

African American Literature, Music, and Art in the Great Depression

*Ellen Connelly
Pittsburgh Mifflin PreK-8*

Contents of Curriculum Unit
Overview
Rationale
Objectives
Strategies
Classroom Activities
Annotated Bibliography/Resources
Appendices/Standards

Overview

The curriculum unit, African American Literature, Music, and Art in the Great Depression is designed for students at the middle school level. My specific audience is seventh grade Communications students, but the unit is easily adaptable for any level of middle school student in a variety of subject areas. The main goal of this unit is to discover more about the African American writers, musicians, and artists of the Great Depression era. In order to meet this goal, my curriculum unit is divided into four interconnected modules.

The first module is a brief introduction or overview of the migration of African Americans from the south to the north and background information on the Harlem Renaissance. This section of the curriculum unit also briefly introduces the remaining three modules. Four activities are provided to allow the teacher to access background information from the students and discuss the literature, music, and art of the period. As with all aspects of this unit, teachers have the option of eliminating parts of a module or an entire module depending on time constraints and students prior knowledge. This module and the remaining three are designed to stand-alone or interconnect with the others in order to provide flexibility and meet the needs of a variety of learners.

The second module is an exploration of the literature and writers of the Depression era. This module includes eight activities to challenge students and promote discussion and interaction. Students are introduced to the module through

three books about Langston Hughes. After the book readings and in depth discussions, students research other famous writers of the period and write an informational paper on their findings. Students conclude this module by penning reflections in their journals.

In the next module, students explore the music of the Great Depression. Music had a great impact on this particular time period and six different activities are included to assist students in their understanding of the music and musicians of the period. Activities as simple as listening to songs of the period and as complex as creating flyers and persuasive advertisements are included in this section of the curriculum unit. Students have the opportunity to conduct Internet searches of music and musicians as they work through this exciting module. Opportunities for discussions and journal writing are available in this module too.

The fourth and final module of the curriculum unit examines the art and artists of the period. Four activities help students discover the amazing contributions of the artists of the time while exploring their own artistic side. The culminating activity of this section is collaboration between the art and communication teachers as students create their own piece of period art and put pen to paper as they discuss their thoughts and feelings regarding their newly created art work.

Once again, it is important to stress that each of these modules is designed to be taught separately or as an entire unit. Teachers have the option of picking and choosing which modules best fit their own needs and the unique needs of the students in their particular classroom.

Rationale

The rationale behind the development of this unit is to merge new information and ideas in the areas of literature, music, and art with the communications curriculum presently being delivered at the middle school level. Students in the seventh grade read the novel *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, by Mildred Taylor which is set in the south during the Great Depression. Through background information and various forms of discussion, students are able to understand the economic hardships and varying degrees of prejudice the Logan family is subjected to in the novel. This novel does an excellent job of giving students a realistic look at life in the rural south during the Great Depression. This unit will give students a broader look at the Great Depression through the lens of the African American artists, writers, and musicians

living and working during that time period. This unit will also meet many of the requirements needed for completion of students' standards-based portfolios.

The seminar I participated in which led to the development of this unit was titled African-American Literature that Aligns the Literature with the Historical Periods of the Development of African and African-American Cultures. The focus of the seminar is the exploration of African literature and history and its relationship to African American literature and history. As a middle school Communications teacher, I was anxious to further explore these concepts and eager to integrate them into my present curriculum.

In order to understand the Great Depression and its impact on United States citizens, particularly African Americans, it's important to take a small step back in time. The Great Depression lasted approximately ten years, from 1929 to the beginning of World War II. It is commonly believed that the stock market crash of October 1929 started the Great Depression but that was only one of several contributing factors. In the summer of 1929, the United States was in an economic recession, which was characterized by a drop in automobile sales, new home construction, and steel production. Businesses began to lay off large numbers of workers and by 1933, nearly 25 percent of the American work force was unemployed (Blumenthal 132). To make matters worse, actions taken by the federal government, such as loans to businesses and tax cuts for workers, did little to help those who had lost their jobs. Unemployment insurance and welfare programs did not exist, so the unemployed were forced to rely on charitable organizations or family members for food and shelter. In addition, the country's banking system was unsound. Hundreds of banks went out of business during the 1930s and many people lost their life savings.

