Language education in England and six other countries

ISSN 2657-9774; https://doi.org/10.36534/erlj.2025.02.07

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Abstract
This article examines how language education in England compares with that of six high-performing countries: Russia, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Estonia, and Finland. It focuses on policy and practice in teaching about language, whether this is the pupils' first language or any second language. Findings show that the other countries place language at the core of the curriculum, integrate first and second language instruction, and value explicit, linguistically informed teaching. In contrast, England, despite its pioneering contributions to language education theory, tends to ignore these innovations and pays little attention to knowledge about language. The review concludes with policy recommendations for embedding linguistic knowledge and teacher expertise in the English curriculum.

Keywords*: language education, England, Russia, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Estonia, Finland*

Introduction

This review asks how language education in England compares with that of other national systems, and how practices in other countries might inform curriculum reform in England. After reviewing language education in six other countries, it will draw general conclusions about how we, in England, should change our approach.

By *language education* I mean any kind of education where the focus is on language, so in England the term embraces most obviously first-language English and modern foreign languages, but in principle also English as an additional language, classical languages, and heritage or community languages, though I have little to say in this article about any of these other aspects. To simplify the picture, I simply contrast **L1** and **L2**, which for most pupils in England means English and a foreign language, though for many pupils English is actually a second language (L2).

This paper may be seen as a guide for those who are currently working in England on the revision of the National Curriculum and its associated assessment instruments (Anon, 2025a). The current context in England is one of crisis in both English and foreign languages, where falling numbers in the last years of secondary school and in university departments reflect a long-standing and ongoing decline in popularity among school children. However, the review also reveals that several other countries face their own challenges in language teaching, and in particular the need to take account of modern linguistics and applied linguistics.

The other countries chosen for the comparison are Russia, France, Germany, The Netherlands, Estonia and Finland. All these countries are (at least partly) in Europe, which somewhat reduces other cultural differences and raises the relevance of comparison with England. For France the discussion extends a little to include other countries where French is a national language: Switzerland and Canada (which, of course, is not in Europe). The discussion of Germany briefly touches on other German-speaking countries in Europe. I chose these particular countries partly because they figured prominently in the data I myself had collected over several decades, and partly because of published reports in English, French or German – the only languages I can read easily. This language restriction is an important limitation on what I say about Russia, The Netherlands, Estonia and Finland, where I could not access the local literature on policy and research so I had to rely on reports in my three languages. But for five of the countries this information was confirmed by individuals who knew the country concerned and had experienced its schools as pupils and/or as teachers.

My personal sources were as follows:

- Russia: Pavel Iosad, Viktoria Magne, Jenny Folkeryd
- France: Marie-Claude Boivin
- Germany: Eva Neu
- The Netherlands: Jimmy van Rijt, Willem Hollmann
- Estonia: Martin Ehala, Viktoria Magne (again)

I also benefited greatly from the international knowledge and experience of Robin Alexander and Terry Lamb, as well as from many others who have advised me over the decades[1].

The seven countries selected for comparison are displayed in Table 1, together with their ranking (out of 79) in the most recent (2022) PISA study of 15-year-olds[2]; since Russia did not take part in the 2022 iteration of Pisa, its rank is based on its scores for 2018[3]. All the selected countries sit firmly in the top third of all countries, so it is likely that the UK can learn from the others, but I express reservations about the significance of these figures in the next section.

Table 1*:* PISA rankings 2022

	Maths	Science	Reading	Average rank
United Kingdom	12	14	13	13
Russia	16	32	23	24
France	26	26	28	27
Germany	24	22	21	22
The Netherlands	10	25	35	23
Estonia	7	6	6	6
Finland	20	9	14	14

Background: Britain's legacy in language education

The UK's PISA results

It could be objected that the table of PISA results shows the UK in a very favorable light, in the 13th position worldwide and near the top of the European countries, and that this undermines my argument that the UK needs to change. There are two counter-objections.

The first is that the Pisa results are very variable, and the UK's performance isn't always, or even usually, as favorable as this; for example, the UK's ranking for reading ranged from 25th in 2009 to 11th in 2018[4]. It seems unlikely that the reality is so variable. Moreover, there is considerable uncertainty about the test's claims to be based on a representative sample of each country's 15-year-olds; for example, it has been calculated that the sample used in the 2018 test for England excluded 40% of the potential randomly-selected population, with low-achieving children particularly likely to be excluded (Jerrim, 2021). This proportion of excluded children is higher than for most other countries.

The second is that the average results in the table may hide a large gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students, which is often called the *achievement gap*. For example, in 2015 the retiring head of OFSTED (an agency which inspects schools) reported an achievement gap of 28%, which was exactly the same

[1] https://dickhudson.com/geography/

[2] https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/pisa-scores-by-country

[3] https://www.statista.com/statistics/1078434/pisa-score-of-russia-by-category/#:~:text=%22The%20Programme%20for%20International%20Student%20Assessment%20(PISA),of%20the%2079%20participating%20countries%20and%20economies.

[4] Government reports produced by googling for "Pisa [year] England"

as it had been ten years earlier[5]. This figure is the number of percentage points between the scores for the top 10% and the bottom 10%. Admittedly, a similar gap exists across most of the other countries in the PISA survey, and England's gap, measured in this case as 86, is actually below the OECD average of 93 (Ingram et al., 2023). Nonetheless, all is clearly less well in England's schools than the cheerful PISA results suggest, as witness the conclusion from a study across 2011-23 that "persistently disadvantaged pupils are almost one year behind by the end of primary school and almost two years behind by the end of secondary school"[6]. In literacy, very poor skills limit the lives of 18% of adults[7], a figure which, although it is below the average for OECD countries, is unacceptable, especially when compared with the figure of 12% for Finland[8]. The achievement gap translates into a lot of slow learners who, after struggling through their years at school, leave without the skills which our society considers essential for life. I suggest below how changes in language education might help such people.

British innovations in language education

Britain has produced internationally recognized innovations in language pedagogy, including the following (which are all explained below):

- Language Across the Curriculum (Bullock 1975)
- Systemic Functional Grammar (Halliday 1985)
- A-level English Language
- Language Awareness (Hawkins 1984)
- Translanguaging (Williams 1994)
- The Languages Diploma.

Despite global adoption — particularly of Halliday's linguistic frameworks, Hawkins's Language Awareness movement and the ideas of translanguaging — these approaches have all dwindled domestically as policy discontinuities and shifting priorities have eroded systematic language education. Only the A-level in English Language endures, and even these faces reduced uptake due to weakened foundations at earlier stages. The following paragraphs add some details.

