Raising achievement in English and literacy
A Leading Edge National Programme

Re-Booting English:

A review tool for English teams and
senior leaders

Geoff Barton

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Re-Booting English

We are at an important time for English. In autumn 2008 the key stage 3 (KS3) tests were abandoned – to the unconstrained applause of teachers, school leaders, students and parents.

Then the summer 2009 GCSE results showed, for the first time in years, a slight decline in the A*-C attainment rate in English. And suddenly, following another 'gear-clunking' policy shift, the status and significance of the proposed functional skills seemed unclear.

The territory of English – what it means and what it stands for – is suddenly looking less certain. It feels to some as if all the initiatives, the strategies, the interventions and endless targets may have led us into something of a cul-de-sac. It feels as if momentum has stalled, as if doing more of the same isn't going to deliver anything significantly better.

No wonder Ofsted's subject report on English published in the summer of 2009 was called English at the Crossroads[1].

In language which is often muted and occasionally exasperated, it surveys progress since the last survey of English in 2005. It reports that progress has been slow and both the curriculum

and teaching methodologies have developed little in too many schools.

Re-Booting English is designed to help those of us who teach English to take stock, to step back and reflect on what we do and why we do it. It starts by mapping out some of the big issues in English, and it aims also to kick-start the whole-school literacy initiative without which reading, writing, speaking and listening in schools will never be joined-up and effective enough.

This isn't a theoretical document. It doesn't quote lots of research. Instead, it is based on what English teams are undertaking across a small number of Leading Edge Partnerships throughout the country. They were chosen because they are doing things that are innovative, which appear to be having an impact, and which they are doing well. Typically, most of the teachers and senior leaders I interviewed were hesitant to make grand claims for their work: their modesty was a reminder of the characteristic humility of so many people who work in schools.

Their stories are important because, at the present time, with pressure on performance at all levels, English

departments can feel beleaguered. In some schools – because of the emphasis on statistics showing school performance in terms of 5A*-C including English and maths – it can seem as if the English team are only valued for their ability to deliver Cs and above. It can reduce us to feeling like operatives on a production line, rather than professionals who came into teaching as what Matthew Arnold described as 'preachers of culture'. Whilst that wording may not sit comfortably now with our pedagogical ideals, it is a reminder that English often attracts the teachers most keen to inspire and motivate young people in a way which goes way beyond training for exam-passing.

Whilst helping our students to gain the best qualifications in English is, of course, one of our main concerns, we want them also to leave school with a strong understanding of the way language works and how it can be used in various forms; to be confident speakers and good listeners; to enjoy reading; to be capable of writing accurately and with clarity and style – things that exams in themselves won't either develop or assess.

So the purpose of this booklet is to help members of English teams to take stock, to see the shifting tectonic plates of KS3 assessment and functional skills as an opportunity to seize the agenda for ourselves and, in a fast-changing multi-media world, to make sure that we are preparing students for the world they will face, rather than one that existed when we were at school.

Re-Booting English is also designed to re-establish the imperative for senior leaders in schools to return to whole-school literacy as a major theme of school improvement. Without an effective, coordinated approach to speaking and listening, reading and writing across subjects, we are missing an opportunity to help our students really develop and apply their skills. The booklet contains some inspiring practical examples of schools which have put whole-school literacy at the heart of their work.

I hope therefore that whatever your role in school, you'll find this a really practical booklet, full of ideas, perspectives and insights. It is intended as something to use rather than to skim and then file away. Most of all it is intended to serve as a reminder that the shifting landscape of English creates a huge and shimmering opportunity. English does indeed feel as if it's at a crossroads: now it's over to us to set the direction for the next stage of the journey.

Geoff Barton

English at the crossroads
A review tool for English teams

In their 2009 subject report on English[2], Ofsted inspectors reflected on the state of English three years on from their previous review.

The findings were based on visits to over 240 primary and secondary schools, observations, evaluations, test results and discussions with teachers and others. The document provides a useful starting-point for reflecting on where we are with English and (to a lesser extent) literacy in our schools.

The following pages have been devised as a tool for training or shared reflection, with each of the main areas of Ofsted's findings summarised and then followed by a short number of prompts for departmental discussion. The idea that these pages might make a useful starting-point for English teams to take stock of where you are in terms of English in your school, and to help set priorities for the next phase of your development.

Read in conjunction with the case studies of interesting and innovative practice, the review tool should allow you to step back to reflect on current key areas of strength and weakness, and to plan next steps accordingly.

One word of warning. Ofsted provides only one view. It says little about whole-school literacy. Each school is different. So don't read it as a template of omission, a checklist of things you haven't yet achieved. That way guilt and disappointment lie. Priorities for the team in your school may be very different from those provided at a national perspective.

After all, if there's one lesson that we have learned from the past dozen years of central initiatives and strategies it is that 'less is more': that we should stop feeling we can do everything (thereby ending up doing it all to a substandard level) and instead focus relentlessly on the two or three key areas which will make an impact on students' learning.

This means that whilst you might emerge from the audit thinking that, say, ICT is an issue across your team, it might also be that you decide collectively that other issues, such as developing a coherent cross-department approach to speaking and listening, are the bigger priority.

So 'less is more'. Use the summary and prompts to drill down into your current practice and then to begin to plan your next steps…

Standards in English

Ofsted says:

Standards in English have risen slowly since 2004.

The gap between boys' and girls' performance remains.

Across the age range, particular groups of students, including some minority ethnic groups, achieve less well than others.

White British boys eligible for free school meals are amongst the lowest performers in the country.

Despite this, provision for English was good or outstanding in well over half the schools visited, although it was better in primary than secondary schools. In the best instances, headteachers valued the subject highly and recognised the vital contribution it made to students' learning. They provided strong leadership and consistent support for the subject leaders; these had a clear vision and a secure rationale for developing English further.

Talking Points:

01 How quickly have standards in English risen at your own school? What have been the 2 or 3 main influences on standards?

02 Which cohorts – ethnic group, gender, free school meals (FSM), English as an additional language (EAL), Gifted and Talented (G&T) – have made more or less progress than expected? How do you know and what is the team doing about it?

03 What support does your school's senior leadership team give to English? Is there a vision and rationale for English and literacy in the school?

So what could you do next?

Teaching of English

Ofsted says:

Teaching was good or outstanding in seven out of ten of the lessons seen across both phases and very few lessons were inadequate.

English is a popular subject and the proportion of students who choose to study it in the sixth form is high.

Most students involved in the survey enjoyed English and made good progress.

Students who were less enthusiastic about the subject and made poorer progress said that it had too little to do with their lives or interests outside school. In particular, it took insufficient account of their developing literacy needs in an age of substantial technological change.