Although the origins of the Great Depression were primarily economic in nature, the effects of this monumental catastrophe were felt in virtually every aspect of life in the United States. Social mores and attitudes, politics, science, and the arts were all impacted in profound ways. Some of the most devastating influences were seen in changes to the structure and interpersonal dynamics of American families. Many families were forced out of their dwellings when they could not afford to pay their mortgages or rent. Sometimes, these homeless people moved in with relatives while others took up residence in hastily constructed shacks or rundown tenements. Others lived without any shelter and slept on park benches or in public facilities, such as subway stations (Lindop 6-7). The rise of homelessness and the hardships brought on by unemployment affected all family members. Fathers, who were expected to provide financial stability for their loved ones, often suffered from the psychological effects of unemployment when their ability to provide that stability was taken away. Some men abandoned their families in despair and became vagabonds in search of

work. Mothers tended home gardens, took part-time jobs, and did whatever they could to stretch their limited funds. Children were born into poverty and learned at an early age to do without basic necessities like food or clothing. Many of them dropped out of school in order to earn money to help support their families (The 1930s 18-19).

In politics, Americans embraced the New Deal of the Roosevelt administration, which expanded the role of the federal government in ways that had never been seen before in the United States. These policies were in stark contrast to the limited government approach that was advocated by president Hoover in the early years of the Great Depression. Mr. Hoover believed that our country's free market economy would eventually correct itself and that government intervention would do nothing to advance that process. He also felt that those who had been adversely affected by economic misfortune could rely on local governments and charitable organizations for temporary relief (Lindop 13). As the hard times worsened, civil unrest erupted across the United States. Riots, demonstrations, and civil disobedience became commonplace as people grew more desperate in their attempts to survive (Lindop 15-16). With the advent of the New Deal, Americans looked to the federal government to provide direct relief in the form of financial assistance, employment, and legislation that promoted fair trade and labor practices. Some of the programs and accomplishments of the New Deal are still with us today. For example, Social Security provides pensions and financial support to millions of Americans who are retired, disabled, or otherwise unable to support themselves. Employment laws that were established under Roosevelt's administration continue to guarantee that employees are paid a minimum wage and are not forced to work beyond a maximum number of hours. Finally, investors can feel confident that their savings are insured, and that the sale of stocks and bonds are regulated by laws that were established under the New Deal (Lindop 34-35).

The turbulence of the era, and the dramatic socio-political changes that resulted, were also felt in the fields of literature, music, and visual and performing arts. The Works Progress Administration, one of many organizations established under the New Deal, paid musicians, actors, and other artists to create and perform works that could be enjoyed by the public at reduced prices. In 1935, the Federal Writers' Project was established to employ writers, editors, and researchers. Eventually, this program employed 3,300 people including prominent African American writers like Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison (The 1930s 100-101). In the media, radio enjoyed unprecedented popularity and prosperity as Americans turned to it for news, entertainment, inspiration, and relief from the emotional effects of poverty. Between 1931 and 1939, the numbers of radios in American homes grew from 12 million to 44 million, or over 80 percent of the population (The 1930s 72). The widespread use of this medium launched and promoted the careers of many

musicians, actors, comedians, and journalists. Motion pictures also enjoyed a dramatic increase in popularity as millions of Americans went to theaters to find inexpensive escape from the hardships of their daily lives. Over 5,000 feature length films were produced during the 1930s, including classics like *Gone with the Wind*, *Cleopatra*, *Scarface*, and the comedies of the Marx Brothers (The 1930s 88-94).

The African American community was not immune to the social, political and cultural upheavals of the Great Depression. Earlier in the twentieth century, a great migration of African Americans from the post-Civil War South to the more industrialized North had taken place. These emigrants sought to escape the repressive conditions that existed in the South. Black Codes prevented them from working and living where they wanted while Jim Crow laws ensured that African Americans would never receive equal treatment in education, health care, and other social amenities. In addition, voting restrictions, the inability to earn a living as sharecroppers, and the constant threat of violence prompted many African Americans in the South to dream of better lives. When World War I began in 1914, large numbers of these people moved to industrial centers in the North where factories needed workers to manufacture goods for the war effort. The largest migrations occurred in cities like New York, Chicago, Detroit, and St. Louis. Between 1910 and 1930, the African American population of New York grew from about 80,000 to over 325,000 (Halpern 18).

