All educational research is primarily directed towards improving learning by informing policy and teaching practice. This Statement and the accompanying elaborating notes focus on the ways in which teachers, throughout their careers, use research for the key purposes of informing their teaching practices and improving students’ learning. The strength of the verbs in the six Statements highlights what teachers do, and in the case of this statement, emphasise the ‘use’ of research. Teachers use research and evidence, not for peripheral purposes, but for the overarching purpose of improving teaching and learning.

‘Use’ is a word that implies that the research will make an impact. If it is not used for significant purposes, research cannot be said to have made an impact. Reflecting on this Statement of Belief is an invitation to undertake some mapping of the territory of research, including some backward mapping to explore impact.

Improving students’ learning is the central goal of all teaching. There is a chain of logic that connects the strengthening of teachers’ professional knowledge and skills to enhanced teaching practices, and ultimately, to more successful learning for students. Professional knowledge about the teaching of English includes knowledge about the subject English as well as knowledge about how students learn, and this knowledge is derived from a wide range of research. Findings from contemporary research are often included in the content presented in professional learning programs for teachers, and influence the selection of content for these programs.

Recent studies have demonstrated that while the connection between the quality of teaching and students’ learning is well established, attributing changes in students’ learning directly to their teachers’ learning from particular professional development programs is a complex matter. There are major challenges for researchers seeking to identify the impact of teachers’ professional learning on students’ learning. The most significant challenge lies in the need for research that takes place over a sufficient period of time to connect evidence of the impact of teachers’ professional learning, to changes in teaching practices and eventually to changes in student learning outcomes (Meiers & Ingvarson, 2005).

English teachers make use of a wide range of general educational research, as well as research that is specifically concerned with the teaching of English. A scan of the contents of the journals and the conference programs of English and literacy professional associations indicates the extent to which these publications and conferences play a key role in providing teachers with access to research. A wide variety of research is reported: large scale research studies, intensive case studies, ethnographic studies, accounts of classroom practice, analyses of student work, surveys, program evaluations. These reports tackle a diversity of questions, sometimes engaging with new problems and questions, at other times investigating existing concerns in innovative ways. The dissemination of the findings of research through these professional channels reflects recognition that research findings are perceived as a necessary aspect of teachers’ professional experience.

The work of English teachers is also enriched by educational research such as national and international studies that enable teachers to see their work in a broader context. The findings from the OECD Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA) set the achievements of Australian students in reading literacy against an international backdrop.

The Statement of Belief is quite explicit about the nature of educational research that informs teaching and learning, and this raises a number of issues. The focus is on research that is ‘rigorous’, ‘evidence based’, ‘strong’, and ‘informs effective teaching and learning’. We use research and evidence to inform teaching practice and improve the learning of students.
The nature of evidence is a key issue, in terms of the extent to which it is valid and reliable, has been gathered using ethical processes, has been analysed using sound quantitative and qualitative methodologies, has a strong background in scholarship, and builds on existing knowledge. Another issue involves the extent to which the evidence provides a basis for generating findings that are reliable and generalisable.

An imperative for rigorous research about effective teaching and learning is that strong research questions are used to shape the methodologies. The Statement’s emphasis on the use of both qualitative and quantitative methods and, by implication, of mixed-methods approaches is very relevant. In many cases, changes in practice and in student achievement take time to become evident, and this requires the use of longitudinal research methodologies.

An interesting example of the use of a methodology that attempted to make an evidential link between the performance of students and the literacy teaching practices of their teachers is found in a recent Australian national study, *In Teachers’ Hands* (Louden et al, 2005). This study used the literacy assessment instruments designed for a longitudinal study to measure the progress of young children in the early years and combined this information with videoed classroom observations of literacy teaching practices. The development of a *Classroom Literacy Observation Schedule* enabled researchers to observe the literacy teaching practices of a national sample of teachers who, on the basis of value-added analyses of their students’ performances in one year of school English literacy teaching, had been identified as being highly effective or less effective teachers. The video data was analysed in terms of the thirty-three teaching practices in the *Classroom Literacy Observation Schedule*. Data were analysed both quantitatively, in terms of frequency of occurrence of teaching practices, and qualitatively. The qualitative analysis involved a cross-case analysis of the video data and accompanying transcripts. A key finding of the study was that the more effective teachers demonstrated a wide variety of literacy practices from all dimensions of the observation schedule.

Subject English draws on research and theory generated in an extensive range of scholarly fields. These include linguistics and discourse analysis, literary theory, particularly reader response theory, critical theory and cultural studies, rhetoric and composition.

*Research in the Teaching of English*, a journal of the National Council of Teachers of English in the USA, regularly publishes annotated bibliographies of research in the teaching of English. The main section headings of the annotated bibliographies are indicative of the extensive scope of this field, and when the heading used for the bibliographies are compared over time, demonstrate how research interests and priorities change and develop. In 1993, these section headings and sub-headings were used in the bibliography:

- curriculum (language interrelationships)
- literature (reader response, content analysis, literature across the curriculum)
- researcher education
- teacher education
- writing (argument/persuasion, assessment and portfolios, assignments, audience, composing processes, cross-disciplinary studies, developmental/longitudinal studies, discourse patterns and genres of writing, first-year college writing, professional writing/professional development, response to student writing, tutorials/writing groups, word processors and computers).