Talking Points:

01 In what proportion of lessons in your school are lessons good or outstanding? Are all members of the team clear on what characterises 'good' and 'outstanding' lessons?

02 What do your students tell you about their attitude to English? Does this differ for students from different backgrounds, or in different teaching groups, or for different cohorts (eg do G&T students like English more or less than those who are EAL?)

03 How does your team help prepare students for an age of substantial technological change?

So what could you do next?

The English curriculum

Ofsted says:

The most effective secondary schools were working to personalise the curriculum by matching it more closely to students' needs.

A few of the schools visited had introduced programmes for more vulnerable students to ease their transition from primary to secondary school. Despite some promising developments at KS3, students generally responded better to the pace and challenge of the key stage 4 (KS4) curriculum, with its explicit framework, clear assessment criteria and detailed feedback on their performance.

Many older students complained that the KS3 curriculum had not been sufficiently challenging or stimulating and that work in year 7 often repeated what they had learned in primary school. Too many secondary teachers did not know what their students had learned at primary school and were not able to build on their knowledge, skills and understanding.

Although year 10 students were normally given an outline of the GCSE course at the beginning of the year, those in year 7 were much less clear about the KS3 programme.

All the English departments visited had schemes of work for KS3 but, since they rarely showed them to the students, students could not see how individual elements linked together and supported each other. To many students, the KS3 programme seemed a random sequence of activities, such as the reading of a class novel, followed by work on persuasive writing, extracts from Shakespeare's plays and the study of newspapers.

In the less effective schools, the KS3 curriculum placed too little emphasis on poetry, media, speaking and listening or drama, and did not enable students to make sufficient progress in these areas.

Talking Points:

01 So how's your curriculum looking, especially at KS3 with the demise of the KS3 tests?

02 Is there a clear rationale for what is taught when and to whom? Is it shared with students?

So what could you do next?

Reading
Ofsted says:

Few schools had developed a clearly articulated policy [on reading], based on a detailed understanding of how students become readers. They used many initiatives and strategies but often in a fragmentary way. For example, group 'guided reading' was taught as a discrete activity, separated from the students' overall reading experience. Therefore, although there was a great deal of activity related to reading, it was not always integrated effectively or directed sufficiently at producing enthusiastic, independent readers.

Ofsted's previous report on English found that 'many students are reading less widely for pleasure than previously'.

This was supported by the findings of an international reading survey which showed that enjoyment amongst students in England was poor when compared with many other countries, and had declined since 2001.

At secondary level, the approach to independent reading remained largely unaltered since the previous English report. At best, specific plans to develop students' independent reading were confined to year 7.

Some schools persevered with 'library lessons' where the students read silently. These sessions rarely included time to discuss or promote books and other written material and therefore did not help to develop a reading community within the school.

Talking Points:

01 Do you have a coordinated rationale for reading?

02 How is reading for pleasure promoted? How effective is it?

03 How are you developing a reading community?

So what could you do next?

Writing
Ofsted says:

Many of the lessons seen during the survey showed there was a clear need to reinvigorate the teaching of writing. Students were not motivated by the writing tasks they were given and saw no real purpose to them. At key stage 2 (KS2) and KS3, teachers often asked students to write imaginary letters or postcards, an activity that many students would rarely, if ever, do outside school.

This contrasted starkly with lessons where students were given a clear goal, such as writing for a real audience, preparing for a talk or helping to plan a film clip. Here they saw the purpose of the task, appreciated the importance of quality and worked with concentration and enthusiasm.

In too many lessons, teachers spent so long introducing the task, analysing a text and talking about the writing, that little time was left for the students to complete their own work. Another common weakness was the over-emphasis on technical matters, such as punctuation or complex sentences, at the expense of helping students to develop and structure their ideas.

Sometimes the teaching focused more on students' knowledge about writing rather than on developing their skills in writing. Each year, from KS2 onwards, students were likely to be taught the features of certain types of text, such as persuasive writing or instructions. Even when they could already easily identify a text's specific features, they repeated such work, for example, identifying rhetorical questions, the passive voice and powerful adjectives. They would have learned more from being helped and supported to write a variety of extended texts in the particular form, followed by independent work on a topic of their choice.

Talking Points:

01 What kinds of writing do students do in English? How authentic are the tasks and genres?

02 How are technical matters taught without dominating the lesson and reducing writing to a mechanical exercise?

03 How is teaching of writing planned and developed so that as they become older, students are given increasing independence in their writing?

So what could you do next?

Speaking and listening

Ofsted says:

Ofsted's previous report on English found that schools put too little emphasis on developing speaking and listening. Since then, the teaching of speaking and listening has improved. Supported by recent national guidance, schools are now devoting more time to oral work.

In the schools visited, teachers regularly gave pupils opportunities to talk in pairs before discussing their ideas with the rest of the class.

Provided there was enough time for the activity and the task was sufficiently open-ended, the discussion was often vigorous and lively.

Talk was often a way of improving students' writing, giving them the chance to rehearse their ideas before committing them to paper.

The most effective teachers demonstrated spoken language as carefully as they demonstrated writing, using a range of registers and drawing attention to details.

Talking Points:

01 Does your team have a shared rationale for structured use of speaking and listening – especially for exploratory talk? Does it need one?

02 Are students regularly given time for oral rehearsal of ideas before answering in class or writing?

03 Do teachers across your team regularly model the kind of spoken language they expect in different situations?

So what could you do next?

Information & Communication Technology (ICT) in English

Ofsted says:

The last English report identified a wide gap between the best practice and the rest in using ICT. This gap remains; indeed, some of the evidence suggests that it has widened. The most effective schools planned their ICT activities well and integrated them appropriately into units of work to develop a range of literacy skills.

Most teachers in the survey had an interactive whiteboard but the effectiveness with which they used it varied greatly. They tended to use it to engage students' attention or make presentations and rarely exploited its interactive element.

The most effective schools understood that 'ICT has fundamentally altered… how we think about reading and writing'. They had a clear understanding of the impact of technological change on students' lives and reading choices.

They sought to make English both relevant to and motivating for students through exploiting developments in ICT.

Talking Points:

01 How does ICT integrate into your schemes of work to help develop students' range of literacy skills?

02 Are interactive whiteboards used interactively, or mostly as projection screens?

03 How has your team's use of ICT developed as technology has change? Have you moved beyond chiefly seeing ICT as Word and PowerPoint?

So what could you
do next?

Priorities for English:

In summarising the main points of its subject review, Ofsted says schools should:

- **review their curriculum** for English in the light of recent changes, including developments in ICT, to ensure that it meets the needs of all their students, particularly at KS3

- **develop strategies** to improve the quality and consistency of teaching that is no better than satisfactory

- **build systematic opportunities** for independent learning into the English curriculum and improve the quality of homework

- **ensure** that curricular targets and consistently good marking help students to understand more clearly how to improve their work

- **improve the quality** of subject plans in English.