Language across the curriculum

Language Across the Curriculum is a slogan that was introduced in the 1975 Bullock Report on English teaching, which argued that 'every teacher is a language teacher':

> Each school should have an organized policy for language across the curriculum, establishing every teacher's involvement in language and reading development throughout the years of schooling (Bullock, 1975: 514).

The Bullock Report was probably ahead of its time from an international perspective, and is quoted as a landmark by researchers in other countries such as South Africa (Walt & Ruiters, 2012).

Systemic Functional Grammar

Systemic Functional Grammar is the brainchild of Michael Halliday, conceived while he was at University College London during the 1960s (Halliday et al., 1964; Halliday, 1985). It is a general theory of language which embeds language in a social model relevant to teaching, and has had a major impact on schools thanks to a very large research project in the 1960s called Linguistics and English teaching (Pearce 1994). Halliday's ideas

[5]https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/26707/1/Sir%20Michael%20Wilshaw%27s%20speech%20to%20the%20Festival%20of%20Education%20-%20Speeches%20-%20GOV_UK.pdf

[6] https://epi.org.uk/annual-report-2024-disadvantage-2/

[7] https://literacytrust.org.uk/parents-and-families/adult-literacy/

[8] https://okm.fi/en/-/finland-a-leading-country-in-piaac-adult-population-survey

have also been taken up abroad, and particularly so in China[9], though much less so in the UK.

A-level English language

Another innovation in our language education which is admired internationally is the Advanced-level exam in English Language, taken in Years 12 and 13, which served as the model for similar examinations in Australia (Mulder, 2007) and Singapore[10]. The UK exam was directly inspired by the linguistics of Halliday's project at UCL, and started in 1983 with collaboration between enthusiastic school teachers and the linguist Katharine Perera (Perera, 1984).

Language awareness

The fourth major contribution to language education is the well-known Language Awareness movement, founded on the idea that schools should teach children to be 'aware' of language. This movement is entirely due to the inspiration and campaigning during the 1970s and 1980s of a UK linguist, Eric Hawkins[11], who managed the language center in the University of York, England (Hawkins, 1981; Hawkins, 1984). As we shall see in our survey of other countries, Language Awareness is now a global phenomenon, with an international association[12] and its own academic journal. It is so important that it deserves a little more explanation.

The main idea of Language Awareness has two simple parts: that school leavers' awareness of language should be conscious and that it should be comprehensive. **Consciousness** entails the ability to talk and think about language, and **comprehensiveness** means, on the one hand, that it should embrace all the language they meet in school (whether their first language or a second language, whether informal or formal, spoken or written, standard or non-standard), and on the other, that it should include all facets of these languages (structure, use and variation: so sounds, spelling, meaning, grammar and vocabulary but also how these patterns are used and how they vary between speakers, between styles, between places and between times). The cross-linguistic aim of language awareness necessarily brings together the teachers of English and foreign languages, in contrast with the tradition of isolation in the UK's schools (which we shall also see in some other countries).

Translanguaging

The Welsh word *trawsieithu* was used first in a PhD thesis by Cen Williams at the University of Bangor, in Wales (Williams, 1994), and was then translated into *translanguaging* by Colin Baker (Lewis et al., 2012). This term relates particularly to the education of bilingual or multilingual speakers, so it is relevant to a lot of schools outside Wales where bilingual pupils can often be in the majority. The idea is that when a person knows more than one language their languages constitute a single mental system, so they should be allowed, or even encouraged, to move freely between these systems rather than keeping strictly to one language at a time. The obvious limitation is that, in contrast with Wales, a bilingual pupil in England may be the only pupil in the class who speaks their particular home language. So in spite of a lively international research agenda, this idea hasn't yet had much impact on schools in England.

The languages diploma

It is not too fanciful to see the 1970s and 1980s as the heyday of innovations in language education in the UK, because little that happened since has deserved international attention. The one exception was a very exciting Languages Diploma[13] which was developed by a team led by Terry Lamb in the 2000s under the last

[9] http://www.isfla.org/Systemics/Courses/China.html (accessed June 2025)

[10] https://www.seab.gov.sg/files/A%20Level%20Syllabus%20Sch%20Cddts/2027/9508_y27_sy.pdf

[11] https://www.languageawareness.org/honorary/tribute.php

[12] https://languageawareness.org/

[13] https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2008-06-30/debates/0806301000002/Education14-19Reform

Labour government but scrapped by the incoming Tory/Liberal Democrat coalition government; otherwise it would probably have been adopted by France, Germany and Spain (Terry Lamb, pc).

Language education in England

Most of the major breakthroughs achieved here during the earlier decades have now almost vanished in the UK's own education system. Language Across the Curriculum never gained traction, Systemic Functional Grammar has almost vanished from UK schools and universities, translanguaging is still looking for applications in England, and Language Awareness is no longer mentioned in curriculum documents, though it was prominent, albeit under the title Knowledge About Language, in the 1990s and 2000s (Teramura & Svalberg, 2025). The only exception is the A-level exam in English Language, which still exists; but, thanks to changes in the curriculum lower in school, even this is struggling with decreasing uptake.

To be fair, there are small patches of language education in the current curriculum, but they are isolated and not integrated into a larger picture. One is the strong focus on phonics in the first two primary years, which includes 'grapheme-phoneme correspondences' and even uses parts of the International Phonetic Alphabet. The other is the very elementary grammar which is tested at the end of primary school by the compulsory exam in Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar. Both these items are taken seriously and occupy a lot of teaching time; but having been taught, they are forgotten, and neither survives into secondary school.

We shall see that the lack of a coherent program of language education sets England (and the UK) apart from the other countries in our survey, so it is reasonable to ask why our education system has evolved in this way. The answer is complex, and beyond this article, but one important point is that language education was taken much more seriously a century ago, even though we have probably never had the coherent partnership of L1 and L2 teaching that we dream of nowadays (Hudson & Walmsley 2005).

In the late 19th century, English teaching was heavy on facts about language – its grammar and vocabulary, its spelling, its history – thanks to school textbooks like the 400-page *Manual of English Grammar and Composition* by Nesfield, first published in 1898 and still printing (in a revised version) in 1978. And, of course, at the same time there was support for explicit teaching of rules in foreign-language teaching in opposition to the equally popular 'direct method' where pupils were left to create their own rules.

But this teaching about language was for the academic elite, and for the masses English was all about literacy and literature, and there were no foreign languages. Moreover, the university courses that prepared future teachers of English and foreign languages were very short of teaching about the language itself, so by the end of the 20th century language had more or less vanished from the syllabus in English, and direct teaching about the language was frowned on in foreign languages. The reforms of the 1990s and 2000s swung the balance towards language, but the curriculum introduced in 2014 has returned the balance to where it was before.