Four years later, in 1997, the sections were as follows:

- assessment
- bilingual education, foreign language education
- discourse processes
- family/workplace literacy
- professional development
- reading
- research methodology
- teaching and learning of literature
- technology and literacy
- writing

Almost a decade later, in 2006, these categories were used in the bibliography

- discourse/narrative analysis/cultural difference
- literacy
- literary response/literature
- reading
- professional development/teacher education
- second language literacy
- technology/media
- writing

An example of the continually developing nature of the field of English teaching and the emergence of new research interests in changing contexts can be seen in the categories used in relation to technology. These
evolved over these years: from a sub-set under writing, ‘word processors and computers’, to ‘technology and literacy’, to ‘technology/media’.

It is interesting to reflect on the impact on practice of particular research studies. Retrospective consideration of past research enables us to gain perspectives on ways in which the research has been used over time, and the durability of the findings.

A pertinent example is the 1975 study undertaken by James Britton and colleagues, *The development of writing abilities (11–18)*. In this descriptive and developmental study over 2000 samples of the writing of secondary school students aged 11–18 were analysed. The data were drawn from school students’ work in all subjects of the curriculum where extended writing was used. The model derived from the analysis emphasised the function served by the piece of writing and the audience to which it is addressed. The three function categories in the model – expressive, transactional and poetic – have played a significant role in English curriculum since 1975. Currently there is widespread interest in the effects of writing on learning, often called ‘writing to learn’, linked to discussion of writing across the curriculum. A recent database search for studies about writing to learn identified numerous articles citing the study by Britton et al, and also numerous citations of a seminal article by Janet Emig, *Writing as a Mode of Learning* (Emig, 1977), in which she contended that ‘writing represents a unique mode of learning’.

Several decades ago, Andrew Wilkinson’s research into spoken language made a profound impact on the teaching of English. In the course of researching spoken language in the University of Birmingham in 1965, Wilkinson found that there was no word for the central concept of speaking and listening and so coined the term ‘oracy’ to describe these skills as a parallel to literacy. He noted how, at that time, English was thought of as having three facets: language, literature and composition, and that the tendency was to think of these as either reading or writing skills. He argued that oracy as well as literacy was integral to English and literacy teaching (Wilkinson, 1970). A review of Australian curriculum documents at the beginning of the 21st century leaves no room for doubting that speaking and listening have an established place in English classrooms. A similar development involving the broadening of the literacy and English curriculum has been seen in recent years in the recognition of the importance of visual texts (see, for example, Kress, 1996).

Jack Thomson’s Australian study, published in 1987 under the title *Understanding Teenagers’ Reading*, explored reading processes and the teaching of literature. The major aim of the investigation resonated with central concerns of English teaching:

> to formulate both a process model and a developmental model of literary response and to relate them to one another so as to research some understanding not only of what progress in literary learning might look like,... but also, and more significantly, what strategies students use at each particular staging point or level.

(Thomson, 1987, p 15)

The study was set in the frame of contemporary theory about the activity of reading literature, and identified the value of finding out about the reading and viewing habits of teenagers. This kind of investigation can be implemented on a large scale, or with a single class. Many teachers have gathered information about the reading and viewing habits and interests of their students and, as a result of what they have found, have adapted their classroom practices.

Twenty years later, reading Thomson’s analysis and discussion of the data from questionnaires and interviews completed by Australian students in years 8 and 10 about their reading and viewing habits and attitudes, we are reminded that some research questions need to be revisited periodically, as contexts change over time. A similar study in 2007 would include the realm of digital texts, including video games.

Reflecting on these historical examples of research that has had a continuing impact over the years is indicative of the usefulness of research to teachers. The examples cited presented new ideas and understandings on teaching practices, and over time, these ideas have become embedded in the teaching of English.

The elaborating notes for this Statement of Belief point to the range of research activities that provides useful insights for teachers.

**School based**

Educational research is not an activity remote from schools, but is based in schools. External researchers continually seek approval to gather data from schools, and schools gather their own data. Many schools now conduct school-based professional learning activities for teachers, to address local priorities and needs. Increasingly, those who manage these professional learning activities evaluate the usefulness and impact of these programs within the school. New computer-based resources, such as electronic survey tools, provide an effective means of gathering and analysing evaluative
data from teachers and students. The evaluation findings can then be used to plan future professional learning projects.

Teams of teachers monitor the introduction of new teaching approaches or new texts for study. The benefits of working in professional learning teams to collaboratively look at students’ work is a research activity, leading to better understandings of what students do, and to the formulation of other ways of improving learning.

**Action or practice based**

The classroom is an important site for research, when teachers reflect on their teaching practices, ask questions about these practices, and seek answers to their questions. In action research, teachers are able to focus on questions that are important and relevant to them in the school context. In planning an inquiry into an aspect of practice, implementing the plan, describing what has happened and reflecting on the process, groups of teachers or individual teachers generate new knowledge about effective teaching.