With the arrival of the Great Depression, African Americans faced the same issues that troubled the rest of the country. However, while nearly all Americans struggled with unemployment and homelessness, the African American community was especially affected. In 1932, about half of the African American population was out of work (Library of Congress), compared to 25 percent of all Americans who would be unemployed a year later (Blumenthal 132). Because competition for jobs was fierce, white people sometimes demanded and received jobs that had been occupied by African Americans. Racial tensions escalated and murders of blacks in the South began to increase. Furthermore, few African Americans had been able to accumulate savings since wages in the factories were low and city living was expensive. Financial assistance from the federal government did not yet exist, so these people were forced to rely on churches and charitable organizations like the Urban League for support. Finally, housing conditions, which were already deplorable for many African Americans, became even more miserable. In the decades preceding the 1930s, African American neighborhoods in many Northern cities had become increasingly crowded due to the large number of emigrants from the South. With crowding, came higher rents and deteriorating facilities, which turned these neighborhoods into slums. As the negative effects of the Great Depression lingered and grew, people who had lost their homes also began to move into the slums. This

caused even more competition for housing, along with increased racial tensions between blacks and whites, and additional discrimination toward African Americans.

Politically, many African Americans joined the rest of the country by switching their political affiliation from the Republican Party to the Democratic policies of the New Deal. However, this change did not occur quickly. During its first term, the Roosevelt administration largely ignored the needs of African Americans because it did not want to confront southern congressmen who controlled the Senate. In time, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt became aware of the injustices suffered by African Americans and became an outspoken supporter of civil rights. The president and his administration responded by publicly criticizing discriminatory practices against African Americans and by establishing a “Black Cabinet” (Wormser) in the White House. This was a group of advisors to the president, which was comprised of influential leaders from the African American community. Congress followed the president’s lead by ensuring that African Americans were included in federal relief programs and the U.S. Supreme Court began to issue rulings that favored the end of segregation. As the federal government became more responsive to the needs of the African American community, members of that community ended their allegiance to the Republican Party and began to register as Democrats.

The changes that affected literature, music, and visual and performing arts also resonated in the African American artistic community. For approximately ten years prior to the beginning of the Great Depression, the United States saw an unprecedented growth and development of African American culture. Musicians like composer Duke Ellington and singer Bessie Smith entertained audiences with their engaging jazz and blues performances. Writers, including Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and James Weldon Johnson published numerous novels, poems, and short stories that effectively communicated the African American experience to black and white readers. In the visual arts, painter Aaron Douglas sculptor Richmond Barthe, photographer James Van Der Zee, and others portrayed the full spectrum of African American history and contemporary culture through their masterful works. During the 1920s, this arts community gravitated to the Harlem district of New York City, which rapidly became established as a center of African American cultural identity and creativity. The term, “Harlem Renaissance” was coined to describe the breadth and quality of work that this creative group of individuals produced (Howes 46-60, 89-96, 110-118).

Another significant development in the growth of African American arts during this period was the establishment of the Harmon Foundation in 1922 by real estate developer William E. Harmon (Reynolds 27). Although Mr. Harmon was a white man, his childhood experience allowed him to come in close contact with

members of the African American community. His father was an officer in the Tenth Colored Calvary (Breaking Racial Barriers 9) and the young William became close friends with many of the soldiers from that regimen. As a successful entrepreneur, Mr. Harmon believed that people should have the opportunity to improve themselves and develop their individual characters. The Harmon Foundation was originally founded to support these values by providing financial awards and honorariums to community and youth groups such as the Boy Scouts.

Over time, Mr. Harmon's interest in the needs and issues of the African American community led him to set aside funds that were specifically directed toward providing opportunities for members of that group. In 1926, the foundation began awarding annual cash prizes to recognize African American achievements in music, visual arts, literature, industry, education, race relations, and science. In 1928, the Harmon Foundation sponsored the first American exhibition of works created exclusively by African American artists. In 1931, "The Harmon Traveling Exhibition of the Work of Negro Artists" began touring the United States. This show spotlighted the works of Langston Hughes and 148 other artists and writers from the African American community. The foundation published an illustrated catalog of the exhibit, which was distributed to 50 cities. Some of the individuals who were honored by the Harmon Foundation include writer Claude McKay in 1928, artist Aaron Douglas in 1930, and sculptor Selma Burke in 1933 ("Drop Me Off in Harlem").

