



## READ ALL ABOUT IT:

Why reading is key to GCSE success



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**Reading proves to be the master skill of secondary school.**  
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## Foreword

**By Alex Quigley, critical friend to the Blackpool Literacy Project**

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that skilled reading, writing and talking, is crucial for our students to succeed in school. And yet, too many secondary school teachers and leaders prove undertrained and simply too busy to support their students to best access the demands of the academic curriculum.

What every teacher needs to know is how academic reading mediates the sophisticated language of each subject in secondary school, and what they can do about it. This analysis by GL Assessment of their *New Group Reading Test (NGRT)* data, featuring over 370,000 secondary school pupils in the UK, found a significant correlation between students' reading ability and their eventual performance across all GCSEs. The match was just as strong with maths and science as it was in the arts and literacy-rich subjects, like English and history.

Reading then proves to be the master skill of secondary school. The increased reading demand in the latest batch of GCSEs is widely known, but what is a school to do when 24% of its students enter Year 7 with a reading age of only five? Such demands, faced by the students and teachers of Blackpool, saw the KS3 Literacy Project developed to support school leaders and teachers in their vital efforts. Investing in the hard-working teachers and leaders of Blackpool to enhance every facet of literacy was simply a priority.

In secondary schools, literacy is too often seen as a bolt-on extra for teachers of science, geography and PE. Yet, when you dig into the research evidence, it is revealed that being literate is the most essential factor for disadvantaged students studying science<sup>1</sup>. Reading, writing, vocabulary and talking all mediate the school curriculum. Every teacher can then gain from targeted, evidence-informed training. By investing in literacy training, alongside leadership training on implementation (based on the EEF 'Putting Evidence to Work: A School's Guide to Implementation'), each school has important additional supports to tackle the issue.

There are no easy wins nor Hollywood endings when working in schools facing challenging circumstances. And yet, with sustained support and collaboration, there are positive signs about what can be achieved for the students of Blackpool.

Schools are continuing to keep the main thing the main thing. Literacy is high on the agenda and is proving a priority, with training and support being sustained in schools. It is not just the green shoots of reading assessments that make this work meaningful – it is a project that focuses hard on students succeeding in school and gaining knowledge and skills that will prove long-lasting far beyond the school gates and the challenge of GCSE examinations.

It has been a sincere pleasure to work with so many committed and talented school leaders and teachers to close the gap for the students of Blackpool.

<sup>1</sup> T. Nunez et al. (2017) **Review of SES and Science Learning in Formal Education Settings: A Report Prepared for the EEF and the Royal Society**. Education Endowment Foundation: London.

## Why reading is key to GCSE success

### Highlights

- A quarter of students at 15 still have a reading age of 12 or below.
- There is a significant correlation between student reading ability and eventual performance across all subjects at GCSE, which is just as strong in maths and sciences as it is in arts subjects.
- The overwhelming majority of students – four in five – will be less likely to have the literacy skills to access a GCSE curriculum at Year 7.
- The gender gap in reading ability widens at secondary school, with girls outperforming boys, whereas the gap in reading ability between FSM and non-FSM students remains static between Years 7 and 11.

Several academic studies over the past few years have suggested that there is a strong link between reading ability and general academic performance<sup>1</sup>. Children who are more literate, it's argued, can more easily access the curriculum than those who struggle, and have more opportunity to succeed academically.

Ofsted clearly agrees. Its latest framework has emphasised the crucial role of reading in enabling children to access the whole school curriculum and its continued importance throughout a child's school career – not just in primary. As it points out, "If we want to give all children an opportunity, a good place to start is reading to them frequently, introducing new vocabulary and meaning within contexts that stimulate their thinking."<sup>2</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the inspectorate has been especially concerned that 'all children' cannot readily access the curriculum if their literacy is poor. Consequently, inspectors have been keen to learn if schools can identify struggling pupils, the help they receive and the progress being made.

Teachers in turn have raised pertinent questions. It might be assumed that there is a strong correlation between reading ability and performance in arts subjects but what about maths and science – is it as evident? How important is vocabulary and subject

literacy? What is the impact of gender and social context?

To answer these questions, GL Assessment analysed the data from more than 370,000 secondary school pupils across the UK in one of the largest studies of its kind. We have also drawn on the initial findings of the Blackpool Key Stage 3 Literacy Project, which aims to raise the reading abilities of children in one of the most challenging areas of the country, and looked at one secondary school in particular to find out what obstacles to literacy teachers are facing and how they are overcoming them. The results are illuminating.

### Main findings

Our study showed that there is a significant correlation between reading ability (as measured by the *New Group Reading Test*, a termly, standardised reading assessment) and GCSE results across all subjects<sup>3</sup>.