Talking Points:

01 Which (if any) of these recommendations are relevant to your team?

02 Based on your response to the Ofsted points, what are your team's two or three priorities?

So what could you
do next?

Re-energising whole-school literacy
A review tool for senior leaders

Whilst there is considerable guidance and analysis relating to English as a subject, there is much less to help guide schools wishing to focus on whole-school literacy.

In too many schools, if we said we were looking at literacy across the curriculum, we might fear a collective groan from staff who would say 'But we did that a few years ago'.

Many Leading Edge schools are recognising that however effective their English teams are, they waste the potential of many students if they don't have a joined-up approach to literacy across subjects. Many schools are explicitly seeking ways of dismantling the long-standing bunkers of subject compartmentalisaton and seeking practical ways of giving students consistent messages about reading, writing, speaking and listening across all subjects.

This section provides some pointers on effective practice which are then exemplified in the case studies which follow.

Once again a 'less is more' approach is important, helping departmental teams to focus on priorities, to share and develop good practice, and then to evaluate its impact.

The following pages are designed to help senior leaders and literacy coordinators to decide on priorities for reinvigorating an approach to literacy across the curriculum.

Whole-school literacy: the essentials

Planning: What we know works

Literacy coordinators have a challenging role unless they are senior and have 'clout'.

The existence of a coordinator can lead some staff to believe that literacy is another person's job rather than a responsibility of all teachers. Bear in mind George Sampson's dictum that 'every teacher in English is a teacher of English'.[3]

That doesn't mean, however, that we should expect every teacher to be an expert in issues of grammar, and canny schools have recognised that trying to get teachers of all subjects to use technical terms about language can prove self-defeating: it can intimidate some staff or leave them feeling alienated and de-skilled. Instead, energy is better placed into making sure that every teacher knows the rudiments of how we can all help students to become better readers, better writers, better speakers and better listeners. In doing so we are helping them to become better scientists, better designers, better historians and so on.

In other words, there is an argument for dispensing with the term 'literacy' and instead promoting key knowledge about how children develop their language skills as part of the essential pedagogy that every teacher in every subject needs. The following pages provide some checklists for the kinds of areas you might wish to consider as 'key knowledge' for teachers.

Bear in mind also that an age of 'rarely cover' provides enormous opportunities for staff to observe and learn from each other's practice. It might be that if I want to improve my ability to manage group discussions, I should spend some time watching teachers in drama or citizenship or personal, social and health education (PSHE). It might be that if I want to become better at explaining complex concepts I should learn from teachers of physics or history. In other words, an emphasis on whole-school literacy – especially if rebranded as essential teaching and learning skills – is an opportunity for ongoing sustained training and professional development work.

Starting Points:

01 Do you have a literacy coordinator? Do you need one? Do they have 'clout'? Does it need to be a key part of a senior leader's responsibility?

02 Is there a literacy working party and what has it achieved?

03 Is it time to ditch the term 'literacy' and instead talk in terms of teaching and learning?

04 Are there opportunities for a differentiated in-house training programme which helps teachers to develop their understanding of how within their subject they can better help students to read, write, speak and listen better?

So what could you do next?

Reading: What we know works

It is easy for secondary teachers to make an assumption that reading has been attended to during the primary years and that our role is therefore simply to provide a range of reading tasks and resources. In fact, there is increasing evidence that students at KS3 in particular need more specific and guided attention to developing their reading skills.

In practice this means teachers being aware of the kinds of reading skills students need in their subject and being more explicit in teaching these.

Reading strategies might include:
- skimming a text (to find the gist)
- scanning a text (to find specific information)
- speed-reading
- analysis of a text
- independent research skills
- reading for pleasure (teaching how to maintain and sustain interest).

Highly effective subject teachers help students to develop these skills by modeling them, giving them practice, and providing feedback.

The library or learning centre has a key part to play in creating a base for a community of readers, a safe environment for students building

confidence in their reading skills, and in helping to teach young people to navigate the internet with care, skill and discrimination.

Highly effective teachers also recognise that vocabulary is an essential part of anyone's ability to read well. They therefore identify the essential vocabulary needed in their subject and make it explicit through classroom and corridor display, through glossaries in exercise books and planners, and through deliberate, planned repetition and explanation of key words in their teaching.

Highly effective teachers and teaching assistants know the importance of creating texts which help students to comprehend them. They use layout features, glossaries and key words, readability statistics, alternatives to endless questions after a text to create resources that are attractive, motivating and help students to build their confidence in reading.

Effective schools create reading communities where reading for pleasure is celebrated through assemblies, lessons other than just English, in newsletters, in creating places where young people can talk about their reading.

They also recognise that silent reading in English lessons and tutor time may actually reinforce negative messages about reading (it being about passivity, control, and awkward silences).

Highly effective teachers help students know how to spell key words in their subject – through displays (eg word webs of associated words), school planners and websites, and – perhaps most importantly – by showing how they themselves learn spellings (eg visualisation of words-within-words [be-lie-ve], word sounds [govern+ment], or mnemonic devices [potassium = one tea, two sugars].

Talking Points:

01 How is a student's reading ability assessed and tracked across key stages?

02 Which different reading skills do different subject teachers explicitly teach?

03 What role does the library or learning centre play in this strategy? Who takes responsibility for developing students' abilities to navigate the internet effectively?

04 How are worksheets and resources being designed to ensure their readability? Who is taking responsibility to ensure that all staff are aware of ways in which they can achieve this?

05 How is subject-specific vocabulary being taught?

06 How is spelling being taught?

07 What are the training implications of the above?

So what could you do next?

Writing: What we know works

In highly effective schools, teachers across subjects know that they have a responsibility to teach students how to write in the main text-types used in their subjects (eg how to write an evaluation in technology, how to write an essay in history). In doing so they are creating not only better writers but better technologists, historians, and so on. Teaching literacy is integral to being a successful subject teacher.

Having a shared approach to the way written work should be presented across all subjects (eg how to write the date, which side of the page,

and so on) can make things simpler for students so that they can focus on what they need to write rather than how to lay it out.

Encouraging students to use a variety of sentences can significantly improve the clarity and precision of their writing. In particular, teaching them to avoid compound sentences (a succession of clauses linked by 'and', 'but' or 'or') can help them to communicate much better.

In encouraging students to use 'and' and 'but' less in joining up their ideas, we should display and explicitly teach the key connectives used in our subjects. In science, for example, these might include 'so', 'when', 'as', 'despite', 'although' and 'therefore'.

Much recent evidence suggests that 'oral rehearsal' – students practising speaking part of their text aloud in a pair or group – can significantly help their writing, especially boys.