We now move to the comparison of England with six other countries.

International findings

Russia

Russia stands at the opposite pole from the UK because it takes language education very seriously, and its current system stands in an unbroken tradition which still guarantees a great deal of expertise among teachers (Pavel Iosad, Viktoria Magne, pc). At the heart of the system is a solid understanding of phonology, morphology and syntax, all of which are closely linked to writing skills – spelling in the case of phonology and morphology, and composition in the case of grammar. Here are some concrete examples.

The first is a lesson that was filmed by the British educationalist Robin Alexander's team in a typical Russian primary school (Alexander, 2001: 450-1); although it took place 30 years ago, in 1994-5, my Russian advisors say little has changed. The pupils are in the first year, so they are aged 6 or 7. The lesson starts with a discussion of the classification of consonants as soft (palatalized) or hard, and how this limits the range of vowels with which they can combine. The lesson continues with a presentation, from the blackboard, in which a selected pupil explains why a particular consonant should be classified as both hard and voiced. The lesson

shows a depth of linguistic analysis which would be unimaginable in any British primary school, let alone with such young pupils.

The second example comes from the same book, but with pupils aged 9-10 (ibid p.285-6). Table 2 is a minute-by-minute record of the first ten minutes of the lesson. For a British reader this lesson is extraordinary: within the first ten minutes of the school day, the class thinks hard about case agreement in five sentences, and one of the pupils has an argument with the teacher about a technical point of grammar – and loses. This is dialogic teaching of a very high order, with a high premium on problem-solving, deep understanding and verbal explanation, and no trace of rote learning. The aim of the lesson is transparent: to develop the children's explicit understanding of how their language works. 30 years later, such teaching may still be typical in Russian primary and secondary schools (Viktoria Magne, pc).

Table 2: A grammar lesson in a Russian primary school

time	**activity**
8.30	Teacher welcomes pupils and visitors.
8.31	Teacher questions pupils on definitions of *biography, catalogue* and *cushion*, ...
8.34	Teacher draws attention to 'word combinations' [i.e. syntactically correct phrases] on the blackboard. Pupils read them silently. Teacher asks pupils to prove that in the first line (*He arrived with a fish*) the words form a combination (i.e. their cases agree) rather than a random group.
8.36	Pupils are asked to elaborate and explain the combination/group distinction. A brief class discussion follows.
8.38	The teacher asks a series of questions to establish that the pupils understand that the verb is 'in command' of the first sentence and that it takes the instrumental case.
8.39	Teacher and pupils work through the remaining four combinations ... Pupils are asked (a) to determine whether the verb or the noun is in command and (b) to identify the cases used (respectively, dative, genitive, instrumental, accusative). During the course of this episode the teacher is challenged by one pupil who disagrees with the answer the teacher has accepted from another pupil. The pupil is asked to explain her objection, which she does in detail. The objection is not sustained.

Russian education maintains linguistic expertise in teachers and fosters metalinguistic reasoning in pupils (Alexander, 2001). Unsurprisingly, there are also weaknesses. The analysis is very prescriptive; so in a recent official Russian language exam, at least two thirds of the questions asked pupils to correct 'mistakes' (Pavel Iosad, pc). Moreover, the teaching ignores matters of usage (Bakhtin, 2004: 12). And pedagogically the teaching can be very didactic, avoiding anything approaching 'play' (Jenny Folkeryd, via Jimmy van Rijt, pc).

Nevertheless, my conclusion is that language education is much more center-stage and purposeful in Russia than it is in the UK. Moreover, the examples quoted show what is possible with primary-aged children, and suggest the cognitive benefits of early, explicit instruction about language structure. Another fact about Russia which may be relevant is that Russia had the lowest 'achievement gap' of all the countries in Europe in the 2015 PISA round (Anon 2018: 6); the nature of their language education may or may not have contributed to this levelling effect by focusing weaker learners' attention on their own language.

It is also worth mentioning an educational initiative in which Russian practice has already impacted on the UK's schools: the *Linguistics Olympiad*. A linguistics olympiad is a competition for school children in which they 'crack the code' of some unfamiliar language on the basis of a small amount of presented data. The idea was first launched in 1965 in Moscow, whence it spread to a growing number of other countries and

eventually reached the UK[14], albeit not until 2009. It has proved a great success in the UK, and in 2025 it attracted just over 6,000 competitors in UK schools. Its Russian roots are easy to explain given the high quality of language education in Russian schools.

France and Francophone regions

This section embraces not only France but also French-speaking parts of Canada and Switzerland, which seem to be united at least by a common research agenda. Like Russia, all these places take language education, and especially spoken language, seriously – for example, France devotes 3 hours per week to grammar through all the primary years (Belard et al., 2008: 10) – but unlike Russia, the development of modern linguistics has led to a widespread perception of crisis and enthusiasm for reform.

The innovations triggered by this perception, which started in the 1970s, apply at every level, from aims through curriculum to pedagogy (Bulea Bronckart, 2020). The aim is now both communicative and cognitive: not only practical mastery of the language in all its styles and genres (Sawyer & van de Ven, 2007), but also understanding how one's own language works as a system, rather than as a list of rules to be memorized (Nadeau & Fisher, 2006). More recently, exploring plurilingualism (as in translanguaging) has also become important[15].

In Switzerland and Canada the grammar taught is linguistically informed (Wilmet, 2015; Boivin, 2018), though the grammar taught in France is currently rather traditional (Marie-Claude Boivin, pc). And although the first goal is still to teach the standard language, the full range of varieties, standard and non-standard, is accepted and studied (Wilmet, 2015). Moreover, at least in principle, the pedagogy has changed from presentation by the teacher to research by the children (Bentolila 2006), though the reality can fall short of this aspiration (Boivin, 2018).

This new approach to grammar is supported by a large research literature which dwarfs that of Anglophonia. Just for the decade from 2005-2016, a review found no fewer than 45 reports of empirical studies (Boivin, 2018: 5). One of the findings of this research is that direct teaching of grammar does seem to have a measurable effect on students' writing (Arseneau, Foucambert & Lefrançois, 2018) – a finding which directly contradicts the mass of similar research in anglophone countries (Andrews et al., 2004; Andrews, 2005; Andrews, 2010). Moreover, in contrast with the UK, teachers do indeed study grammar at university before going back into schools as teachers, and modern reforms promote inquiry-based and plurilingual learning, with well-developed links to modern linguistics.