With the advent of the Great Depression, America saw the decline of the Harlem Renaissance. However, most of its participants continued to work in their respective fields, creating work of lasting value that reflected and celebrated the African American experience. These pieces of music, art, literature, and drama continue to inspire, educate and entertain people to this day.

Objectives

The objectives students will meet as they work through this unit are directly aligned with required standards. One of my objectives for students as they progress through this unit is to research African American writers, musicians, and artists. Students will explore the impact of the Great Depression on African Americans. Finally, students will read, write, and speak for a variety of purposes.

Strategies

Throughout the development of this unit, a number of strategies are employed in order to meet the objectives outlined and to assist students in reaching the necessary communications standards.

In order to enable students to successfully complete the curriculum unit, it is necessary to familiarize them with the literature, music, and art of the time period. This can be done in several different phases in order to keep their interest high and establish adequate background for the unit.

As I mentioned in the Overview, the curriculum unit is divided into four different modules. The first strategy I can use to give students a better understanding of the literature, music, and art of the Great Depression is to introduce them to The Great Migration and the Harlem Renaissance. This can be done in several ways. Teacher led discussions that introduce the background information on these two important events is a necessary first step. Taking a broad look at these two periods of time makes the material familiar and therefore easier for students as the focus of the unit narrows to include the areas of literature, music, and art. Developing a KWL chart helps drive the discussion and establishes the importance of the three remaining modules. Once students develop some background knowledge about the Great Migration of African Americans to the north and the Harlem Renaissance, we can move to the next modules.

The next step employed in order to help students meet the objectives outlined in my unit is the introduction of the second module; a comprehensive look at the literature and writers of the time period. The strategy here is to introduce students to literature through a look at one of the times most famous writers. Book reads, teacher led and student driven discussions, a research based informational paper, and student speeches are components of this module. As students work through this module they'll discover the important contributions African American writers made to the literature of the period.

Another strategy I can use as my curriculum unit takes shape is the introduction of the third module. This module introduces students to the music and talented musicians of the Great Depression era. During this phase of the unit students will explore the various types of music people enjoyed through Internet searches and listening to recordings of famous songs of the time. A persuasive paper, period appropriate advertisement, and small group discussions are all components of this particular module.

The final step in the process of developing my unit is to introduce the fourth module to my students. This phase involves the exploration of art during the Great Depression. In order to successfully complete the objectives a few specific strategies are employed. Discussion and exploration of famous artists and their artwork is one avenue traveled during this module. Student developed art representing the time period is a collaborative activity used in this module. Reflection through journal writing and small group discussions are also employed when working in this module.

As students work through the objectives outlined in this unit, they are meeting standards outlined by the Pittsburgh Public School District. These communication standards can be found at the end of the curriculum unit in the appendix.

Classroom Activities

The classroom activities below are divided into four distinct modules. The first module is an introduction to the Great Depression through the exploration of the Great Migration and the Harlem Renaissance. The four activities included in this module provide needed background information for the students as they move through the rest of the curriculum unit. The activities in module two fall under the heading “Literature” and include the research and reading of famous writers of the Great Depression. Six activities comprise the third module, “Music”. Here students discover the music and musicians of the time. Listening to the popular music of the times and writing a persuasive piece are just a few of the activities included in this module. “Art” is the final module and the activities in this section complete the curriculum unit. Students view the art and discover the artists of the time. Activities include creating personalized artwork based on the historic period and sharing thoughts through group discussions. The entire unit takes approximately four to six weeks to complete. What follows is a detailed description of the activities I intend to use in order to bring this unit to fruition.

Module #1- Unit Overview- Activity 1- Book Read/Book Talk

The overview of this unit begins with a book read. Students read *Moving North: African Americans and the Great Migration, 1915-1930* by Monica Halpren which describes the migration of African Americans from the south to the north during the early part of the twentieth century. The book read and subsequent book talk provide an important overview and background information for the remainder of the unit.