Highly effective teachers know that perhaps the most powerful thing they can do is to model writing. In practice, this means not only showing students an example of the kind of text they are being asked to produce (eg a science investigation) but actually demonstrating how to write it, showing students the process that writing involves: making decisions, changing one's mind and making mistakes.

Teachers therefore need to be very familiar with the dominant text types used in their subject and the main connectives. They will need practice in seeing how to demonstrate this, how to move through shared composition (students collaborating to write part of a text) to independent writing.

Scaffolding texts – providing a writing frame, key vocabulary including connectives, and showing how to organise the text – can significantly build the confidence of some students.

Teaching students paragraphing and how to link paragraphs, significantly helps them.

Having a school assessment policy, so that teachers across all subjects respond to students' writing in a consistent fashion, can help students to gain confidence in their writing.

Talking Points:

01 Are teachers aware of the significant text-types in their subject? How do they make these explicit to students?

02 Is there a common approach to how work is presented? Should there be?

03 Are staff aware of the type of sentences students should use in the key text-types in their subject? How confident are teachers in referring to these?

04 Do they teach connectives which break the tyranny of 'and' and 'but'?

05 Do teachers give time for oral rehearsal?

06 Do teachers across subjects model texts, actively demonstrating how to write, say, the opening paragraph?

07 Is there a common assessment policy for written work?

08 For students who struggle, do teachers provide scaffolding in the form of, say, writing frames to help them to build their skills?

09 What are the training implications of the above?

So what could you do next?

Speaking and listening:
What we know works

A high quality speaking and listening experience in school, across subjects, promotes students' reasoning, conceptual development, and reading comprehension.

Many students don't experience a sufficiently rich culture of spoken language at home: school therefore has an important compensatory role to play.

This means more than passive experience of different speaking and listening contexts in school: students need actively to be taught the essential skills for various spoken modes, just as they do for the dominant text-types in writing.

In practice this means showing students how to construct, say, an argument for a debate, what kinds

of vocabulary are appropriate, which connectives are relevant.

Highly effective teachers therefore model the language they expect – whether in formal situation or informal discussion work, they show students what is expected of them.

Highly effective teachers recognise that talk isn't just about students 'giving presentations'. In fact, students are probably asked to do too many of these and given too little practice in 'exploratory talk' – talk used to solve problems, reflect, discuss and debate.

Highly effective teachers know the importance of their own talk – avoiding asking too many questions, specifically closed questions; asking more open-ended exploratory questions; providing thinking time and discussion time before expecting an answer; avoiding latching on to praising only the first answer they receive.

Highly effective teachers will ask questions like 'how did you know that?' to encourage reflection by students.

They ask students to listen to and comment on each others' views.

They provide students with time and space for 'oral rehearsal' of their answers before answering in front of a group just as oral rehearsal is integral to the writing process.

Many highly effective teachers reject a dependence on students putting hands up, and instead give them time to think and discuss before choosing various students to give their responses.

As an alternative to a succession of scattergun questions to a class, highly effective teachers may use other techniques – for example, choosing one student to be 'interrogated' about a topic with other students listening and then giving their response to both what the student says and how she says it.

Talking Points:

01 So what do the most effective teachers in your school do to model and encourage high quality talk? How do you know? How is their practice shared?

02 How might a rich culture of structured talk be developed across all subjects?

03 How are teachers trained in your school to avoid the tyranny of closed questions and to develop more exploratory talk?

04 In which subjects does it happen the most?

05 What would students tell you about talk in your school – do they value its place in their learning? In all subjects?

06 How does the school culture generally emphasise the importance of spoken communication and listening skills? Is there more that could be done, say, through tutor time and assemblies?

So what could you do next?

Case studies
In researching this booklet, I came across many schools for whom innovation in English appeared to be trying out ways of getting more students to gain a grade C.

And of course that's important.

But the case studies in this section are presented to show that deeper levels of innovation – likely to result in transformational change rather than a succession of quick hits – are going on too. In particular they illustrate schools that have stepped back from the exam results conveyor belt, looked at their work, and done things differently – both in English and whole-school literacy.

These schools are already achieving outstanding results, and continue to make progress. They are a welcome reminder that real progress comes through pedagogical and curricular innovation.

Chenderit School
Banbury

First specialism: Arts

Creating a literacy community

Chenderit School is an 11-18 comprehensive with around 1150 students. It is a specialist college for visual arts. Headteacher Graham Tyrer has been at the school for 2 years and is a passionate advocate of literacy across subjects. This approach extends way beyond a traditional emphasis on displaying key words in classrooms with a shared presentation and assessment policy. 'The aim,' says Tyrer, 'is to create a literacy village'. Anyone who heard him speak at the 2009 Achievement Show will know just how far the school has travelled and just how innovative is the vision.

Creating a literacy village:

What's striking about the Chenderit approach is its emphasis on community – students are given responsibility for delivering literacy –based starters and parents are involved as literacy coaches.

Here's how it works:

When they arrive at Chenderit, year 7 students are expected to opt into one of three literacy roles. First, there are **functional skills tutors**. These are students who take on a kind of coaching role with other students. They are asked to devote three sessions to helping a partner or small group to develop their understanding of issues like punctuation, paragraphing or using different connectives.

The second role is **literacy consultant**. These are students who are asked to develop ten-minute starter activities based on the same key elements in improving writing – punctuation, paragraphing and connectives. These students work as a part of a school 'learning company' which, over a half-term, will deliver three starter activities to subjects other than English.

Teachers in these subjects can simply book the literacy consultants to present their starters in their lessons.

Then there are students who have a **product development** role in the literacy project. These are the backroom workers who put together teaching resources for teachers – perhaps a display or a handout. They are rewarded for their efforts with iTunes vouchers.

Impact:

So that's the concept. Here's the way headteacher Graham Tyrer describes its impact: 'the students gaining from the extra provision are improving their skills, especially in writing, in internal punctuation and the use of connectives because they are getting informal, but well guided instruction from successful students, parents and governors who are highly motivated to help'.

The student literacy leaders also report that their literacy is improving because they are teaching what they use; in some cases they find themselves experimenting with, say, the semi-colon because they have to explain it.

Involving parents:

Chenderit School is also developing another innovative approach to whole-school literacy. Graham Tyrer advertised to parents the school's need for volunteer literacy consultants – parents and carers who would help students with their reading and writing. He expected a small turnout. In fact, at the initial meeting, fifty parents turned up, a group that had to be reduced to fifteen.

The role of these parents was to give four to five hours of literacy support to a group of around three students. They did this voluntarily.

The impact?