But another finding is the familiar preference of some teachers for teaching what and as they themselves had been taught at school in spite of reforms to curriculum and pedagogy (van den Akker, 2003). Another weakness seems to be the lack of links between L1 and L2 teaching (Marie-Claude Boivin, pc). In spite of these weaknesses, it is clear that language education receives a great deal of expert attention, including exciting new approaches to pedagogy, and also that major change is underway, with all that this entails in terms of teacher expertise and re-skilling. What I can't claim is that France's language education produces a smaller achievement gap, because France's gap is even wider than England's[16].

Germany

In spite of the independence of the states in Germany, generalization is possible thanks to a relatively unified research literature, and once again we find language education in a much more prominent position than in the UK. But, as in Francophonia, there is also a great deal of research underpinning attempts to innovate and in particular to accommodate modern linguistics (Funke, 2018).

Once again, the heart of language education is grammar, which is still central to *Deutschunterricht* in all

[14] https://www.uklo.org/

[15] https://approchesplurilingues.e-a-v.ca/grammaire-plurilinguisme/

[16] https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/about/programmes/edu/pisa/publications/national-reports/pisa-2018/featured-country-specific-overviews/PISA2018_CN_FRA.pdf

German-speaking countries (Funke, 2018). In Germany itself, grammar instruction is compulsory throughout the first ten years of education. According to one study, teachers spent about 17% of the time devoted to German studies on grammar; this figure stayed constant between 1970 and 2007 (Funke, 2018). For pupils continuing to grades 11-13, grammar is replaced by a broader study of communication or even some linguistic theory.

One of the points of disagreement regarding grammar teaching in Germany is the extent to which it has actually changed as a result of influence from modern linguistics. On the one hand, it is possible to trace a strong stream of debate about how best to bring linguistics into the classroom, starting in the 1950s with the impact of a single book, *Die Innere Form des Deutschen*, by Hans Glinz (Glinz, 1952; Moulton, 1953). Glinz introduced the idea of 'tests' for syntactic structure, and 'Glinz tests' (*Glinz'sche Proben*) are still an important part of grammar teaching. The influence of linguistics continues; for example, a textbook used in the 2010s discussed de Saussure, Chomsky and Whorf (Eva Neu, pc). On the other hand, it is also possible to object that this debate has had very little effect on what is taught in the classroom (Hlebec 2017). Presumably the truth is a complex mixture of these two views.

Another relevant fact about grammar teaching in Germany is that "courses on grammar constitute a basic component of the first academic phase of language teacher education at German universities" (Döring, 2020: 91). Given this wonderful opportunity for influencing the content of grammar lessons, together with the climate of openness to linguistics discussed above, we might expect teachers of German to be really well prepared for the task; and no doubt they are much better prepared than their equivalents in England. But, just as we noted above for France, trainee teachers still tend to revert to teaching grammar in the way they were taught when at school (Döring, 2020; van Rijt et al., 2022).

Because of such weaknesses it is possible for a recent survey (Hlebec 2017) to conclude that the actual practice of grammar teaching in Germany is still traditional: deductive (i.e. teacher-led) and focused on word classes and sentence parts (*Satzglieder*). The same is true of textbooks, which are used by most teachers (though less so by Gymnasium teachers) and which have been criticized for their deductive orientation and their lack of problem-solving. Other researchers have also reported significant gaps in teachers' knowledge of grammar (Eisner, 2021). Not surprisingly, perhaps, the result is that school leavers are less competent at grammatical analysis than the official documents would lead us to expect.

To summarize, Germany offers a model in which a great deal of teaching time is devoted to developing children's understanding of how their L1 works. This applies especially to the teaching of grammar, so German children, like French children, acquire a detailed framework of concepts and terminology for analyzing sentences which teachers of foreign languages (including, of course, English) can build on. This framework may be to some extent informed by modern linguistics, giving future generations of school teachers an intellectual foundation which they can share with pupils.

The Netherlands

The school curriculum in the Netherlands gives an increasing amount of attention to conscious language awareness:

> Within the language domain, students learn how language is structured as a system. They learn to reason functionally about spelling and grammar of Dutch … discover how you express identity by making choices in your linguistic repertoire … explore how language is used in society by looking at language variation and language change[17]. (Anon, 2025b)

This broad focus marks an extension of the long-standing tradition of grammatical analysis which dates from the late 19th century (van Rijt & Coppen, 2017). Moreover, teachers seem to be keen to go beyond the 'rules of thumb' of the traditional approach so as to deepen their pupils' understanding (van Rijt, Wijnands & Coppen, 2019).

[17] Translation by Jimmy van Rijt.

The Netherlands, like France and Germany, also has a very active and productive empirical research program including intervention studies related to conceptual understanding and linguistic reasoning (van Rijt & Coppen, 2017), and there are enviably strong links between universities and schools through a 'Mastery of Dutch' program[18] led by academics. In short, language education in the Netherlands not only has high profile, but is increasingly open to influence from research, including linguistics research.

The solid tradition of grammar teaching gives grammar-teaching a status which is the reverse of what we have in the UK: in the Netherlands, teachers of Dutch are typically enthusiastic experts on grammar, which for several decades they continued to teach in spite of discouragement from official documents which followed the Anglo-Saxon anti-grammar trend: "Teachers seem to like to teach grammar, although they know that it is not related to the quality of written production" (Rijlaarsdam, 2011). (We now note the more recent research which casts doubt on the latter claim.)

The Netherlands is particularly relevant to England because of the cultural similarity between the two countries, which makes educational differences especially significant (Alexander 2022: 329). If language education is different, we can hardly explain the difference as an inevitable result of other cultural differences.

Estonia

Estonia is noteworthy because it consistently figures among the top performers in the PISA tests; for example, in the 2022 results in Table 1 it came 7th in the world for its overall score and was the top-scoring European country.

What is especially interesting about Estonian education is the close link between schools and university research which is possible thanks to the country's very small population (1.4 million): most teachers are graduates of the university of Tartu, so this university has a major impact on schools. For language teaching this is important, because all the teachers graduate, knowing a great deal of linguistics, from the university's Department of Linguistics.

Another relevant fact is, of course, that until 1991 Estonia was part of the USSR, so about 20% of Estonia's population speaks Russian as L1. Since 1991, therefore, strategies have also been needed for teaching Estonian as L2, though Russian is now being replaced by Estonian as the medium in all schools[19]. More generally, minority languages are officially recognized and supported; so if a school has more than ten pupils who speak a language, the school must provide two hours per week of teaching in that language. As for foreign languages, every child is expected to study two, and to learn them to a respectable level[20].

