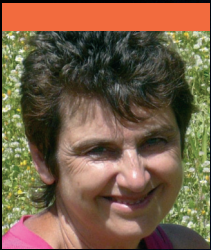


Word POWER

Leaving literacy to the English department could leave students struggling to express their ideas in other subjects – **Julia Strong** has some tried and tested suggestions for a whole-school policy that could really get everyone talking...



ABOUT THE EXPERT

JULIA STRONG HAS BEEN AN ENGLISH TEACHER, A DEPUTY HEADTEACHER AND DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF THE NATIONAL LITERACY TRUST. SPECIALISING IN LITERACY ACROSS THE CURRICULUM, SHE HAS WRITTEN A RANGE OF BEST-SELLING BOOKS AND PROVIDED TRAINING DAYS FOR HUNDREDS OF SECONDARY SCHOOLS. SHE CURRENTLY WORKS WITH PIE CORBETT IN DEVELOPING TALK4WRITING, WHICH IS A COMPREHENSIVE RESOURCE ILLUSTRATING THE APPROACH OUTLINED IN THIS FEATURE, ORIGINALLY AIMED AT PRIMARY SCHOOLS, AND NOW DEVELOPED TO INCLUDE TALK FOR WRITING IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS. FOR MORE INFORMATION, VISIT TALK4WRITING.COM

Many attempts at achieving an effective approach to literacy across the curriculum have failed because, under pressure from above to impress a passing inspector, some benighted soul has burnt the midnight oil to create a policy which bears little relation to practice. This then rots on some shelf. As I write, I picture huge posters of the most regularly misspelled words that mushroomed on the walls of every classroom in the school where I worked in the mid 1970s, following the Bullock Report. Everyone taught beneath them as usual, ignoring their existence. It has to be practice, theory, practice and that practice has to be actively supported and developed by the majority of teachers otherwise, in reality, there is no policy.

Beleaguered teachers have been trying to coordinate literacy across the curriculum effectively ever since the Bullock Report tried to make James Britton's concept of 'language across the curriculum' a practical reality. This is ever-increasingly key to the demands of inspectors and exam boards, but exactly how to do it still remains challenging. The latest requirements of Ofsted, mirrored by their counterparts in Wales and Scotland, stress the centrality of achieving an effective approach to literacy across the curriculum. When evaluating the achievement of pupils, Ofsted considers: "how well pupils develop a range of skills, including reading, writing, communication and mathematical skills, and how well they apply these across the curriculum." Meanwhile, the exam regulator Ofqual is seeking a coherent approach to achieving quality written communication in all subjects that are examined.

Passing the buck

Given this centrality of literacy across the curriculum to success in inspection and exams, why is it that the literacy coordinator's job is so challenging? One explanation is that many teachers don't see literacy as part of their job. I've never met a teacher who didn't think literacy was important but I've met an awful lot who think it is someone else's job, and in secondary schools that 'someone' is the English department.

At the heart of the problem is the fact that many, possibly most, secondary teachers are much better at teaching the facts and skills related to their subject rather than how to express that knowledge effectively. The problem has probably been exacerbated by the fact that teaching and learning was separated from literacy across the curriculum by the National Literacy Strategy; in reality, they are inseparable. The more

you consider the key elements that underpin effective teaching and learning, the more you realise that they are exactly the same as those that underpin literacy across the curriculum.

Therefore many teachers don't know how to make literacy across the curriculum work in practice in their subject. This problem is then made worse by the fact that many attempts at implementing it have been far too English focused and irrelevant to the demands of other subjects, for example being handed writing word mats to display on all work surfaces which focus on the language of creative writing. There is an understandable air of resentment.

Finally, an often side-stepped reason why literacy is not always flavour of the month is that some teachers are insecure writers themselves. If you have been the teacher in charge of checking the quality of reports written by teachers, you will know what I mean. Perhaps because of this insecurity, we often set students writing tasks that we don't actually try to write ourselves. As soon as you try writing the tasks yourself, you become acutely aware of the levels of difficulty involved; it can make you realise that far more support needs to be offered to the students. Nobody likes facing such truths and, if we are not careful, the literacy coordinator can be seen as the enemy. One good way forward is to offer voluntary sessions for teachers, possibly beginning with apostrophes of possession, to build understanding and confidence.

What's your language?

Each subject has its own vocabulary and sentence patterns. The rhythms and tune of the language of explanation for science is different from the patterns of argument needed by the historian. How can we help students acquire the language of so many different subjects? It seems obvious that talk is central to learning. To deepen understanding, talking through problems plays an important role. Silent classrooms do not lend themselves to progress. Discussing, explaining, questioning and using talk and writing to tussle with ideas are all aspects of the struggle towards clarity and deepening thought in any subject. The principles behind "Philosophy for Children" help teachers know how to generate open questions and extend their students' thinking through focused discussion. Another useful resource is Aidan Chamber's "Book Talk" which outlines how to facilitate children's thinking through partner and group discussion using the open question "Tell me...".



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Every teacher also needs to think about the sort of language that students need to express their ideas in writing in their subject. It is a mistake to believe that this is the domain of the English teacher. How can an English department be responsible for helping students acquire the language students need for music or PE or science? Each subject has its own pattern of language that is tied up inextricably with meaning. An English teacher cannot teach children the vocabulary of science, let alone the patterns of language needed to express scientific thought effectively. Only a science teacher can do that – but how?

Model behaviour

The acquisition of vocabulary seems simple enough but the emphasis needs to be on helping the students talk the language in context so that they internalise the words and phrases. When a subject teacher models how to use the technical vocabulary of his or her subject in different contexts, the students begin to understand what the words mean. This can be followed up by a range of opportunities to enable the students to be in teacher role, explaining to others: role play is invaluable here – try asking the students in pairs to take turns in being a visiting professor, explaining to the class what they have just been taught. The modelling of subject specific formal talk helps students hear how thought processes work within that subject. This modelling will inform the students’ talk so that when they come to write, they have already internalised the language that they need to express themselves. And, of course, they will recognise such language when they see it written down, so reading subject-specific text becomes easier.

A useful way forward is for every subject teacher to identify, adapt or create exemplar text that helps students understand “what equals good” within their subject. Exam A* text is a good place to start but it is important to adapt such text so that it is at the right level of difficulty for the class being taught and is a good model of the sort of phrases that underpin effective expression in your subject. The more the students are involved in co-constructing the ingredients that help make the text effective, the more they will understand how to use such approaches in their own writing. In this way, guided by formative assessment, progress can be built into planning as students are increasingly exposed to more demanding exemplar text as a model for their own writing.

Investing in results

Establishing an effective whole-school approach to achieving quality communication across the curriculum is all about helping teachers of all subjects adapt their units within a consistent framework so that students can transfer their learning from one subject to another and become confident communicators. Every teacher can help students internalise the pattern of language of their subject through focused talk activities related to exemplar text. This enables students to independently generate the speech and sentence patterns that are key to whatever subjects they are studying. In short, it is all about putting language in to get language out: in this way language across the curriculum can become a practical reality.