Tyrer says: 'Parents and governors – and we have a group of 15 volunteers – say they find it rewarding and challenging to help improve what they know are key life skills. The 'litweb' site helps them stay in touch with resources and helps them at home working with their own children.'

Conclusion:

This is an approach to literacy by stealth – using students and parents to energise the school's literacy provision and, in the process, creating an exciting and entrepreneurial culture.

Next steps:

We asked what the benefits have been to the school:

- Raised standards of literacy for students who appeared 'stuck' at levels 3 or 4 in year 7.

- Improved motivation to learn literacy in these students and the volunteers.

- A real sense of community working together around literacy.

- Improved parent and governor involvement in the life of the school.

- Improved support for literacy across the curriculum by non-specialist teachers because the 'litweb' and student functional skill tutors help them directly in the classroom.

Preston Manor High School
Wembley, North London

First specialism: Science

Personalisation of literacy for all

Preston Manor High School is an 11-18 foundation school in Wembley, North London. It describes itself, rather modestly, as 'a successful and happy school'. Strikingly, it also wants to prove a 'memorable' school for its students and there's something inspiring about the school culture that strives so hard to shape and influence young people's lives for the better.

The mission statement:

'Ensuring that all students and staff achieve as highly as possible by being an excellent and memorable school, which values and celebrates its multicultural community and maximises potential for a happy and fulfilling life in our changing world… as a Leading Edge school, collaborating and innovating with our partner schools to transform secondary education in our area.'

That same sense of passion comes through when you talk to Deputy Head Georgina Liveras. She'll proudly recount the social context of the school – 70% of students speak English as an additional language, 90% come from a diverse range of ethnic backgrounds, and there's a high proportion of students with special educational needs. 25% of students are entitled to free school meals. The staff includes twelve special educational needs (SEN) specialist teachers and around thirty learning support assistants. Yet the results, year in and year out, would be aspirational for more homogenous schools. In 2008, for example, 71% of students achieved 5+A*-C including English and maths.

The success arises from a mix of very directed, inclusive work within English combined with a whole-school approach that is built around supporting the needs of every student.

English intervention at Preston Manor

As Georgina says, 'the English department leads the way', kick-starting year 7 with a one or two week summer school for a target-group of level 3 students. What you notice quickly is how tightly focused this scheme, like others at Preston Manor, is on measuring impact. The students take part in a series of skills-based activities designed to improve their reading, speaking, writing and, critically, their self-confidence. They are assessed at the end of the course to see what progress they have made.

All students transferring from year 6 to 7 receive a summer work pack, and from the start of year 7 the department runs an early morning literacy club. This meets three times a week with students in groups of no more than eight. They work through the National Strategies' literacy progress units and, once again, are assessed at the end of the course.

The department also targets year 7 students who are underachieving at level 4, normally a group of around 16 students. The extra diet for these youngsters is a range of motivational activities, booster classes, and an important cross-curriculum dimension to help join up their learning to other subjects.

In year 7, as part of their English programme, all students experience a discrete literacy lesson, and this is designed to allow differentiation according to students' needs. Level 5 students, for example, have a more challenging programme which includes Latin. Students with English as an additional language are withdrawn to work with a specialist EAL teacher. Students at level 3 work on literacy progress units. Statemented, School Action and School Action Plus students

get to work with key workers. The remaining students, working at level 4 follow the department's literacy programme.

It is this approach to targeted support which makes the Preston Manor approach so distinctive, and more akin to the notion of special needs provision articulated by Professor Michael Barber. He notes that, in countries such as Sweden, there is no stigma in being a student with special needs – you gain a kind of personalised support focused on the specific skills you need to develop, the aim being to integrate you as quickly as possible into your regular class. Sometimes the withdrawal group will include gifted and talented students, or students with no identifiable needs but who may just benefit from working in a smaller group or 1:1. The effect is that personalisation is something lots of students receive and enjoy.

That's how it feels at Preston Manor School, where the sheer plethora of programmes, each targeted at different cohorts and led by different specialist staff, creates a powerful sense of inclusivity and helps to explain the extraordinary attainment of their students.

This is perhaps best illustrated by the way the English team uses intervention strategies to support the learning of their main cohort of students. In years 8 to 10, students are blocked in two half-years. Critically, in each half-year there is an additional teacher allocated, the person who oversees the withdrawal room. The scheme of work for all students has a parallel programme of withdrawal which lasts a half-term at a time.

So, in one half-term, the withdrawal group might consist of highly able students who are working on a challenging novel together whilst the rest of their classmates, in their regular classes, are also working on a novel. Another half-term the withdrawal rationale may be based on lower ability students and their needs.

The point is that intervention is no longer the preserve of a small group of students who have been identified as having special needs. The range is broader, more inclusive and, in the process, creates a healthy sense that personalisation, withdrawal from lessons, more personal attention, is something that every student might enjoy and feel entitled to. It's a canny

and motivating approach which clearly results in significant gains in students' progress at all levels.

A supportive culture of literacy

Whilst the English department at Preston Manor takes a leading responsibility for developing the language confidence and skills of students, it is supported by a striking culture of whole-school literacy. One key feature of this is the recognition that teachers of English are the experts, and they will take the lead, but that all staff also have a responsibility. This deftly helps to get away from a traditional polarisation in some whole-school literacy strategies which either anchor literacy in the domain of the English leader or literacy coordinator, thereby implying to staff that literacy is someone else's responsibility; or a tendency to wish to avoid that by keeping the English department separate from whole-school literacy.

The Preston Manor approach fuses the two, with a working party led by the Literacy coordinator and a member of the English team. Its function is to train teachers across the school in understanding what effective literacy looks like in practice.

The group might focus, for example, on developing active reading strategies across all subjects or on how to improve students' spoken skills.

These approaches are then bedded into the schemes of work and they explicitly identify the vocabulary a student will be expected to be taught – and to see in displays – in any subject.

Many schools have had literacy working parties. The challenge is always how to give them sufficient clout. Georgina Liveras is clear that the make-up of the group has to be the people who are accountable for their subjects: the working party largely consists of heads of department:

'If you want to see change, then you need to get the key drivers, the heads of department, involved. When they see that literacy is about good practice, they'll lead their team, and develop resources and practice, ultimately enabling children to effectively access the curriculum.'

Underpinning all of this is a school culture which is rich in various intervention programmes, some targeting literacy and some addressing students' academic and emotional needs.

The programmes include:

- Reading in registrations
- Lunchtime and after-school clubs
- Extra classes for students with learning difficulties
- Thinking skills groups
- Intervention groups related to social skills and friendship groups
- Early morning reading groups
- An anger management group
- An assertiveness training group
- Drama therapist
- School psychotherapists and counsellors
- Specific targeted interventions for black boys, refugee groups, and G&T students

- An active student council that participates in teaching and learning, behaviour management and promoting student voice.