As in so many other countries, grammar is the core of language education, and it is taken very seriously. It is part of the curriculum from Grade 4 to Grade 10 (out of 12 grades), with a strong focus on the complex morphology of Estonian and its effects on spelling. Estonia also shares the international dissatisfaction with purely form-focused grammar teaching, so its national curriculum has seen a series of revisions over the last few decades towards a broader focus on meaning and usage, and on stylistic and regional variation (Uusen & Müürsepp, 2010).

However, to compensate for the rather boring exercises which dominate grammar teaching in earlier years, Estonia has also introduced a broader course in linguistics for final-year students in Estonian-medium schools; this course lasts a year and (unlike the UK's Advanced-level course in English Language) is taken by all pupils in these schools. (Similar courses have also been introduced in nearby Denmark.[21]) The course books are all authored by linguists, so this is another excellent example of a strong bridge between linguistics and schools.

For example, Figure 1 (Ehala & Kitsnik, 2011: 38) is an exercise from the linguistics course. This is an

[18] https://nederlands.vakdidactiekgw.nl/

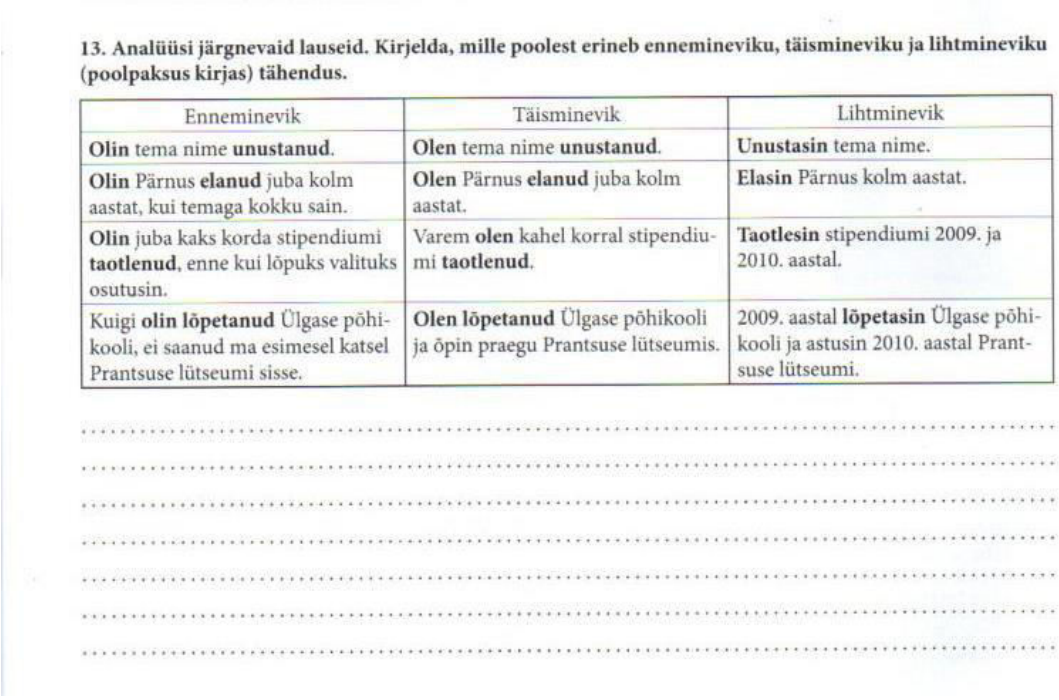
[19] https://www.educationestonia.org/estonian-education-language-reform/

[20] https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/eurypedia/estonia/teaching-and-learning-single-structure-education

[21] https://da.wikipedia.org/wiki/Almen_sprogforst%C3%A5else

exercise in semantics in which students think about the meaning differences between the three past tenses of Estonian, called *enneminevik*, *taisminevik* and *lihtminevik*; the highlighted verbs in the first row are the relevant forms of 'forget'. Given that the first word in the sentence distinguishes past and present tense, these are formally similar to English *had forgotten*, *has forgotten* and *forgot*; but what about their meanings? The table data guide students in identifying subtle differences in aspect and temporal reference, and the space below the data allows students to write down their thoughts; so once again, as in France, the students turn into language researchers.

Figure 1: An exercise in Estonian



13. Analüüsi järgnevaid lauseid. Kirjelda, mille poolest erineb enneminevikku, täisminevikku ja lihtminevikku (poolpaksus kirjas) tähendus.

Enneminevik	Täisminevik	Lihtminevik
Olin tema nime **unustanud**.	**Olen** tema nime **unustanud**.	**Unustasin** tema nime.
Olin Pärnus **elanud** juba kolm aastat, kui temaga kokku sain.	**Olen** Pärnus **elanud** juba kolm aastat.	**Elasin** Pärnus kolm aastat.
Olin juba kaks korda stipendiumi **taotlenud**, enne kui lõpuks valituks osutusin.	Varem **olen** kahel korral stipendiumi **taotlenud**.	**Taotlesin** stipendiumi 2009. ja 2010. aastal.
Kuigi **olin lõpetanud** Ülgase põhikooli, ei saanud ma esimesel katsel Prantsuse lütseumi sisse.	**Olen lõpetanud** Ülgase põhikooli ja õpin praegu Prantsuse lütseumis.	2009. aastal **lõpetasin** Ülgase põhikooli ja astusin 2010. aastal Prantsuse lütseumi.

I cannot claim that such exercises for school-leavers explain Estonia's high performance in PISA, because the Pisa program tests 15-year-olds who cannot yet have taken this course. But it does seem reasonable to see a link between the high performance in PISA and the skills that both teachers and students must have in order to handle this kind of teaching.

The pedagogy of turning students into researchers is certainly worth noting, but it is not unique to Estonia. I am aware of similar initiatives in Portugal (Costa & Rodrigues, 2019), the USA (Honda, 1994) and the Netherlands (Van Rijt, 2024), as well as a number of very useful textbooks in the UK (Barton, 1999; Lury, 2017). On the other hand, what may be special to Estonia is the widespread use of this pedagogy.

Estonia is clearly well ahead of the UK in the quality and quantity of its language education, whether in the study of L1 Estonian or of foreign languages – or, for that matter, in the study of a child's family language.

One thing is very clearly relevant to this difference: the academic qualification needed to become a teacher, at any level of schooling, is a Master's degree[22], whereas UK teachers only need a Bachelor's degree followed by a Post-graduate Certificate of Education. Moreover, the linguistics courses available to trainee teachers mean that Estonian teachers are much better qualified to teach about language than their UK counterparts.