Module #1- Unit Overview- Activity 2- Book Read/Book Talk

The overview of the unit continues with a second book read titled *Harlem Speaks: A Living History of the Harlem Renaissance* by Cary D. Wintz. This book gives important background information into the Harlem Renaissance and is a good introduction to many of the accomplished African American writers, artists, and musicians of the time. Discussion of this book also helps establish vital background information for the remainder of the curriculum unit.

Module #1-Unit Overview- Activity 3- Listening Activity

In order to further introduce students to the famous African American artists of the era, they will listen to selected tracks from the CD that accompanies the book *Harlem Speaks; A Living History of the Harlem Renaissance*. Hearing Langston Hughes read his poem “The Weary Blues” and listening to Josephine Baker sing her famous song “Bye Bye Blackbird” are powerful methods to motivate and excite students as we move to the next phases of the unit.

Module #1-Unit Overview- Activity 4- Discussion/KWL Chart

This activity begins with a teacher led discussion based on the previous three activities. Specifically targeted areas are literature, music, and art. A large KWL chart is used throughout the course of the unit as students learn more about the literature, music, and art of the period. The KWL chart lists what the students know (K), what they want to know (W), and what they learned (L). The chart is a good way to help weave a common thread throughout the unit as it progresses from start to finish.

Module #2- Literature- Activity 1- Book Read/Book Talk

An appropriate way to begin this module, which focuses on literature, is to have students read about Langston Hughes; one of the most influential African American writers of the period. The books *I, Too, Sing America*, *The Story of Langston Hughes* by Martha E. Rhynes, *Free to Dream, The Making of a Poet: Langston Hughes* by Audrey Osofsky, and *Langston Hughes, American Poet* by Alice Walker are excellent vehicles for students to use as they learn more about this famous writer. Students are divided into small groups to read the books and discuss their impressions of Langston Hughes. These particular books were chosen because they are of varying degrees of difficulty and help the teacher differentiate instruction.

Module #2- Literature-Activity 2- Book Sharing

After individual groups read and discuss their selected books from activity #1, they discuss and record the gist and several significant parts of the text. These are recorded on chart paper and shared with the entire class. The charted ideas of students should remain posted throughout the length of the curriculum unit to provide learners the opportunity to refer back to the information.

Module #2- Literature- Activity 3- Poetry Writing

After the extensive book reads on the life and work of Langston Hughes, students should have a feel for his talent as a poet. At this point students can write their own poem. The idea here is to encourage students to write their poem with a feel for the time period. This should help students better relate to the lean years of the Great Depression.

Module #2- Literature- Activity 4- Poetry Presentation

Students are given the first of several opportunities to share their work with classmates. Since students at this age are often uncomfortable speaking in front of their peers, reading a short poem is a good way to ease students into oral presentations. Students can read their poem from their seat or in front of the classroom. Later in the unit, students give a more in-depth and formal presentation.

Module #2- Literature- Activity 5-Research/Informational Paper

For this activity students research a famous African American writer. Students use the information they gather to compose an informational piece detailing the life of the writer. Special emphasis should be placed on the person's life during the period of the Great Depression.

Module #2- Literature- Activity 6- Oral Presentation

Upon completion of the informational paper, each student shares his/her writing with the class. This provides the opportunity to learn more about the many talented writers of the Great Depression era. It also affords students another opportunity to speak in front of their classmates.

Module #2- Literature- Activity 7- Peer / Self Evaluation

Including a self evaluation as part of the speech evaluation gives students a chance to critique their own work. Including a peer evaluation affords them the opportunity to evaluate a classmate's performance. Each student evaluates one other student's speech as well as their own. (See Appendix A for samples of the peer and self evaluation rubrics).

Module #2- Literature- Activity 8- Journal Writings

At the end of this module students have the opportunity to reflect on the activities included in this section and the knowledge they've gathered. The students are then given the opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings with classmates in an open journal reading time before moving on to the next module.

Module #3- Music- Activity 1- Introduction/Discussion

This next module begins with a teacher led discussion referencing the novel *Bud, Not Buddy* by Christopher Paul Walker. Seventh grade students are familiar with this book because it was a required novel read in the sixth grade curriculum. The novel chronicles an African American boy's search for his father. The novel is set during the Great Depression and a fair portion of the book revolves around a group of musicians who befriend the main character. This is a good introduction to the module because it links students' prior knowledge of the Great Depression with music, the focus of this section of the curriculum unit. Students note important information in their Reader's Writer's notebook as a reference for future work in this module.