This was not just the case in English, but in maths and science too. Indeed, the correlation between good literacy and good student outcomes at GCSE was higher in maths (0.63) than in some arts subjects like history (0.61) and English literature (0.60). **See table below.**

To assess the degree of association between *NGRT* and grades in GCSE we use a measure called the correlation coefficient. The correlation coefficient will vary between 0 (no association) and 1 (perfect agreement). Correlations above 0.7 are considered strong; correlations around 0.5 and 0.6 are moderate and statistically significant. High correlations in arts subjects are not surprising. But the correlations in maths and the sciences also underscore just how 'text heavy' most academic subjects are and why literacy is so crucial. Even the more expressive subjects – art, drama, music – have strong correlations to reading ability. Creativity, in effect, will be enhanced by reading.

GCSE subject	Correlation
English Language	0.65
Geography	0.65
Maths	0.63
History	0.61
Science Combined	0.61
English Literature	0.60
Drama	0.57
Citizenship	0.56
German	0.55



## Subject literacy

At secondary school, subject literacy is likely to be as important as general literacy. Anyone with extra-curricular interests will know how reading about them deepens understanding and enjoyment. The same is true of any academic subject.

Given the importance of literacy to the whole school curriculum, it follows that those students who struggle with it are at a significant disadvantage – a sizable minority are years behind their peers at age 15. According to our study, nationally 25% of 15-year-olds have a reading age of 12 or below, 20% a reading age of 11 and below and 10% a reading age of 9 and below. Those proportions of course will vary by school – and will tend to be significantly worse in the most challenging.

On average, nationally only 20% of 11-year-olds have a reading age of 15 or above (see Fig 1). That is one reason why schools that introduce GCSE curricula prematurely at Year 7 are likely to encounter difficulties – because four in five students will lack the reading ability to readily access them.

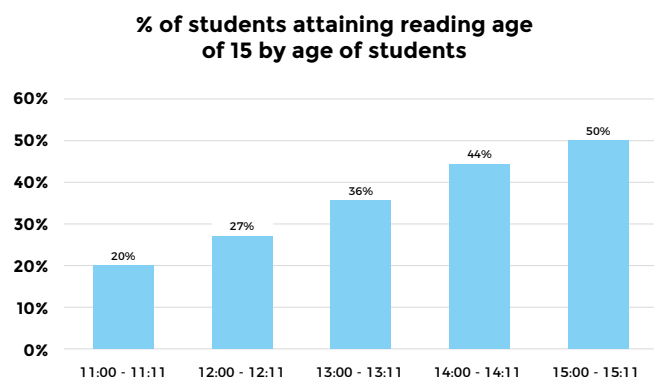


Fig 1

## Gender and social context

Our research does point to some differences in reading ability by both gender and social background.

At age 15, 53% of girls have a reading age of 15 and higher compared to only 47% of boys (see Fig 2). This is a shift from the situation at age 11, where the gender gap is much smaller – 21% of girls and 19% of boys have that ability. The later gender gap is of course reflected in exam results – only 44% of boys in 2018/19 in England received a grade between 9 and 5 in English language GCSE compared to 61% of girls.

% of students attaining reading age 15 by age and gender

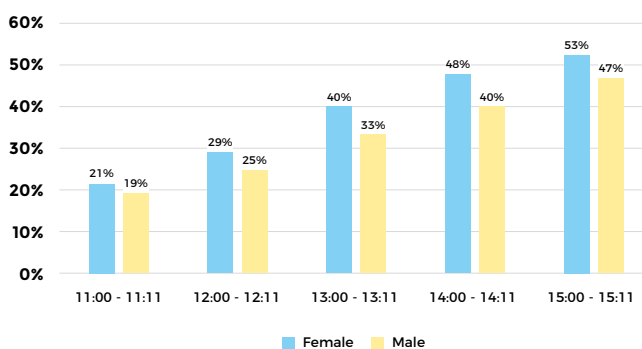


Fig 2

There is also a pronounced 11 percentage point gap in reading ability at age 15 between FSM and non-FSM pupils (see Fig 3). The gap is relatively similar over the course of secondary school – it is 10 percentage points at age 11, and 11 percentage points at age 15 – but the overall figure masks a big gender divide.