[22] https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/eurypedia/estonia/initial-education-teachers-working-early-childhood-and-school-education

Finland

The Finnish language is very similar to Estonian, and until recently, Finland has had a similarly enviable record in the PISA tests. Moreover, language education has as high a profile in Finland as in Estonia. But unlike Estonia, Finland has a second official language – Swedish – although only 5% of the population speak it at home.

Finland has the special attraction for present purposes of bringing us back to the start of this article and the discussion of the British invention, Language Awareness. The National Core Curriculum is impressively enlightened, as can be seen in the extract in Figure 2 (Nupponen, Jeskanen & Rättyä 2019: 2), where the highlighting is added.

Figure 2*:* Language awareness in the Finnish National Curriculum 2016

> … plurilingual competence … comprises competences of different levels in mother tongues, other tongues, and their dialects. The basic principle of language instruction at school is using the language in different situations. It strengthens the pupils' **language awareness** and parallel use of different languages as well as the development of multi-literacy. The pupils learn to make observations on texts and in interaction practices in different languages, to use the concepts of **language knowledge** in interpreting texts, and to utilise diverse ways of language learning.

The Finnish National Core Curriculum (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016, 109) is especially interesting for us because of its focus on language awareness, emphasizing the similarity of language education in the mother tongue and in foreign languages, recognizing the plurilingual competence of many pupils, and highlighting competence in using linguistic concepts (Repo, 2023). Language awareness plays a central role in mother tongue and foreign language education, although both of these also aim at communicative skills. Consequently, good language awareness skills are naturally required of teachers.

Two other important features of language education in Finland are the frequent use of textbooks and the highly qualified teachers. According to one report, 76% of L1 Finnish teachers frequently used a textbook, and according to another the figure was 85%; and for foreign languages the figure is 98% (Nupponen et al., 2019: 10). As for the teachers, they all have a master's degree (as they do in Estonia) and their training qualifies graduates to teach language(s) at any level of the Finnish educational system, from the primary level to university level (Nupponen et al., 2019).

In spite of these very positive features of Finnish language education, teacher trainers in Finland also worry about a familiar range of issues: the rather old-fashioned approach to grammar in the textbooks, the continuing lack of collaboration between L1 and L2 teachers (in spite of the official statements to the contrary), and the dominance of the written medium in L1 education; and, above all, they worry about how to build a deeper understanding of grammar in all students (Rättyä, 2013).

A conclusion that emerges from both Finland and Estonia is the need for teachers to receive the training they need to deliver Language Awareness well. This is a major hurdle for the UK to cross. But another aspect of Finnish education which may be helpful in this regard is their respect for textbooks. Textbooks are important at a time of transition because they help teachers to overcome the inbuilt inertia which pushes them to teach as they were taught. Suppose the curriculum requires teaching about language that takes a teacher out of their comfort zone; in that case, the teacher can use a good textbook as a crutch. And of course, when the same topic comes up again the following year, the teacher will be in a better position to teach it. In

this way, textbooks can act as a tool of CPD (continuous professional development) in a changing curriculum.

Thematic synthesis

This section brings together a number of salient features that emerge from all these comparisons between England and other countries.

Centrality of language

All the other countries position language as foundational to learning across the curriculum. They all devote a lot of teaching time not only to developing the children's language skills, but also to deepening their understanding of how language works. This study dominates teaching in the schools of all these countries, so young people leave school knowing a great deal about the school's language (which may also be their own first language) – about its sounds and spellings, about its grammar, about its vocabulary, and in some cases even about its history and geography. Moreover, they combine this knowledge with skills in forming words and sentences and in choosing forms carefully so as to convey complex meanings in a context-appropriate way.

This central place of language is all the more important in the modern world of mass migration, in which 30% of school children in England speak a language other than English at home. These home languages are an enormous resource which we don't currently use – indeed, until recently our schools have tended to see it as a problem and children have seen their extra language ability as a source of embarrassment.

Although England's schools teach children reasonably well how to write and read, they teach very little about language. Bright children can no doubt work out for themselves some things about how language operates, but slower children may struggle, and none experience the excitement of a good project on language. Worse still, those who are multilingual never have the chance to admire their linguistic wealth.

Explicit teaching

In all these countries, teaching about language is explicit, so children learn and use a metalanguage for talking about grammar, vocabulary, sounds, letters and so on. It is taken for granted that children can learn this metalanguage and its associated concepts, just as they can in other subject areas such as science and history. It may be difficult for them, but with plenty of help and practice they can manage it.

The conceptual framework for this explicit teaching has its own roots. In Russia, it comes from school teaching in a tradition that goes back to the early 20th century (and in some respects long before that); and in France, Germany and The Netherlands there is a different school tradition which still counts. In contrast, Estonia and Finland have a tradition with roots in modern linguistics, and innovators in France, Germany and The Netherlands are trying to push their teaching in the same direction.

Does it work? Not surprisingly, teachers everywhere tend to cling to the expertise they developed as school children, and therefore tend to go on teaching in the way that they themselves had been taught. However, this tendency merely slows down change in education, rather than preventing all change, so the content of school teaching is still influenced by university research.

In contrast, England is just emerging from a century in which explicit teaching about language was deeply unfashionable. Until recently, the standard view among anglophone educators was that explicit teaching, especially about grammar, was a waste of time; the research evidence quoted was all reported in English, so research from France and Germany was ignored. Things changed when contradictory research evidence emerged in England (Myhill et al., 2012), but even that research evidence is ambiguous because any research project has to cope with teachers who know little about language, in contrast with all the teachers in our comparison countries.

Explicit teaching by well-informed teachers may be particularly helpful for slower learners who are responsible for the achievement gap which successive governments have failed to reduce in the UK. In the area of language, it was for a long time assumed that if anything needed to be learned, any child could pick it up from simple exposure under conditions of 'immersion'; the argument was that this must be so, because

this is how we all learn our first language. This assumption may have been justified for bright children fully immersed in the target language, whether L1 or L2, but it seems not to work for all learners, and especially not when exposure to the target language is as limited as it is in our L2 teaching.

Teacher expertise

Another major issue in language education is the subject knowledge of the teachers, given that a teacher can hardly teach beyond what they themself know. In all the other countries, teachers have themselves come through a school system which taught them a lot about language, and on top of that they often have a university course in linguistics which added to this knowledge. This being so, teachers can all be assumed to be relative experts on language, in contrast with UK teachers who typically know very little about language (apart from the expertise of a small number of specialists in areas such as special needs and English as an Additional Language).