All of which suggests that if we want personalisaton to seep through the whole curriculum, and to raise the attainment of all students, then it needs to impact on as many students as possible in a focused and customisable way.

Next steps:

What advice would Georgina Liveras give to other schools keen to help their students through a programme of intervention work?

'There has to be a holistic approach and, if schools want to have an impact, intervention programmes need to be sustainable and long term. Interventions have to be consistent throughout the whole school and not just focused on year 7. You cannot abandon children after a year and tick a box and say the job's done. Regression happens quickly unless schools keep up the momentum. It's the slow drip, drip effect that will have the greatest impact.'

The Corsham School, Wiltshire

First specialism: Visual arts

Using the specialism to improve literacy

An 11-19 community comprehensive school, the Corsham School has 1400 students including a sixth form of almost 300.

You only have to take a look at the Corsham School website to know that the specialism is visual arts. A collection of images – almost no words – spins enticingly, leading us into what looks like a spiraling labyrinth. The overarching slogan is 'I can inspire' and as the February 2009 Ofsted report says 'it achieves this aspiration very well'.

The town of Corsham has a population of 10,500 residents and is situated on the eastern slopes of the southern Cotswolds. It lies on the watershed between the Bristol Avon and one of its tributaries, the By Brook, about 8 miles east of Bath and 4 miles to the west of the North Wiltshire market town of Chippenham.

The impact of the specialism in English

Head of English Naomi Boulding talks passionately about how the visual arts specialism helps students in English to attain highly. 'We are very interested in Anthony Gregorc's work on thinking skills. His theory is that people tend to have one of four predominant thinking styles:'

Concrete random thinkers:
These are students who enjoy experimentation. They are known as divergent thinkers. They enjoy creating new models and practical things.

Concrete sequential thinkers:
These students are detail oriented, notice and recall details with ease. They require structure, frameworks, timelines, and organisation to their learning. They like lecture and teacher-directed activities.

Abstract sequential thinkers:
These students delight in the world of theory and abstract thought. They are rational, logical, and intellectual. They are happy when they are involved in their own work and investigation. They need time to examine new ideas, concepts and theories they are exposed to. They like to analyse new information and make sense of it.

Abstract random thinkers:
These students organise information through self-reflection and prefer working in people-oriented and fluid situations. They are preoccupied with feelings and emotion. They learn best when they can make the information personal. They like to discuss and interact with others as they learn. They benefit from cooperative learning centres or stations, and partnering helps them to better understand what they are learning.

In English, this translates itself into an approach which leaves visitors astounded by the passionate focus on giving students a deeper understanding of the texts they are reading. It revolves around something called the

'Making Room'. Year 10 students studying Great Expectations, for example, need an understanding of the powerful sense of place that pervades and shapes the narrative. In groups, students will be given four lessons in the Making Room – a space rich with art resources – in which they have to talk about and then recreate the details of the description on the page. Students might, therefore, painstakingly recreate the room Miss Havisham inhabits, visualising the words and translating them to their own physical version.

What this does, explains Boulding, is to take a process of literary analysis which many students find dauntingly abstract and give them instead a practical, tangible form of response in which the key element is the challenge to the text, the close reading, the interpretation. She says: 'By the time pupils return to the classroom to write a detailed analysis of Dickens' use of description, the hard work has already been done: they have already scrutinised elements of the description and thought hard about the connotations it conveys'.

In a similar way, year 7 students reading William Blake's 'A Poison Tree', make it – again, working collaboratively, they physically construct the tree, discussing and incorporating the details they see on the page. Their finished products will be shown to the class, perhaps displayed in the library, and their interpretations are discussed and debated.

In addition, a group of students has worked with Chris Peacock, the school's full-time artist, to create a permanent sculpture in the grounds of the school and this, too, stimulates discussion about the connections between the 'foe outstretched beneath the tree' and the tree itself.

A process which in so many of our English classrooms can become arid and uninspiring for many of our students – 'Why do we have to talk so much about the poem, sir?' – is now something students have literally experienced in a hands-on style. In this way, they come to appreciate the power an image can have to stimulate serious and profound ideas.

The result, says Boulding, is that students' reading skills dramatically improve and confidence in engaging with challenging texts is increased. 'We've noticed that students write about texts better as a result and that they write more. Boys in particular are hugely motivated by this hands-on approach to textual analysis.'

The visual arts specialism doesn't only help students to respond to descriptive detail. 'We also use visuals to engage students in discursive writing,' she explains.

Whether it's Paul Zindel's The Pigman or John Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men, in dealing with the moral issues at the heart of the text – about the assassin in the former or who is responsible for Lennie's death in the latter – the English team start with the concrete. In small groups, students will discuss what they know, look for and present evidence, and then begin to develop their extended thinking through the systematic consideration of a range of possibilities. This not only helps them respond at much greater length to questions which begin 'To what extent…?' it also helps them to appreciate the achievement of writers in presenting complex ideas through literature.

The result, says Boulding, is students who never realised how many ideas they have about a text, or who said they found reading 'boring', or simply never engaged in class, becoming a community of readers taking part in discussions that have been designed and led by the teacher to move into increasingly abstract areas – a process which can only then enrich students' writing about texts.

Next steps:

So what would Naomi Boulding's advice be if other schools wished to try something similar, especially if we don't have the specialist resources enjoyed at Corsham School?:

She says: 'The Making Room and our full-time artist have enabled us to develop our ideas about the teaching of English in a luxurious and innovative way – we are lucky! Nevertheless, our work in recent years has merely carried us forward with ideas we were already using.

'The general thinking underpinning the approach can be applied to ordinary classroom situations and at all levels. Annotated drawings, graphs, badges, physical deconstruction of texts and pupils' use of PowerPoint to present images that reflect their own response to poetry are just some of the ways in which concrete thinkers can develop their response to – and appreciation of – literature.

'This is particularly important as we inherit a generation of pupils taught via the literacy hour, who have had only limited opportunities to respond in concrete and visual ways to their reading.'

Springfield School
Portsmouth

First specialism: Technology

Using literacy to raise aspirations

Anyone who has taken a cross channel ferry from Portsmouth has driven close to Springfield School. At the bottom of the A3 as it converts into a short bit of motorway to whisk tourists and truckers to France or the Isle of Wight, the school is set in the middle of suburban housing in Drayton in the north of the city.

A community comprehensive of around 1100 students, Springfield School specialises in technology and became a Leading Edge school in Spring 2007. Until 1997 it was what would now be described as a coasting school. Now – as of summer 2009 – 77% of students gained 5 or more GCSEs at grade C or higher, including 63% in English and maths.

