

Literacy

By Geoff Barton

Like some gangly teenager in the shadows of a suburban party, one of our most important school subjects is having a bit of an identity crisis. As Ofsted put it in their 2009 subject report, English is “at the crossroads”.

Whilst inspectors found that 70% of lessons were good or outstanding, they also found something depressing. For many young people English is feeling leaden and confusing and frankly a bit irrelevant. Many of them are set tedious tasks with little connection to the kinds of reading and writing they might do in their real lives - stuff along the lines of “write a letter to your best friend telling her about your summer holiday”.

In key stage 3 in particular, classroom activities too often have the feeling of some disconnected hoops held out high for pupils to jump through like compliant Alsatians.

A sign of how grim things have become is that they appear to prefer key stage 4 with its cliff-face of anthologized poems to conquer and examination writing tasks with titles like “Describe the room you are sitting in”.

And whilst the Ofsted report makes some recommendations for rejuvenating English, the threat to the subject hasn't receded. The new GCSE specifications run the risk that literature – for many years the core of great English lessons – will become the privileged playground only of our brighter pupils as schools decide not to enter pupils who aren't likely to notch up a C grade.

Then there's the chill wind of functional skills blowing in – a feeling from employers, reflected in the development of stand-alone tests and qualifications, that the subject English isn't the kind of English that the economy needs. If basic skills in speaking, reading and writing are taught and tested separately from English lessons, where precisely does that lead a subject which had once seemed the pre-eminent baron in the kingdom?

The reason this matters is that pupils have never needed the essential ingredients of English more than they do today. They need to be fully equipped to deal with a rich and complicated world of multimedia texts, confident in using a range of skills unthinkable when I was young, and secure in locating these techniques and knowledge within some kind of cultural context. They need to know their cultural birthright – why the great writers of the past matter and how they have shaped who we are.

English, in other words, matters a lot, and we mustn't allow a generation to leave school thinking it was dull or bland or irrelevant. And despite the pressure to stuff a decent GCSE English grade into every youngster's pocket, nor should we be duped into thinking that this is the sole preserve of English teachers. We all have a responsibility for developing our pupils' speaking and listening, reading and writing.

In a small but influential booklet called English for the English, the primary school teacher and school inspector George Sampson once wrote:

Teachers always seem to think that it is always some other person's work to look after English. But every teacher is a teacher of English because every teacher is a teacher in English.

That second sentence, he says, "should be written in letters of gold over every school doorway".

That was in 1922 when English was struggling to emerge as a school subject in its own right, as something other than poor man's classics. The fight was on to reinvent the subject from deadening mechanical instruction in reading and composition to what FR Leavis in the 1940s would describe as a battle against cultural disintegration. Children needed to be saved from "falling into the grip of the entertainment industry" and

English was the subject to do it. This was 1949 and English teachers were being conceptualized as “warriors” or, in Matthew Arnold’s triumphalist phrase, as “preachers of culture”.

Yet if you wanted a sure way to provoke a collective groan in your staffroom, simply announce that you’re intending to hold a training day devoted to whole-school literacy. “We did that five years ago,” someone will cry out, harking back to the day the National Strategies juggernaut rolled into town with its panoply of methods.

And yet whole-school literacy has never been more important. The Science teacher who tells her class to write “Potassium was added to the test tube” rather than “I added potassium”; the RE teacher who teaches pupils to use the verbs “suggests” and “implies” instead of “says”; the PE teacher who teaches the connectives “as”, “although” and “despite”; the History teacher who reminds pupils to spell the word “government” by saying it inside your head as “govern”+“ment” - these teachers aren’t just “doing literacy”. They are teaching their pupils to speak and read and write like experts in science and RE and PE and history.

That’s why George Sampson’s words from 1922 remain so relevant: every teacher in English is a teacher of English, and all our pupils will benefit from a consistent approach.

But this time round let's not call it literacy. Let's just say it's what all great teachers – whatever their subject – happen to do.