% of students attaining reading age 15 by age and Free School Meals (FSM)

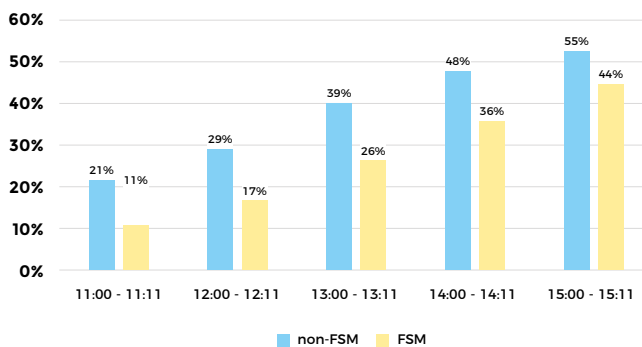


Fig 3

FSM boys fall even further behind their non-FSM male cohort, with the gap growing from 10 percentage points at age 11, to 13 at age 15 (see Fig 4). This performance is even wider when comparing FSM boys and girls – a 2-percentage point gap at age 11 widens to an 8-percentage point gap at age 15.

The Literacy Project has started to achieve real results in a number of its schools – Ed Diversity, Armfield and St Mary’s, to name just a few. Yet it is South Shore that has seen the biggest improvement in reading scores. To understand exactly how South Shore did it, go to page 9.

**% of students attaining reading age 15 by age, gender and Free School Meals**

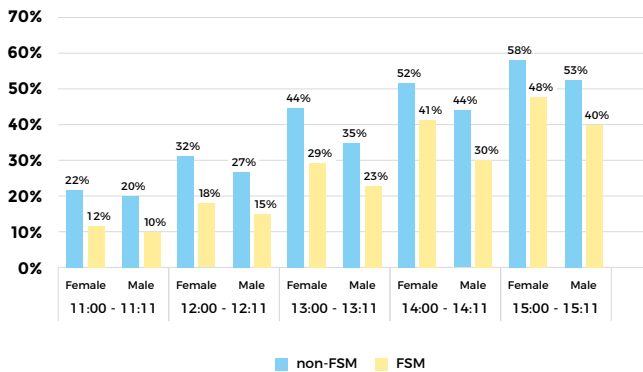


Fig 4



## Reading in a local context

National averages, of course, mask a large degree of regional and school variation. Those in deprived areas will typically see far lower reading scores. Blackpool is a case in point. Of the eight schools taking part in the Blackpool Key Stage 3 Literacy Project, outlined later in this report, seven have *NGRT* scores below the national average at KS3.

Reading comprehension is often poor, while many students lack the ‘cultural capital’ to fully understand texts or have the knowledge or confidence to range more widely. Speech and language difficulties also make the curriculum hard, if not impossible, to access.

In Blackpool, 16% of pupils are in the lowest *NGRT* reading performance band (stanine 1), which is four times the national average (4%). But just as national data can obscure regional variation, a town’s averages can mask considerable differences at the individual school level. South Shore Academy, for example, which is in one of the most deprived areas of Blackpool, has significantly lower scores than those of its neighbours. Almost one in four (24%) are in the lowest stanine – six times the national average.

## About the authors

Cres Fernandes is Head of Statistics at GL Assessment. He has worked on the national standardisations of most of GL Assessment’s tests over the past 20 years, including the subsequent research looking at how these assessments correlate with national tests such as KS2 SATs and GCSEs. He has an interest in computer adaptive tests and has helped to develop the algorithms for GL Assessment’s adaptive tests, including the *NGRT*.

Tom Gallacher MA MSc MBPsS is a statistician at GL Assessment. He works on the standardisation and validation of many of GL Assessment’s standardised assessments, as well as data projects in the UK and globally. His research interests include validity and curriculum, with a special interest in the applications of Rasch models.

### Footnotes

1. *Reading: the next steps*, Department for Education, March 2015; *Reading for pleasure puts children ahead in the classroom*, Alice Sullivan and Matt Brown, Institute of Education, 2013
2. School Inspection Update, Ofsted, January 2019
3. GL Assessment analysed the data from 370,000 secondary school students aged 11-15 who sat the New Group Reading Test in England in 2018/19



## Improving pupils' literacy across a locality

**Stephen Tierney, Leader of the Key Stage 3 Literacy Project in Blackpool, provides some key lessons on the project**

Improving pupils' literacy is a no-brainer. Ensuring children and young people are both functionally literate and able to access the curriculum are good things that all schools, teachers and parents can sign up to. The problem is that not all children and young people are. As a consequence, they struggle at school and may decide that success and belonging can be found in other pursuits, sometimes leading them into criminality.

Blackpool is an area of extreme long-term disadvantage. Of the ten most deprived areas in the whole of England, eight are in Blackpool. The town is predominantly White British. Improving educational outcomes in Blackpool is the hardest of the hard miles. Many children start school well behind their age-expected development. Poor speech, communication and language skills, limited vocabulary and life experiences – some primary children have not been to the beach let alone the countryside – all make reading more difficult, particularly comprehension and inference. This has a knock-on effect: more time for literacy leaves less time for other subjects.