**Research based on other forms of empirical and theoretical research**

A rigorous approach to reviewing research evidence is that used in systematic reviews. In this approach, the aim is to find as much as possible of the research relevant to particular research questions, and use explicit methods to identify what can reliably be said on the basis of these studies. The reviews synthesise research findings so that they are easily accessible to those who use the research to make decisions about policy or practice.

This approach was used in an in-depth review of research designed to help answer the question, ‘What is the impact of networked Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) on literacy learning in English for 5-16 year olds?’ (Andrews, 2002). Research studies that investigate new developments, such as the increasing use of ICTs in schools are topical, and Andrews’ study is an example of the use of this research approach. Extensive searches of international databases yielded 1,871 post-1990 studies of possible relevance. When the criteria established for the review were used to screen these studies, 188 met the criteria, and 16 were concerned with the topic of the impact of networked ICT – the internet and email – on literacy learning. The findings were inconclusive, but in terms of practice, the review recommended that

... more attention needs to be given to the ways in which ICT is used in classrooms in support of teaching; teachers need to take more account of the ways in which young people work at home on computers; and ICT needs to be seen as one tool among many for the improvement and support of literacy learning (Andrews, 2002, p. 5)

By pointing out the importance of taking note of the use of ICTs in classrooms, and in the everyday lives of young people, this recommendation indicates how large scale research can open up possibilities for school-based and action research studies that could be undertaken by teachers.

A second example of a study using a theoretical approach involved a synthesis of evidence of the power of feedback to improve teaching and learning (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). This is a topic of major interest to all teachers, particularly in relation to classroom assessment. The review focused on ‘feedback as information about the content and/or constructions that students have made from the learning experience’ (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 82). The review posed the question: ‘How effective is feedback?’ and commenced by comparing a synthesis of over 500 meta-analyses of various influences on student achievement with evidence related to feedback. This process indicated that ‘feedback is more effective when it provides information on correct rather than incorrect responses and when it builds on previous trails’ (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 85).

Hattie and Timperley conclude that feedback can be very powerful in enhancing learning, and, in relation to assessment, ‘teachers need to seek and learn from feedback (such as from students’ responses to tests) as much as do students, and only when assessment provides such learning is it of value to either’ (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 104).

**Drawn from and facilitative of group collaboration and the sharing of professional knowledge**

Teams, professional networks and clusters are significant contexts for research activities. When groups of teachers with common interests, concerns, and a shared vision are able to work collaboratively over an extended period of time, they create new professional knowledge. Opportunities to share experiences and ask questions about the introduction of a new strategy, such as literature circles, digital portfolios, approaches to visual texts, or coaching are mutually supportive, bring a range of perspectives to bear on the questions, and enrich the
experience and understanding of all involved. The collaborative experience of the group leads to the creation of new knowledge for future use.

Moderation activities, where groups of teachers from within or across schools come together to strengthen the consistency of their judgements about student achievement against agreed standards provide another research context. In these contexts, professional knowledge is shared, and leads to new knowledge about, for example, the kinds of assessment tasks that most effectively allow students to demonstrate the full range of their learning.

**Critically reflective activities by individual teachers and students.**

Research is always a critical and reflective activity, suggesting new directions and questions. When teachers and their students pause to reflect on the impact of a particular classroom approach, and to ask critical questions about what happened, they are engaging in research. In the course of the regular cycle of planning, teaching, evaluating and reviewing many answers to research questions emerge, and many new questions are formulated.

The narratives that are at the core of the *Standards for Teachers of English Language and Literacy in Australia* (STELLA) were written to illustrate the standards in action. English teachers wrote accounts, or ‘narratives’ in which they described and reflected on the complexities of teaching encountered in the context of their own classrooms. The use of narratives in the formulation of STELLA drew from the tradition of narrative enquiry, and particularly the ‘cases’ approach developed by Shulman (1992). These narratives are an impressive example of critical investigations in which teachers have identified episodes in teaching and, in their writing, have shaped a rich and contextualised account of the episode, combined with sharply critical analysis. These narratives provide powerful examples of how this kind of critical reflection leads to further development in teaching practice.

The STELLA materials provide a framework for critically reflective action-research projects. A project undertaken in 2005 by the Australian Literacy Educators’ Association established small groups of teachers in three states who worked with a mentor to explore the STELLA materials to develop their own professional learning (Meiers, 2006). A major finding of the project was that STELLA provides a useful guide for prompting a collaborative, investigative learning community.

**English teachers use research and evidence**

In their professional practice, English teachers constantly use research and evidence in a multiplicity of ways. The teaching of English raises, and will continue to raise, a wide variety of research questions. Answers to these questions will be sought in the findings of researchers working in many academic disciplines, using a range of quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. Reflecting on contemporary and historical research that has informed practice is a powerful reminder that this is a never-ending story. In future, changing contexts will prompt new research questions, and new knowledge will be generated from a wide range of research studies and from teachers’ own critical inquiries.

**References**