Developing staff confidence in writing:

In many schools you can hear senior or long-established staff bemoaning the writing skills of others. At the time when reports are written and handed in for checking, many of us feel a sense of heightened frustration that no one, any more, seems able to write a sentence, use an apostrophe, or punctuate properly. Then nothing happens.

At Springfield School, literacy emerged as an issue for staff themselves. Teachers said they weren't always confident in their own writing skills. Dave Jordan, Assistant Headteacher, explains: 'Our belief was that, if we could help our students to become better at writing, it would help raise standards across all subjects. Teachers were keen to see students improve their extended writing skills, but it soon emerged that they weren't always confident themselves about the conventions of writing.'

What followed was a bold approach to developing the professional skills of a workforce which can be uneasily sensitive about admitting areas of concern: teachers, in other words, can be a tough audience.

Dave Jordan and Helen Summers' (Deputy Head) approach was to create extended writing opportunities in unexpected subjects, beginning in art and drama. 'Like all teachers, the art and drama team asked 'What's in it for me?' but were quick to recognise that better writing from students would lead not only to higher results, but also to more confidence, more subtle thinking, and other skills likely to feed back into the subject.'

Thus began a programme of teacher training, initially by stealth, developing the skills of the teaching teams in art and drama to teach extended writing. In these lessons, students were taught how to write evaluations and they explored the relevant writing conventions for their subjects. In addition, colleagues became more secure in giving meaningful feedback about students' writing.

The effect was improvements in the level of subject understanding that the students demonstrated in their writing, which in turn raised teachers' expectations. From that, a programme of differentiated training for all staff began. Teaching extended writing was the whole-school theme, but the INSET responded chiefly to teachers' wishes to become more confident and accurate writers themselves. CPD sessions were organised with a whole-staff grammar session which – keeping the tone light and entertaining – included quizzes and a survey by which teachers could judge their own existing writing skills and knowledge. There then followed a grammar session – going through the basics of structuring and punctuating that many of us never covered in our own schooling.
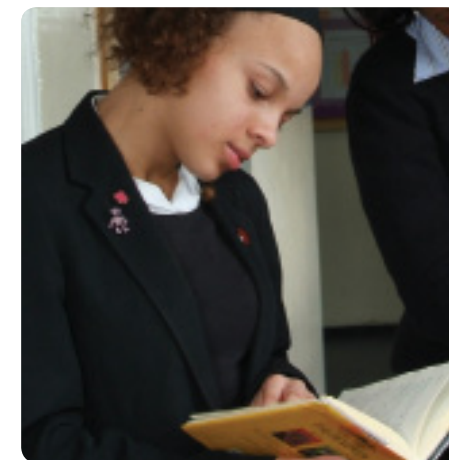
How did teachers react to this? 'Because it was a collaborative approach – something recognised as a need to a greater or lesser degree by all staff – it had a really good feel to it. And apart from a generic introduction to grammar basics, we were then able to start linking into the dominant text-types that teachers of different subjects would need to know well, such as evaluations in technology and science.'

The impact? 'There's no doubt that the self-esteem and confidence of many teachers was raised. That's a difficult thing to measure, of course, but that's what staff feedback was telling us. And the other effect was a consistent and coherent approach to developing students' extended writing which – though it began in art and drama – is now seen right across the curriculum, including maths'.

It's an approach which exemplifies that intuitive adage: 'How do I know what I think until I've written it down?' A rich programme of writing is likely to result in students better able to think analytically, to organise their ideas, and then to express them more coherently.

Creating writing 'events' for students:

As well as the emphasis on CPD in writing skills for teachers, Leading Edge has enabled the school and its partners to create some innovative events designed to inspire students to write beyond traditional subject boundaries.

In 2007 one event was built around the visit to the partnership of a former Russian cosmonaut, Alexander Volkov. Another visitor was Alistair Humphries who cycled around the world. These events, which include primary pupils as well as students, then lead to students writing accounts of what they heard, feeding into coursework, or moving them into writing extended pieces about their own lives.

Writing, in other words, is getting deeper into the bloodstream of the community. And to make the events feel like events, they are supported by displays and resources which students, teachers and parents can access through the virtual learning environment (VLE).

So what has the impact been of this strong emphasis on writing? 'We've seen improved skills which allow students to optimise and effectively communicate their learning in a particular subject. Furthermore, it moves the disciplines of accurate and focused writing from the English classroom across all curriculum areas.'

Next steps:

The challenge is to find time to re-visit this priority on an annual basis in order to ensure that all departments have extended writing opportunities embedded in their schemes of work and in order to ensure that this becomes a keystone of effective learning.

And if other schools wanted to raise the profile of writing, and in particular to build the skills of their teachers, what advice would Dave Jordan give? 'Start small and work with departments other than the English department to create lead practitioners and advocates for extended writing. Then use those practitioners to ensure that these skills and their benefits are successfully disseminated rather than diffused across the school. Colleagues are likely to be responsive to the examples of good practice shared by other departments.'

Comberton Village College
Cambridge

First specialism: Sports

Consistently delivering high standards in English

When you arrive in the large reception area of Comberton Village College, you are reminded of Henry Morris's original concept of what the village college should be – a school that serves its whole community, stems migration to the towns, and provides first rate educational standards. Sitting in reception you see smartly dressed but not overly regimented students passing through en route to the next lesson, whilst a member of the public might be at the other side paying in money at the village's branch of the Cambridge Building Society.

It's a school whose surface of calm purpose disguises an extraordinary level of consistency across subjects, across year groups and across ages. Many schools achieve very good results in some subjects, but the striking feature of Comberton's success is its wide base. It's a Mercedes amongst schools – the quiet purring motor concealing systems that deliver consistently high levels of teaching and learning.

Take their results for the summer of 2009: the percentage of students gaining five or more GCSEs and equivalents with grades A* to C, including English and mathematics was 77%.

Acting Head of English Victoria Norman ascribes this in part to the appointment of very good teachers. The school's approach to recruitment exemplifies Jim Collin's advice in his book *Good to Great*. He says that the best organisations never compromise on their appointments. If they have any hesitation at all about a candidate, then they won't appoint. The school also benefits from its proximity to Cambridge, a city which attracts good graduates and is a place where many people might choose

to live and work, but it's the absolute emphasis on securing excellence for all that is a striking feature. The school hosts a number of initial teacher training (ITT) and graduate teacher training programme (GTP) students who, once spending time there, are keen to stay and therefore apply for jobs.

Inside the English team:

Part of the reason for this is a relentless focus on teaching and learning. Back in 2003 the staff were undertaking training in whole-school literacy to seek ways of minimising in-school variation. The staffing structure is a distinctive one – more than a dozen advanced skills teachers work within the school and with partner schools –

once again keeping the focus on classroom practice and innovation. It is a school seemingly at the top of its game, and one might expect an English department driven crudely by the results agenda, determined to keep the percentages of Cs and above at GCSE sufficiently high. But this is no exam factory.

