

Essential skills for essential times

Helen Lapping assesses a new resource from Oxford University Press to see how it fits with the new KS3 Programme of Study and the renewed Framework.

As I write, many English departments are receiving training on the revised Programmes of Study for KS3 and 4 and the renewed English Framework. This pared down, streamlined English entitlement puts the emphasis firmly on the skills or key processes young people will need in our multi-faceted twenty first century society. It looks as though, at last, we shall have an English curriculum that is about planning for progression in such skills, rather than pursuing 'coverage' for fear of being caught omitting Reading 13 or some such item!

It is in this context that Oxford University Press have come up with a creative, jam-packed resource that would be a good place to start looking for teaching ideas. *Essential Reading Skills*, *Essential Writing Skills* and *Essential Speaking and Listening Skills* each comprise a ring bound teachers' file of lesson plans and pupil tasks and a CD-ROM with supporting resources: interactive whiteboard activities, further pupil tasks (differentiated at 'Foundation', 'Core' and 'Extension' levels, and with answers), and user-friendly templates for creating lesson plans which can be customised and can have word documents added. Throughout the materials there is an emphasis on assessment for learning which will enable teachers to track pupil progress in reading, writing and speaking and listening and show them what they need to build on. This to me reflects the best of (and the heart of) the *Assessing Pupil Progress in English at KS3* approach.

There is an emphasis in these materials on the assessment focuses for all three key processes, both in the lesson plans and in the pupil tasks — the latter reminiscent of the Optional Tasks in the *APP* materials. At the same time, creativity, as one of the four concepts underpinning English, is highlighted as a potential focus for many of the activities. I should have liked to see the other key concepts of competence, critical understanding and cultural understanding brought in more overtly; but there are certainly openings for these, and this is such a flexible resource that they could easily be inserted into teachers' planning.

Lesson plans are organised into five units of work per year for KS3. In *Essential Reading Skills* these are by genre (Literary Heritage, Contemporary Writers, Non-Fiction, Multi-Modal and Drama); in *Essential Speaking and Listening Skills* by purpose (Speaking and Composing Orally, Listening, Questioning and Responding, Talking Together, Spoken Language Varieties and Drama); and in *Essential Writing Skills* by purpose and text type. The proofs I examined for this last resource gave the titles of the writing units by text types, like 'Unit 3 Advert — Visit India', yet some of detailed lesson plans had 'purpose' titles like 'Unit 12 Review, Analyse and Comment — Does the Loch Ness Monster really exist?' I did have some doubts about this, since the revised PoS and renewed Framework have tried to

move away from the four writing triplets, reflecting the fact that it's possible for persuasive writing to be imaginative or explanatory to be entertaining, and so on.

The texts suggested for use in *Essential Reading Skills* are perhaps a little conventional, for example, 'I Used to Live Here Once' by Jean Rhys and 'The Highwayman' by Alfred Noyse (more often used at KS2) but there are some wonderful contemporary choices like an extract from *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* by John Boyne and 'The Awesome Infusion', a newspaper article on rollercoaster rides. (After all, I do work in Blackpool!) And the more conventional English teacher favourites may be reassuring, with the units that contain them serving to complement schemes of work already known and loved. For the new PoS is about a rethink of what you have in place, not a huge revamp. However, it would be exciting to see a commercial resource that didn't organise itself in units of skills, but instead took a key concept as its starting point, with key processes delivered through that. But I digress.

I particularly like the *Essential Speaking and Listening Skills* pack, which provides some excellent activities for a skill that can be neglected in terms of discrete planning, teaching and assessment. I was inevitably drawn to Unit 3 Year 7, Talking Together, 'Chocolate Rappers', both for the subject matter and the neat pun. In this, the story of chocolate is used to set up a variety of activities. First, pairs are asked to discuss and decide on the order of items describing how chocolate is made — helpfully displayed in an interactive whiteboard version from the CD-ROM. This is real 'grammar of talk' stuff: identifying connectives that show order ('next', 'finally') and new vocabulary like 'nibs' and 'chocolate liquor'. The activities move on to pupils listening to recordings of people involved in cocoa production and speculating about their lives. There are obvious connections to other areas of the curriculum here, and this fits well with the aim of the new PoS to promote cross-curricular links. Indeed this unit (like all the others) ends with a 'Beyond the classroom' section of speaking and listening activities that support learning through 'real life' scenarios. Having analysed and reviewed a rap (the 'choc rapper') as a poetic form, pupils create their own as a short TV or radio ad. Here in Blackpool, this slots right into our current emphasis on gathering alternative or non-traditional examples of pupil work to demonstrate their progress.

So, *Essential Skills* is useful and lively stuff. It cannot, by itself, provide a full English curriculum; but its emphasis on the assessment focuses and on specific skills/key processes, and its well thought out activities, will really support departments as they find their way through the revised PoS.

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