Witnessing domestic violence, substance misuse in or around the home, poor mental health, overcrowded, inadequate and cold houses and the daily struggle to put food on the table affects too many of our children and young people. Education in Blackpool has a far greater social dimension than in some other areas of England.

### Addressing the challenges of the new GCSEs

During the annual review of our summer 2017 examinations results, heads of departments repeatedly mentioned pupils struggling to understand the questions being asked in the new GCSEs. Concerns were also expressed about the demands of the new GCSE syllabi. These concerns resonated with comments from primary phase senior leaders about the demands of the Key Stage 2 Reading Test the previous year.

So I started an extended period of thinking, reading, reflecting and planning how we might significantly enhance the reading capabilities of all our pupils. Partway through the process, Blackpool Opportunity Area approached me about extending the project that was beginning to emerge in the other Blackpool secondary academies and the Pupil Referral Unit (PRU).

### The Blackpool Literacy Project

By September 2018, all of the secondary academies in Blackpool and the PRU had contributed to and signed up to the plan. We had Right to Succeed – part-funding the project and bringing considerable project management expertise – and GL Assessment as key partners.

The funding plan submitted to the Blackpool Opportunity Area Partnership Board was for a two-year initial roll-out. The training of literacy and evidence informed leads at a senior leadership level in each academy and the PRU was key. The time for these senior leaders was the biggest expense. The first term was spent on training and planning high-quality implementation. Interventions, which started small and grew over time, only happened in most schools in the second term.

An ambitious set of aims were set out in the original project and they have helped focus and maintain momentum. These aims were to:

- **Improve the decoding skills of students at Key Stage 3**
- **Enhance vocabulary acquisition**
- **Increase the amount of time students read**
- **Develop, implement, test and embed a process for the reading of text within subjects**
- **Develop, implement, test and embed a systematic improvement of Key Stage 3 Literacy (Reading) and the use of evidence-informed practice**
- **Develop schools' ability to undertake a Response to Intervention approach, matching intervention to identified need**
- **Improve students' social and emotional development**



Each aim was linked to a particular evaluation tool – mainly GL Assessment’s *NGRT*, *Progress Test in English (PTE)* and the *Pupil Attitudes to Self and School (PASS)* attitudinal measure. We were particularly interested to see if there was a correlation between improved reading abilities and wider pastoral/attitudinal outcomes.

It is difficult to overstate the importance of the near 12-month planning process. Too many projects fail due to poor planning, which leads to poor implementation, poor monitoring and an absence of any evaluation. It’s the kitchen sink approach to school improvement: if we just keep throwing enough things at the problem we will solve it.

## Results so far

Not everything went to plan. There is always a level of turbulence working in the most challenging areas. Inevitably, people were promoted, fell ill or went on maternity leave, which meant that we needed to repeat training. Changes to senior staff meant the new person had to get up to speed without the benefit of training. An adverse Ofsted inspection blew one academy totally off course.

The early signs, particularly for those schools that had more stable staffing or good implementation, are very promising. *NGRT* Average Standard Age

Score progress for Years 7 and 9 students showed an increase in four schools – ranging between 3-5 points – maintained the expected progress in three other academies and only fell in one. Unfortunately, the latter had struggled to retain its senior project lead, so implementation was erratic. It has now appointed an experienced practitioner from the Trust to lead literacy development.

Staff surveys show a significant increase in the academies’ prioritisation of literacy and in teachers’ beliefs in their self-efficacy. The next challenge is to provide support to teachers in disciplinary literacy within their own subject areas. And anecdotally, it seems the steady, consistent leadership and management of the project is rubbing off on the way schools are operating. Throwing kitchen sinks may well become a thing of the past.



**Improving pupils’ literacy is a no-brainer. Ensuring children and young people are both functionally literate as well as being able to access the curriculum are good things that all schools, teachers and parents can sign up to.**



