

Trouble in the English language primary classroom

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When it comes to teaching English Language, our primary teachers are in trouble—and have been for a very long time.

Research evidence suggests that especially in the area of grammar teachers typically do not know enough and lack confidence.

Willem Hollmann, Professor of Linguistics at Lancaster University and former Chair of the Committee for Linguistics in Education (CLiE), argues that the gaps in teachers' knowledge and confidence are not their fault but mostly that of this and several previous governments.

In a 'position paper', ['Knowledge About Language'](#) (KAL), published today on the [CLiE](#) website, Professor Hollmann identifies shortcomings in support for teachers.

The solution, he suggests, is a centrally commissioned study into the gaps in teachers' knowledge and subsequent investment in high-quality support materials.

"This is a serious issue for [school children](#)'s performance as well as for the teachers' own confidence and, to be blunt, the gaps are mainly the government's fault together with the other obvious guilty party—grammar book publishers, who hardly ever consult academic grammarians on their publications. As a result, some books contain quite a few errors."

"This position paper is intended to describe the situation to parents, teachers and, hopefully, relevant civil servants, and to suggest a possible way in which things could be improved."

KAL covers the sounds of a language, its grammatical structures, its levels of formality. It may also include ways in which the language changes across space (with different accents and dialects), and across time (as languages evolve).

The 2014 Primary National Curriculum (NC) specifies the KAL that

teachers are required to teach.

The NC also contains implicit expectations. For example, it lists correspondences between written letters and spoken sounds. The standard used for these correspondences (in the International Phonetic Alphabet) is Received Pronunciation (RP). Yet, says the paper, this is just one accent among many.

Teachers may also need additional KAL to be able to field questions from children. The concepts and terms in the NC may well not be enough for this, adds the paper.

"Unfortunately, there are no large-scale studies into teachers' actual KAL," says Professor Hollmann. "The studies we have only tend to focus on knowledge about grammar, as opposed to KAL more broadly."

"Unsurprisingly, given that most teachers have been taught very little about grammar themselves, the authors of these studies are typically led to conclude that knowledge and confidence are unsatisfactory."

"That is not the teachers' fault. The amount and quality of the support available to them has been patchy with little or no input from grammarians and materials have not drawn on available exciting new grammatical research."

To make real progress in achievement against the NC standards, the CLiE paper calls for the Government to commission research into gaps in teachers' KAL, and then to invest in developing appropriate high-quality support materials.

More information: [clie.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/... ing-the-KAL-gaps.pdf](http://clie.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/CLiE-2014-15-Implementing-the-KAL-gaps.pdf)

Provided by Lancaster University

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