Victoria Norman has recently taken on the leadership of the English team. She has worked at Comberton Village College for three years, originally being appointed as an advanced skills teacher (AST). She leads a team of nine full-time and two part-time teachers, two managers of KS3 and 4 and, critically, a higher level teaching assistant (HLTA), Debbie Brown, who proves integral to the department's success.

Students arrive in year 7 from around ten main primary partner schools. Four weeks in, based on work they have completed, including the completion of a bridging project begun in their respective primaries, students are set into ability groups. Setting, at Comberton, is seen as one important factor in students' success. It becomes particularly distinctive in its ethos from year 9.

Here, as in years 10 and 11, one small, targeted group is taught entirely by Debbie Brown. In year 9 it is a group with significant literacy needs, whereas at GCSE it is a key target group – the C/D borderliners.

What is striking here is not that special needs intervention is something that comes from outside the department: Debbie is integral to the English department, attending their meetings, working to the same schemes of work, leading the team in training on issues like, say, dyslexia. It is a demonstration of the way what we used to call 'adults other than teachers' are bedded into a teaching team, adding diversity and enrichment of skills.

The HLTA's contribution to the development of the abilities and confidence of key cohorts of students is seen as decisive in the work of the English department. But there's another rather unexpected aspect to the way setting works. From year 9, students are placed into gender groups, an arrangement which continues through the GCSE courses.

This, says Victoria Norman, has made a significant impact on students' attitudes to English. 'The boys,' she says, 'tell us that they feel liberated by the need not to show off to the girls anymore. They become competitive, striving to succeed and to improve, to better their own expectations and also expectations of others in the group. The girls, in turn, are much more prepared to make presentations and to speak aloud. They feel confident and relaxed, more ready to contribute to class discussion and make original, insightful interpretations of texts. It's something which, for us, has been hugely successful and is really appreciated by students. It also means we can tailor schemes of work to suit the needs of the gender groups, not to mention matching teaching style with the right class.'

In addition to setting arrangements, what is similarly striking is the way in which students are enthused and motivated by their English studies. Ofsted's comment that KS3 English is often not understood by students, feeling too much a succession of

unrelated topics and activities, doesn't appear to be the case at Comberton. There's a clear underpinning sense of purpose to KS3 and 4 which is clearly communicated to the students.

Year 9, for example, has at its core a large scale theatrical event. All students study Romeo and Juliet and, around Christmas, a theatre company (Shakespeare in Schools) attends to bring the play to life.

Year 9 is also used to teach students the essential coursework skills they will need at GCSE and gives them the chance to complete a practice piece. Then, in the summer term, they begin their GCSE courses, again grouped by both ability and gender.

One complaint about setting is that it matches the best students with the best teachers and leaves the others to flounder. At Comberton, staff complete an annual questionnaire expressing their preference in terms of year group, ability and gender, the aim being to match staff strengths with student needs. It's another example of a

deceptively simple but considered approach to achieving the best outcomes for all students.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the Comberton approach is the strong culture within English and across the school of an ethos that is focused on maximising achievement. Top set students write their own coursework questions and plan their coursework essays; in the case of the media essay they choose their own text to study – the aims being: to develop them into independent learners; to allow them to take ownership of their own work; and to give them the chance to write about topics which genuinely interest them. In addition, top set GCSE students complete all of their coursework and speaking and listening assessments by July of year 10 and this year they will go on to take their GCSE exams in November. After piloting this approach for two years, it will not only be top set students who take the exam in November but half the year group will sit the early entry GCSE, knowing that re-sits are available, or the chance

to concentrate on their literature work. Next year, all students in year 11 will take their GCSE English in November. All are supported by two days of speaking and listening immersion, where the aim is to make sure that every student, whatever their ability, has completed two high quality spoken English assessments.

Again, there's a deceptive simplicity to all of this, a laser-like focus on the things that make a difference, giving students a strong sense of what they need to do to make progress, the space to do it, and a teaching team who palpably wish them to do well. Underpinning it is a whole-school project called 'CREATE' in which students are taught to develop their thinking skills, their teamwork and their resilience and, within the English team, an emphasis on shared planning, mutual observation and evaluation. It's the stuff we would all like to be doing, the approaches that the research tells us works in developing both teachers and students, and it evidently works at Comberton.

Next steps:

Asked what she thinks are the essential ingredients in Comberton's continued success in English, Victoria Norman says: 'The gender-based approach to setting is central to motivating students, to getting the teaching approaches that suit them, and to making sure the pace and pitch of the lessons are suited to the class. We also make our expectations really clear – often they are well above what students might have set as expectations for themselves.

And then there's the level of individualised support. For some students – some of them aiming for grade As, some of them for Cs – they can choose a session of study support – a space in their timetable to complete homework and coursework, and to get guidance from a teacher. It's this combination of systems and personalisation, plus a drive always to keep on doing better, which I think characterises our work.'

Conclusion
English – where next?

As Ofsted's 2009 subject report puts it, English is at the crossroads. There is much to do and much we could do to improve our students' skills in reading, writing, speaking and listening.

The problem is that the day-to-day imperatives can too easily swamp us, squeezing out the approaches and techniques which actually might accelerate learning whilst making our lives easier.

So, in thinking how you might re-boot English at your school, here are five final key messages:

- **Less is more.** Let's identify the things that will make a difference – within our English classrooms, across other subjects, and within the bloodstream of the school culture, and then let's focus relentlessly on them. Let's rule things out that we aren't going to do, so that we can concentrate on what will work. And let's not think that most of these things are quick hits: real improvement will come through continual long-term focus.

- **In English, revitalise KS3**, mapping it out so that students understand its purpose in developing them into confident users of language and passionate but critical readers of literature and the media. Develop systems for personalised feedback that helps them to track how they are progressing. Make KS4 more personalised to the needs of different students, using functional skills to help sharpen the accuracy and confidence of key cohorts.

- **Kick-start whole-school literacy** so that we minimise mixed messages about talking, reading and writing, and instead equip students in their respective subjects to talk, read and write like

- **Develop a culture in which teachers talk about literacy** as a core component of being a great teacher, not something that belongs in the domain of a coordinator or senior leader. Make every teacher in English a teacher of English. Do this through professional development that goes across subject boundaries.

- **Get the excitement of language into the school culture** through display, performance, assemblies. See tutor time as a time for building literacy skills. See the school newsletter and website as an opportunity to promote reading and spelling. Become a language-rich school.

References

[1] English at the Crossroads, Ofsted. June 2009.

[2] Ofsted, June 2009 Op. Cit.

[3] English for the English, George Sampson, 1921.