## Stephen Tierney's ideas for a successful Key Stage 3 Literacy Project roll-out

- 1. Appoint a leader with the authority to make the decisions needed to get the project up and running and maintain its momentum.** This person needs to be in place 9/12 months before the start date.
- 2. Form a small project team of committed people** who can identify the key problems that need to be addressed. Start to get other key partners on board. GL Assessment, CUREE and Lexonic (Sound Training), among others, were all companies we engaged at an early stage. Getting Alex Quigley on board to lead the literacy training and act as a critical friend proved very powerful.
- 3. Build in evaluation from the outset.** Keep it simple and straightforward. Start by getting a baseline. GL Assessment's *NGRT* is a well-designed and robust assessment tool. All pupils were assessed in the first half term of the 2018 academic year using the *NGRT*. We were also interested in whether enhanced reading would have a wider impact on the curriculum and whether enhanced reading capability (literacy) would have a positive impact on pupils' attitudes. For these, we also baselined pupils using GL Assessment's *PTE* and *PASS*. With these tests now being repeated annually, Blackpool is beginning to develop a longitudinal database across a range of measures. The literacy plan also had more qualitative elements – pupil case studies, staff questionnaires – to ensure interventions were being correctly implemented.
- 4. Build significant capacity within the organisation** to ensure the project is actually implemented well. Too often projects have significant amounts of funding for external consultants/ companies with absolutely no thought to the capacity needed to implement the project on the ground. We built in circa £24k per school to release a senior leader for two days a week to act as a Literacy and Evidence Informed Lead. Some schools decided to split the role. We always hold meetings when lessons are not timetabled so full attendance is pretty much guaranteed.
- 5. Include substantial professional development for the senior leader from each school.** We identified staff's limited knowledge and their views about literacy as an early problem. The academies were required to commit to significant whole-school training of staff. The Research School at St Mary's Catholic Academy, alongside Alex Quigley, led on the Education Endowment Foundation programmes for Literacy & Implementation; Philippa Cordingley from CUREE led on Response to Intervention; GL Assessment and Lexonic led a number of training sessions. There is no significant literacy development in the classroom without substantial professional development in the staffroom.
- 6. Finally, don't think a project will run itself.** Right to Succeed provided the crucial element of project management. This included regular meetings with senior leads, updates and task management, identifying issues at an early stage, keeping people true to the main aspects of the plan but tweaking them when needed and maintaining momentum and focus.





## How can secondary schools enhance literacy and improve GCSE outcomes?

**Bernadette Kaye explains how a pioneering borough-wide initiative and a laser-like focus on reading led to rapid progress for disadvantaged KS3 students at her Blackpool school**

South Shore Academy is a smaller than average 11-16 high school serving some of the most deprived communities in Blackpool. It's in one of the top 10 most deprived areas in England, with over 50% of students living in the most deprived area nationally and with over 70% of its students receiving free school meals. Transience is high. Student turnover in the last academic year was 23%, with 9% of children being new to the area, though the intake remains predominately White British (83%) and more male (55%) than female.

Over the past few years, trustees and governors have worked hard to give children a better education. And that hard work has paid off: the school improved from 'special measures' to 'requires improvement' in its latest Ofsted inspection, with indicators such as personal development rated 'good'.

Nevertheless, teachers and leaders at the school realised that more needed to be done. They understood that pupils' poor literacy skills often got in the way of learning. So they enthusiastically signed up to the Blackpool KS3 Literacy Project when it launched 18 months ago. Bernadette Kaye, an English teacher and the Assistant Head, became the literacy lead for South Shore.

### Identifying the problem

Before the project could get underway, teachers wanted to know how they could best identify the children who were struggling and what specific issues they were struggling with. This is where GL Assessment's *NGRT* came in. It was used to ascertain the baseline scores for 400 of 11 to 14-year-olds and to help teachers understand what the data meant.

"Before a single assessment was taken, teachers were shown exactly what their tests would measure, and the depth of insight they would bring," says

Bernadette. "GL Assessment's support was invaluable. We could immediately uncover the issues students were experiencing in literacy and shape the right interventions."

### What the data showed

The *NGRT* results, which showed standard age scores for every child and how they compared to their peers nationally, painted an alarming picture. "The data uncovered the fact that a lot of our students struggle with reading and that 24% of them were in the lowest *NGRT* reading performance band (stanine 1), compared to 4% nationally."

The school also used the results to highlight the link between literacy and academic performance in every subject. In common with secondary colleagues elsewhere, many teachers at South Shore weren't fully aware just how vital a role literacy played across the curriculum. "We hammered the data to understand the correlation between *NGRT* and GCSE results and used case studies in maths and science, for example, to demonstrate the link between literacy and subject performance," Bernadette says. "For many colleagues it was a light-bulb moment."

There was already a perception among her colleagues, she says, that the new GCSEs had made literacy challenges greater for schools like South Shore, which in turn helped the KS3 project. "That awareness allowed greater buy-in from colleagues in different subjects because they realised that students needed literacy help to tackle the new exams."