It is true, as noted above, that the expertise found in other countries may be out of date when compared with modern linguistics. This is of course a serious issue, and there is no doubt that the knowledge taught in schools should as far as possible be compatible with the best available research. The analysis of language is complex, and research evidence is often equally complex, so the issue is by no means trivial. Indeed, as soon as we tie teacher knowledge to university research we face the prospect of constant change; but this is the case in every subject, and is infinitely preferable to the previous reality in which schools taught what had been taught to some previous generation, with little change between generations. This is why the updating experience of a university course is so important in the training of a teacher.

As for slow learners, a well-trained and knowledgeable teacher can help better than one who is poorly trained and knows less. This much is obvious. What is less clear is precisely what expertise is needed for helping different kinds of pupils.

Integration of L1 and L2

One of the pillars of Language Awareness is the principle that unifies L1 and L2 teaching: a shared view of language. What Language Awareness recommends is that children first study their own language – the language they bring from home and use in the playground – and learn to respect it as a complex human system. If this is different from English, so be it; this is the language in which they are already expert. Then they learn about other language systems: on the one hand, the standard spoken version of English, standard written English, and on the other, one or more foreign language. Each new language is viewed through the conceptual framework which children have already built for the languages already mastered, and each new language deepens their understanding of how language works.

In this approach, earlier languages create expectations which later languages may confirm or refute. At the very least, in talking about the target language an L2 teacher should be able to use the metalanguage built by L1 teachers, but they should also be aware of the structure of the L1. For example, the teacher of L2 should expect an English-speaking child to be shocked to the core on meeting the gender system of French, German or Spanish. Why on earth would a language classify everything in the universe as either masculine or feminine? And why is ‘moon’ masculine in German and feminine in French and Spanish? Language learning ought to be a thrilling exploration of cultural diversity, mixing the familiar and unfamiliar in a heady brew.

Most of the other countries manage this integration more or less successfully, with the possible exception (noted earlier) of France. But in the UK, L1 and L2 teachers rarely interact, and rarely see each other as colleagues in the teaching of language. Consequently, children typically learn one rough mental model for language in the English lesson, and a completely different one in their foreign language lesson. This is at best unhelpful for all students but must be very confusing for slower students.

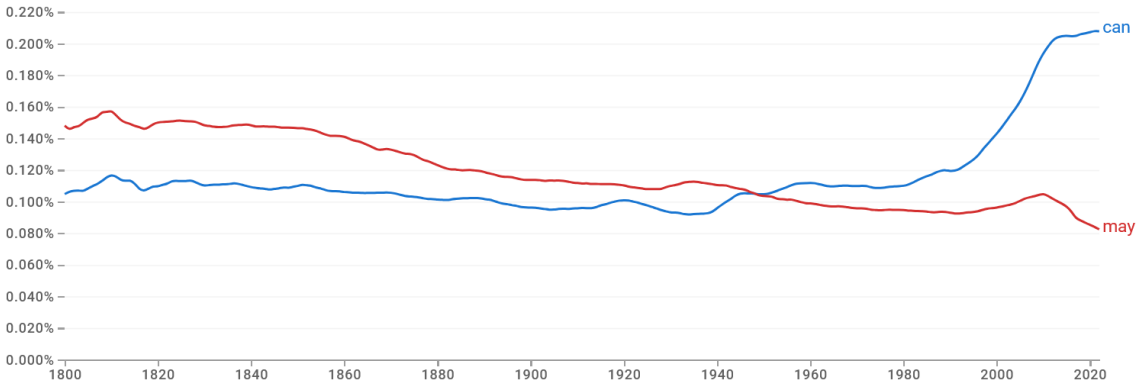
Inquiry-based pedagogy

The last general theme that emerges from my survey is the use of inquiry-based pedagogy, which was at least an ideal everywhere except Russia, albeit one which tended to be sidelined in Germany. In every country

the aim was deep understanding of the language system – an aim which surfaced very clearly in the primary lessons from Russia – but this aim was generally tied to the pedagogy of exploration and discussion instead of the more traditional top-down, teacher-led pedagogy. Not surprisingly, perhaps, reality sometimes falls short of the ideal, but the ideal is still important.

Language is an ideal area for classroom inquiry because it is so easily accessible. A classroom is full of both spoken and written language, but children can also explore the language spoken at home and by family, and they can gather examples from everyday language, books, the media and so on. For example, suppose a class is studying the meaning of words like *may* and *can*; the first step could be to collect examples invented by the class, but the second step could extend this collection by adding examples found elsewhere. A wonderful resource for such exploration is Google N-grams, which allows a class to produce an instant historical record like the one in Figure 3, which shows a gradual and slow decrease over the past two centuries in the use of *may* combined with a recent giant uptick in the use of *can* – something demanding discussion in class, but a discussion in which the teacher probably knows no more than the class.

Figure 3: The use of can and may since 1800



This pedagogy is a far cry from the old-fashioned pedagogy of memorized definitions associated with grammar teaching, and far easier to justify as part of education. It develops awareness of the realities of language – often called *noticing* (Keith, 1999) – as well as the ability to think and talk about language (*metalinguistic awareness*). Ultimately this kind of thinking counts as an example of scientific thinking (Honda, 1994). But above all, most children enjoy this kind of exploration, so it enhances engagement.

Once again, the curriculum in England has no place for this kind of activity in classrooms, although some excellent textbooks do promote it (Lury, 2017; Corbett & Strong, 2016). This is especially regrettable for slower learners, who stand to gain the most from the gentler pace of classroom explorations.

Implications for policy and practice

What conclusions can be drawn from this comparison of England with other countries? The answer clearly depends on many things, including how we interpret the 2022 PISA results.

On the one hand, we could accept the results as an accolade for the present arrangements. Being ranked 13th in the world is surely something we should be very proud of, so we meddle at our peril. The trouble is that previous tests have ranked us much lower, and there is a danger of going down rather than up. Moreover, a high rank doesn't solve the problems that everyone recognizes, such as the large cohort of young people who leave school every year without qualifications. Even if other countries share the problem, it still needs to be solved here. My conclusion is that, although PISA 2022 shows that our schools are doing really well in some respects, it is important to learn what we can from international comparisons, such as the one in this article.

The following is therefore a list of the changes that are needed if our schools are to align with international

best practice, at least as represented by countries in Europe such as those surveyed here.

Elevate language education as a core curriculum area.

We have seen that all the other countries give significant amounts of teaching time to language education, to the extent that language education can be seen, at least in primary school, as the core of education. This early focus on language makes really good sense when seen as an investment in solid foundations for almost all kinds of later learning.