Module #3- Music- Activity 2- Book Discussion/Internet Search

The second activity in this module requires students to work in both small groups and independently. Students independently complete an Internet search for music of the 1930's. In small groups students examine the book *Music of the Great Depression* by William H. Young and Nancy K. Young. This book lists prominent musicians and music of the Great Depression. Students can use this resource as they research African Americans who contributed to the music of the time.

Module #3-Music-Activity 3- List Formulation/Five Fact Feature

For this activity students use the research information gathered from the Internet and the book, *Music of the Great Depression* to formulate a list of famous

African American musicians. From this list each student chooses one musician and writes a Five Fact Feature. This involves listing the musician and five facts about that person.

Module #3- Music- Activity 4- Listening Activity

Students divide into groups of four for this activity. Using the Internet, groups pick a song that was sung or written by an African American artist popular during the Great Depression to share with the class. Each group presents their chosen song to the remainder of the class. Students listening to each groups song will note their thoughts in a brief reflection.

Module #3- Music- Activity 5- Persuasive Brochure/ Letter

Using knowledge gained from the first four activities, students develop a brochure advertising a popular musician or band of the Great Depression era. The brochure should persuade people to go out and listen to the musician/band. A short persuasive letter accompanies the brochure.

Module #3- Music- Activity 6- Presentation

Students present their brochure and persuasive letter to classmates in this activity. Once again students have an opportunity to speak in a group setting. This speaking activity conclude module three.

Module #4- Art- Activity 1- Introduction / Discussion

Most of the activities in this module are done collaboratively with the art teacher. To begin, the art teacher serves as a guest speaker to introduce students to the famous artists and art work of the time. Students take notes which they use later for the culminating art activity.

Module #4- Art- Activity 2- Research / Report

With the assistance of the art teacher, students begin research on an artist of their choice. While researching the artist they will note the style of artwork and begin formulating ideas for their own art project. After research is complete, students report their information in the form of a short informational writing.

Module #4- Art- Activity 3- Artistic Creation

Here again collaborative work occurs between the art teacher and the communications teacher. Students begin to create a piece of artwork representative of something an artist working during the Great Depression might fashion. The style should reflect the time period. Students are encouraged to work in whatever medium is appropriate to the piece.

Module #4- Art- Activity 4- Art Display

Students complete this module with a classroom display of the artwork they created. A brief student description accompanies each piece of art. Students are encouraged to share their piece with the class.

Final Reflections

As a way to tie the entire curriculum unit together, students write their thoughts and feelings concerning each module in the unit. Hopefully the feedback given by the students will serve as a vehicle to make revisions and improvements for future use.

Appendix A

Self Evaluation Form
(Speaking, Listening, and Viewing Exhibit)

Your Name _____

Assignment _____

- 4= ADVANCED
- 3= PROFICIENT
- 2= BASIC
- 1= BELOW BASIC
- 0= NOT SCORABLE

My voice was clear and could be heard. _____

I made eye contact with the audience. _____

I delivered the information at a good pace. _____

I had good posture. _____

I used correct grammar and pronunciations
when communicating. _____

The presentation was well organized and
included all necessary components. _____

Questions from the audience were
handled well. _____

_____/_____
Total Total Points

Appendix A (cont)

Speaker Feedback Form
(Speaking, Listening, and Viewing Exhibit)

Your Name _____

Assignment _____

4= ADVANCED

3= PROFICIENT

2= BASIC

1= BELOW BASIC

0= NOT SCORABLE

My voice was clear and could be heard. _____

I made eye contact with the audience. _____

I delivered the information at a good pace. _____

I had good posture. _____

I used correct grammar and pronunciations
when communicating. _____

The presentation was well organized and
included all necessary components. _____

Questions from the audience were
handled well. _____

_____/_____/28_____

Total

Total Points

**Pennsylvania Academic Standards
Categories for Reading, Writing,
Speaking and Listening**

- 1.1 Learning to Read Independently
- 1.2 Reading Critically in All Content Areas
- 1.3 Reading, Analyzing, and Interpreting Literature
- 1.4 Types of Writing
- 1.5 Quality of Writing
- 1.6 Speaking and Listening
- 1.7 Characteristics and Functions of the English Language
- 1.8 Research

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