### The road to improvement

Of all the Blackpool schools involved in the KS3 Literacy Project, South Shore has witnessed some of the biggest improvements in reading in Years 7 and 9. And Bernadette attributes staff buy-in and intensive CPD as two of the crucial reasons for that success. "We did a lot of hearts and minds work with the staff early on in the project so they really understood the changes we were proposing."

But she also says the school deliberately focused on a couple of areas rather than having a multiplicity of changes. "First we changed the culture of the school. Class teachers used to feel they had to make sure students had enough to eat first thing in the morning or were dressed properly and so on. It was very well intentioned but it didn't get students thinking straight away."



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“Now, while we still provide that level of pastoral support, we have made sure that it isn't the responsibility of the teacher. We've said to the staff, 'The school will take care of the pastoral needs of those children who need it; your job is to get them reading as soon as they come into class.'” Students now spend 20 minutes each day in daily form reading, with those with the lowest scores getting tailored phonics support, too.

The second area South Shore concentrated on was the teaching of reading in all subjects. “We have gone from having virtually no textbooks in the classroom – and relying on simpler, non-contextual handouts – to ensuring that each child has a high-quality textbook in every subject.” Students are no longer spoon-fed chunks of de-contextualised information, Bernadette says, but are trained how to skim, scan and access material in textbooks.

One of the earliest discoveries the school made was that students lacked the subject-specific literacy they needed to access the curriculum. “We realised they were getting breadth but little depth. So the reading materials we now give them aim to give them a deeper understanding. If, for instance, they are studying the Holocaust in Year 8, we will give them *The Diary of Anne Frank* to read at the same time. Everything is much more joined up than it used to be.”

## The results

The results have been impressive, with students in Years 7 and 9 improving by the equivalent of almost half a GCSE grade in a single year. “When Ofsted came in recently, we were able to demonstrate our whole-school approach to reading and we could show them it was a focus in every class that they went into,” Bernadette says.

The children have responded incredibly well to the programme, she says. “They are so proud of the progress they have made and can't wait to tell visitors how much they have learnt.” And so have the staff: “Everyone is really happy. We're cautiously awaiting the next set of results but our staff and students know how hard they have worked.”

There have been other benefits, too. “Attendance has improved and truancy has declined, probably because there is now a much more predictable routine. We're also seeing fewer exclusions, in part because children find the curriculum much easier to access now literacy has improved.”

Bernadette also believes that the increased stability and pride the programme has brought to the school has had a tangible effect on staff turnover. “Two years ago, our staff turnover was approaching 50% – 24 colleagues left out of a teacher population of 56. Last year only seven teachers left – and I think our new literacy programme is a big reason for that. In fact, we are so impressed with it that we have introduced the *NGRT* to our family of primary schools, so we should have a much richer set of data when those children eventually arrive in South Shore.”



## The future

Bernadette and her colleagues aren't planning on making any major changes just yet. "We will only embed progress if we stick to what we are doing now - we don't want to do anything new yet. In a school like South Shore, just sustaining progress is an effort."

She points to their continued use of teachers reading directly to the class as an example. "At some point we will try independent reading programmes as students progress. But at the moment too many of them need adult role models to get started because they lack the capabilities to read independently."

Bernadette has some advice for schools with a similar literacy problem to South Shore: "Less is more. Do one thing really well and stick with it. Blackpool has been intervened with and tampered with for so long that it actually makes a refreshing change to stick to an initiative and see it through."

She emphasises once again the contribution of colleagues: "Staff CPD and staff buy-in are vital. To get a secondary school teacher who has never read a book in front of children to sit there and read has been hugely beneficial not only for students but for staff, too. Now they understand that because they are doing that they don't have to spend so much time doing other things - like chase attendance."

## Bernadette's top ten tips for improving literacy throughout a school

1. **Ensure you know the nature of the problem.** Do you know how your students compare nationally, which need support and what that support should look like?
2. **Make sure staff are on board with any changes.** They need to know why literacy is so crucial and what it means for the teaching of their subject.
3. **Emphasise that literacy is a whole-school endeavour.** It is not the sole responsibility of any one department.
4. **Sweat the data.** Use it not only to measure progress but also to identify and diagnose potential problems.
5. **Less is more.** Make one or two big changes and stick to them.
6. **Read first thing.** Get children into the habit of reading as soon as they start school in the morning.
7. **Invest in quality textbooks.** Teach children how to get the most out of them and don't rely on handouts.
8. **Encourage subject literacy.** Introduce reading materials into each subject that acquaint children with specific subject vocabulary and concepts.
9. **Invest in staff CPD.** Colleagues have to know what the data is telling them and where students need to be supported or stretched.
10. **Walk don't run.** To be sustainable, progress has to be properly embedded, so don't introduce students to material they can't fully access.