But a language focus also has other benefits. For one thing, most of the teaching is focused on the children's own language, so it encourages them to take pride in their language, and also to take pride in their expertise in this area – in contrast with most other curriculum areas where they are definitely novices. And for another, building an intellectual framework for talking and thinking about language is an excellent exercise in mental development, in which they learn important things about mental activities such as categorization, relationships and social norms.

When this intellectual framework goes beyond the child's own language to embrace other kinds of language, we find the familiar 'spiral curriculum' in which concepts are revisited over and over again, becoming deeper and more reliable on every visit. It makes no difference whether the language is the L1 language of the school and of academic life, or the L2 language of a foreign country. And if all teachers share the same framework, they can all build it together, whether in science or in poetry, helping the children's minds to grow into mature adult minds.

Slow learners need language education more than others precisely because they have more difficulty in working things out for themselves. They need things to be spelt out explicitly. These are the 38% of children who don't achieve the 'expected standard' at the end of primary school in all subjects[23] – a shameful figure, which anticipates the 33% that fail GCSE exams five years later[24]. Whatever the PISA results show, we all know that the long tail of underachievement exists and should worry us. And one of the arguments for a clear focus on language education is that language is the main tool that children need in order to make progress. Slow learners have less language: less vocabulary, less grammar and (presumably) less metalinguistic awareness. Bolstering a child's language resources deserves top priority in any school system.

Reintroduce explicit instruction in both English and modern languages.

The explicit instruction in language which is so common in other countries helps children, and especially slower learners, to build a framework of concepts and terminology which they can apply in their learning. They can apply it to the technical language of school subjects; for example, if they can recognize past-tense verbs and know how they are normally used, they can see that English teachers are applying a special rule when they say *Shakespeare says ….* How can a dead person say anything now? And they can also apply their understanding of language outside the classroom when swapping jokes in the playground or even when switching languages at home.

The use of explicit instruction is especially important in foreign languages, given the pitifully small teaching time available for teaching in our schools. The unconscious absorption of language that happens when children are immersed in the target language simply doesn't have time to happen when children only meet that language for, say, two hours per week (Hawkins 1981: 97; Mitchell 2011). In that situation, they need a lot of help to speed up their learning, and explicit instruction ranks high among the possibilities, provided it is combined with practice time.

[23] https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/key-stage-2-attainment-national-headlines/2024-25

[24] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/infographic-gcse-results-2024/infographics-for-gcse-results-2024-accessible

Reform teacher training to include linguistics

In most of the other countries (and perhaps in all of them), trainee language teachers study linguistics as part of their university training, as do generalist primary teachers. This training tops up the knowledge about language that they acquired at school and brings it up to date. Of course, the two bodies of knowledge may not sit comfortably together, and we have seen that some countries worry about the old-fashioned ideas that teachers go on teaching in spite of their university training. But the main point is that university linguistics is available, and in some cases helps to bring teaching up to date.

It is important to name the academic subject supplying these new ideas as *linguistics*, because this at least shows where the expertise lies. In other subjects, the academic link is clear: chemistry teachers teach the chemistry of universities, and so on for history teachers, literature teachers and all the other subjects. In the area of language, the linkage is too often ignored. For example, some versions of the National Curriculum were built without any input at all from linguists. This makes no sense at all, even if we agree that linguists need to improve their ways of collaborating with educationalists.

Promote collaboration between L1 and L2 educators.

Another theme of this article is the need for L1 English and L2 foreign-language teachers to work together, as advocated in the Language Awareness literature. The unifying factor is that both groups are teaching language, so each really needs to know what the other is doing. They can help one another in important ways: the L1 teacher can provide the intellectual framework for the L2 teacher's teaching, and the L2 teacher can deepen and extend this framework. Indeed, it would make complete sense for the two groups to belong to the same department in a school: the Language Department; but this arrangement seems to be vanishingly rare in the UK.

Use textbooks and inquiry-based teaching.

Textbooks and pedagogy are closely related in obvious ways, but textbooks have an oddly ambiguous status in UK schools: for some reason, our teachers seem to avoid using textbooks (Oates, 2014). But at the same time, the exam boards for GCSE each publish their own textbooks, and these serve to define the syllabus for that board. This uncertainty about textbooks seems very strange, given the support that a good textbook provides both for teachers and students.

But leaving the general case aside, it is surely beyond doubt that textbooks are helpful when a subject is in transition, as I claim that language education should be. If teachers are being asked to change their teaching, this is much easier if they use a textbook which enshrines the new teaching. A textbook author devotes a year or more to producing it – researching everything from general principles to examples for practice; and better still, a textbook author is chosen for their expertise in the area. Even if the teacher adopts the textbook grudgingly just as a crutch to lean on during the transition, it is likely to produce better teaching than the teacher could produce unaided.

Turning to the inquiry-based teaching described above, this can easily be combined with a textbook. The book can be like a cookbook, full of recipes for active and exciting lessons; and if the teacher has better ideas, they can replace the ones in the book.

Phase in implementation across generations

My last point is that change comes slowly in schools. It's true that some countries manage to transform their schools rapidly, but this doesn't seem to be the general case. Several countries in my survey reported teachers who went on teaching as they themselves had been taught – and very understandably so, because they had learned to be experts, and they felt more comfortable in their area of expertise than out of it.

This raises a fundamental issue about the relation between official documents and pedagogical practice. Writing a curriculum takes very little time, even if the job is done thoroughly – say, a couple of years. But implementing that curriculum can take very much longer, because ultimately it has to be implemented in classrooms by teachers doing things which they aren't accustomed to doing. The process can be accelerated

by pressure from exams, but this produces 'teaching to the test', which wastes everyone's time. In the long run, an educational change follows the pace of the teachers and may take decades, or even generations, to implement. Some teachers may resist a change because they simply believe it to be bad education; others resist out of inertia; but others may see the point of the change and start to implement it quite soon. Putting all these different teachers together gives a long lead time for any change.

If this is so, then it matters for educational planning. For one thing, planning needs time, so it can't be fitted into the five years of a single parliament, and if every new government tears up what the previous government planned, change will never happen. But for another, teachers need help in bringing the changes in. One important kind of help would be a phased introduction spread across several years or even decades. Each year would require a new element to be added, while the elements already added were consolidating; and these elements would be carefully graded and interconnected so that the introduction went smoothly and successfully.

Conclusion

This review identifies a consistent pattern across successful education systems in six different countries: linguistic understanding, explicit instruction, and teacher expertise underpin both literacy and multilingual competence. England's underachievement in these areas stems not from conceptual weakness but from policy neglect. Re-engaging with its own linguistic heritage — through systematic, cumulative language education — offers a sustainable route to higher achievement and greater equity.

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