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**Freedom and the new English GCSEs**

Sam Gibbs’ life was changed by David Gore, her English and Communications teacher at Bilborough College, Nottingham. She told me: “It was genuinely a light bulb moment in one of his lessons. We were studying theories of how people are influenced by the media and suddenly the penny dropped and I realised how there are a number of factors that influence people, and the media is just one of those factors. David Gore didn’t rely on gimmicks; most of the time, we would simply read and discuss what we thought and felt about our reading in his lessons. But we were talking to think and that was the crucial thing.”

Sam feels that David gave her the conceptual tools to achieve a good English degree and an MA in Renaissance Studies. After that, she taught at a variety of schools in the Leeds area –in affluent and deprived areas – and is now an Acting Head of English/AST at Rodillian Academy in Wakefield.

The pressure is on because there are high expectations that her students will score top marks in the new GCSE English exams to be sat in 2017, even though many of them do not have a history of good English results and most are not from wealthy backgrounds. In previous years, Rodillian has achieved excellent English GCSE results, with over 80% of pupils attaining A\*-C grades in English. But will these great results continue with the new English GCSE, which is so different from its predecessors? The jettisoning of coursework, the emphasis on pre-20th literature, unseen poetry, making comparisons between texts and an entirely new marking system has meant English teachers must deal with massive change in a very short space of time.

Sam told me: “It’s a totally different course. With the old GCSE, I was aware that many teachers drilled children to get a C or above. If students learnt the relevant terminology and other techniques like PEE (Point, Evidence, Explanation) paragraphs, they usually would do well, even if their reading skills weren’t that great. But I was never a fan of this approach and I’m glad that the new course requires students to read independently. They have to understand difficult passages of prose and old fashioned poems all by themselves. The questions in the reading paper are much less formulaic than before and require students to come up with original answers, as well as show genuine understanding.”

As a result of these changes, Sam is trialling a number of different teaching techniques which nurture independent learning. She attended my NATE workshop on The Brave New World of the GCSEs in June 2015 and was inspired enough to see how my suggested teaching strategies might work with her students. Although there is evidence that the approaches I advocated do work in many different educational settings, I was interested to see how they might play out in the context of the new GCSE and so teamed up with Sam to do some research with her and her Year 10 class.

One of the significant stratagems I promoted at my NATE session was “Reciprocal Teaching” (RT). This is a reading intervention which has been shown to improve comprehension skills of children across the globe. In October 2015, I observed Sam explain RT to her class: she instructed the students to appoint a “teacher” in their group, to agree on a short passage to read and then discuss what it is about; clarify any misunderstandings; predict what might happen next and then evaluate what strategies have helped them read well. All the students listened enthusiastically.

As she and I went from group to group, it was clear that the students enjoyed RT; I watched them all read a page or so of *Animal Farm* (their GCSE English Literature set text) in silence and then listened in on their talk, which started, as Sam asked them to, with checking if everyone understood the passage and then moved onto more in-depth analysis: I observed a number of students asking high level questions about the complex themes and contexts of the book. All the students I spoke to said they preferred RT to reading around the class for these reasons:

* “It’s a lot easier to keep up; you can go a bit more at your own pace, and get help if you don’t understand.”
* “Everyone gives their feedback and so you can get their ideas, and that helps you think differently.”
* “There is more time to think and that means you get more ideas.”
* “Everyone has a chance to contribute. I don’t really say anything in whole class discussions, but I talk a lot in my group.”

For Sam, she felt that the students were definitely talking about the text in more detail than they would normally. When she asked for whole class feedback after the students had been doing the RT for about 30 minutes, she noticed that the students were also much more confident about giving their opinions. “And the really interesting thing is, they are getting to their ideas much quicker,” she said.

Seeing this class made me feel much more positive about the new English GCSEs than previous specifications. Although I am now a PGCE Lecturer, last year I was teaching the last Year 10 cohort to do the “old spec”, which involved ploughing through ridiculous quantities of Controlled Conditions Assessments (CCAs). These CCAs were time-consuming and did not always nurture deep learning; often teachers, under pressure to get the highest results possible, would “over-teach” CCAs by providing inappropriately detailed essay plans. In an ideal world, the CCAs should have promoted original thought, but ironically they did the opposite.

What I like about the new GCSEs is that the content has been stripped right back. For example, if you are following the AQA spec, you only have to study four set texts: a pre-19th century text, a Shakespeare play, a modern prose or drama text, and a selection of poems. There is still Spoken Language coursework to complete but the mark does not form part of the final English GCSE grade. Effectively this means you could spend the first two terms of Year 10, or even the whole of Year 10, doing what you want – or more importantly teaching what the students need to learn! I think GCSE teachers are much freer than they used to be. I’m urging my PGCE English students to think about nurturing students’ core skills in independent reading, writing and discussion in Year 10. I’ve urged them to get to know their students during this time; find out about their lives – their hobbies, their past-times, their concerns – and to foster a love of reading by digging out articles, poems, stories which their students will love. When I interviewed Sam’s students outside the GCSE lesson, it was clear that they, like most teenagers now, were spending much of their spare time on social media entertaining, informing, discussing, arguing and analysing their “world” with each other. It made me think that there is a place for the English teacher to encourage their students to investigate this virtual world in lessons: reading articles by top internet commentators like John Naughton in the *Observer*; analysing the language usage on these platforms; writing creatively about the online world and their own “actual” lives. The new GCSE English paper requires students to be thoughtful and pro-active in their thinking; a great way of doing this, as the Brazilian educational philosopher Paulo Freire argued, is to help students “read the world”. Then, once they’ve understood the context they’ve emerged from and have a better understanding of themselves, they should have begun to acquire what the Brazilian educational philosopher, Paulo Freire, calls “critical literacy”.

This is something Sam and I have realised through our initial research. Our next step is to see whether we are right; does the new GCSE indeed give an English teacher the freedom to nurture this sort of critical literacy in his/her students? I’m going to be returning to Rodillian Academy over the next two years and so will see. We aim to present our findings at the next NATE conference in 2016.

PULL OUT BOX

What is Reciprocal Teaching?

Palincsar and Brown (1984) invented this method for students who were struggling to read but it can be equally used with high-ability learners: I’ve seen it work well with undergraduates. Crucially, through thorough assessment of the strategies, Palincsar and Brown showed that comprehension is a teachable skill, which is best taught by getting a group to “copy” the strategies a strong reader uses without thinking about it: asking what a passage is about, clarifying misunderstandings, predicting what might happen next and evaluating how well they are reading.

What evidence is there that it works?

A great deal, particularly with less able readers. Twelve and thirteen-year-old readers who were, on average, 2.5 years behind their peers caught up within a matter of weeks when using RT. For more see: <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/reports/adolescent_literacy/rec_teach/references.asp>

I made a couple of videos with some school students on the intervention. Here it is being used with Sixth Formers: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MqcccHDT2-s>

And here with Year 9: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PefOhNAxJOU>

5 Good Things About the new English GCSEs

1. Much more time for teachers to read engaging material.
2. Much more concentrated focus upon independent reading skills.
3. Much more creative writing and personal responses encouraged.
4. No more drilling students to write PEE paragraphs packed full of terminology they don’t really understand.
5. No more boring lessons writing endless coursework drafts.

3 Problems with the new GCSEs

1. Too much focus on pre-20th century literature.
2. Much of the unseen poetry is inaccessible and irrelevant to students’ lives.
3. All exam based: many students never produce their best work in high stakes tests.