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## One school's approach to tackling oracy as well as literacy

**Students can't access the curriculum if they can't read. But students won't be able to read if they lack basic vocabulary in the first place – and this is an issue for too many secondary school students, argues Ian Mooney**

Ian Mooney knew there was a problem when he started analysing the long-term data. Although students' Key Stage 2 scores had improved over the years at the North Liverpool Academy (NLA), one key metric hadn't. "The verbal skills of a significant number of our Year 7 students were very low and had remained low for over a decade," he says. "Interestingly, students' non-verbal and numeracy skills were pretty good – it was their verbal scores that stood out."

The North Liverpool Academy lies in an economically deprived part of the city. "A large number of the school's intake has always had a significant problem with reading," says Ian, who is based at the NLA and is the Strategic Lead on Assessments and Partnerships for its parent, the Northern Schools Trust. "But I suspected it went deeper than that. It was a vocabulary problem."

The community the NLA caters to is predominantly white working class and the number of EAL students remains relatively small. Most of the low scores were attributable to students whose first language was English and who had a significant language deficit.

In Year 7, the NLA compares KS2 reading data to a student's *Cognitive Abilities Test (CAT4)* verbal reasoning and *New Group Reading Test* scores. Any child who scores more than three years under their chronological age is then tested with an additional language assessment, the *British Picture Vocabulary Scale (BPVS)*, which tests receptive vocabulary – the words that are understood – rather than expressive vocabulary – the words produced or expressed by speaking or writing.

"Approximately 70 students out of 230 are more than four years adrift in their reading," Ian says – and the numbers are roughly the same in every year group. "Only 7% of these are EAL – and some of these score highly in their mother tongue. The rest speak English as a first language. Out of those 70 students, 90% have vocabulary issues."



**Schools don't talk enough about vocabulary or test sufficiently for it.**



## Three tiers of vocabulary

Language specialists divide vocabulary into three tiers:

- Tier 1 consists of basic, everyday, high-frequency spoken words;
- Tier 2 is made up of high-frequency words used in a variety of different contexts, such as books and written pieces;
- Tier 3 consists of low-frequency words used in specific contexts – words and phrases like ‘photosynthesis’ or ‘the divine right of kings’.

Most children beginning secondary school are fluent in Tier 1, have a good grasp of Tier 2 vocabulary and are beginning to assimilate Tier 3 words.

At the NLA, though, many of the 70 children in Year 7 who struggle with reading can’t understand many Tier 2 words and a few are much further behind. “For some of our students with the poorest vocabulary – for example, a 12-year-old who has a vocabulary of a five-year-old – the curriculum remains impenetrable for them because they lack the words to unlock it.”

It’s not only that most of the 70 don’t understand more difficult words; they also lack the vocabulary of Tier 2 words to enable understanding of the explanation.

“It’s no use saying, ‘Use a dictionary or thesaurus,’” explains Ian, “because they can’t spell or recognise a word they’re supposed to be searching for.” And most struggling 12- or 13-year-olds aren’t going to put their hand up if they don’t know what most of the rest of the class takes for granted. This leads to disengagement.

## A ‘hyper-local’ population

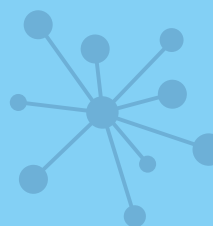
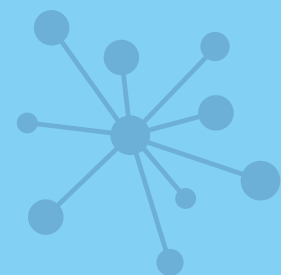
Why, then, is there such a vocabulary gap among so many students at the NLA?

“Many of our students come from families which qualify for Pupil Premium or FSM, or both, but while there is a correlation, it’s not the core issue. The core issue is the lack of access to a rich vocabulary, and this language deficit can go back several generations.” It’s a ‘hyper-local’ population which doesn’t have a tradition of literacy and which has had limited exposure to wider influences. “Some of our children haven’t even been as far as Liverpool city centre,” explains Ian.

It’s also a local culture that is fiercely proud of its Scouse dialect, and that can be a problem, says Ian, if standard vocabulary isn’t learnt as a result.



“  
**The curriculum remains impenetrable for them because they lack the words to unlock it.**  
 ”



## Tackling the gap

To tackle the language gap, the NLA has recently adopted a more refined approach to the third of students with the lowest reading ability. “We’ve divided them into four groups – English as a first language with very low vocabulary; English as a first language with adequate vocabulary but who have reading issues; English as a first language who don’t really need reading support but need language enrichment in mainstream lessons; and EAL.”

