bring back the idea that children have a responsibility for their own learning...you truly can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear and we all know that children are not getting cleverer and nor is teaching getting so much better.

A degree does not a teacher make. It can help but is not the most important thing you need to be a good educator. We need to get back to teachers teaching – standing at the front of the class imparting knowledge, hopefully in a way that is fun and enjoyable. But children need to understand that it is their responsibility to learn and pass exams, not the teachers'. Please, please learn from the people at the coalface, those trying to do the job.

Yours

Rhea Williams (Mrs)

PS from Plain Language Commission

The consultation lasts until 4 November 2011. To have your say, visit: comment.ofqual.gov.uk/gcse-reform

As part of the consultation, the regulator Ofqual has proposed that from 2013, 5% of marks in GCSE English literature, geography, ancient history and religious studies (usually taken at age 15 or 16) should be given for punctuation, grammar and spelling. The Daily Mail (27 September 2011) also reports that from 2012, the same writing skills will count for 12% of the total marks in English language. The proposal follows publication of the 2010 government White Paper, 'The Importance of Teaching'.