Each group has tailored support, but there is a common pathway. “First we enhance vocabulary, if that is poor. If students do well with that, they go onto guided reading and reading support; and if they do well in that, they go back into mainstream lessons where they read what their peers are reading.” There is also an additional conversational class, held by the SEND team before the school day starts, if children need to learn communication skills and greater expressive vocabulary.

The school is planning further changes to its curriculum this year, giving Year 6s who may have scored poorly in the *NGRT* the chance of a two-week summer school and reworking the first half of Year 7 to ensure that the cohort of struggling students receives more intensive language tuition as well as reading support.

## Oracy as well as literacy

Ian argues that schools don’t talk enough about vocabulary or test sufficiently for it. “Of course, reading is crucial; it’s how students access the curriculum. But before they get to reading, they need vocabulary. We should be talking as much about oracy as we do about literacy.”

Vocabulary as an issue is often overlooked, he believes, because teachers assume students have sufficient language skills and don’t readily spot it when they don’t. “A secondary school teacher might use different language when they switch from teaching an A-level student to a Year 7 student, for instance, but they wouldn’t expect to make allowances for a student who has the vocabulary of a child in Year 3.” In any case, children can be very good at disguising any deficiency, Ian points out. “They may use a Tier 3 word because they have been drilled to recognise it, but they won’t be able to answer a question about it because they can’t understand the rest of the sentence.

“To read fluently you need to understand 95% of words in a piece – and we have students who understand 10% of words in a piece.”

## Creating a vocabulary-rich school

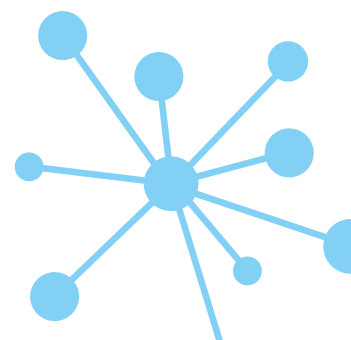
Vocabulary is “the missing plank” in the bridge to literacy, Ian argues. When schools successfully identify its absence and put in place interventions to address it, reading ability improves and access to the curriculum becomes so much easier. A rich vocabulary, he says, is “the door to ambition and so we are determined to create a vocabulary-rich school”. That means the targeted interventions mentioned earlier, CPD to enable teachers in every subject – not just the English department – to understand the importance of vocabulary and the role it plays in exam success, and working with older students to equip them with the language capital needed to shine in interviews.

Many students at the NLA don’t lack ambition to go to university and into professional careers, Ian points out, but they often lack the vocabulary to succeed in interviews, which can leave them floundering and which in turn knocks their confidence. “It’s a question of working with them to give them the vocab and confidence to fulfil that ambition.”

Although the interventions the NLA have put in place are at an early stage, Ian is confident they will make a huge difference. “Interventions to address vocabulary work. And they need to. After all, we’re asking children to embark on an ambitious pathway, to choose GCSE options, by Year 9. How can they possibly make those choices if they don’t have the vocabulary or can’t read?”



**We’re asking children to embark on an ambitious pathway, to choose GCSE options, by Year 9. How can they possibly make those choices if they don’t have the vocabulary or can’t read?**



“

**We are so impressed with *NGRT* that we have introduced it to our family of primary schools, so we should have a much richer set of data when those children eventually arrive in South Shore.**

”

Bernadette Kaye, English teacher and Assistant Head, South Shore Academy, Blackpool



## How GL Assessment can help you

South Shore Academy and the North Liverpool Academy are great examples of the way GL Assessment works with schools to both help teachers uncover the issues some students face in reading, as well as demonstrate the impact of interventions that are put in place.

Our *New Group Reading Test*® (*NGRT*) is ideal as a whole-class screener. It's a standardised, termly assessment that reliably measures reading skills against the national average to help schools get to the root of any problems precisely and quickly. And, as it's adaptive, it offers a personalised experience for each student, ensuring it's accessible for the children who are struggling and challenging those who need to be stretched.

*NGRT* is often used with the *Cognitive Abilities Test (CAT4)*, where handy combination reports show how a student's current level of reading attainment compares to their potential achievement, and our *Pupil Attitudes to Self and School (PASS)* measure, which can highlight how a student's reading ability can impact on their attitudes to learning.

Schools can also choose from a wide range of diagnostic assessments to support areas for further investigation, based on *NGRT* results. These include the popular *York Assessment of Reading for Comprehension* (which looks at areas such as phonological skills and reading rate), the *Phonological Assessment Battery* (for phonological awareness) and the *British Picture Vocabulary Scale* (for receptive language).

Find out more:

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