

Outstanding Teaching, Learning and Assessment (OTLA) Action Research Project

Unlocking Potential in English

Strathmore College – June 2022

Strathmore College (2022) *Final Report on the OTLA Action Research Project – Unlocking Potential in English*. London: ETF.

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This resource was produced as part of the Education and Training Foundation's OTLA programme, which was funded by the Department for Education. To learn more about the OTLA programme please visit: <https://et-foundation.co.uk/supporting/professional-development/practitioner-led-development-and-research/otla/>.

For further information regarding the Shaping Success Action Research programme and this project go to <https://ccpathways.co.uk/practitioner-research/otla-8/>.

The programme was delivered on behalf of the Education and Training Foundation by:



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Unlocking Potential in English

Strathmore College

SUMMARY

“I can envisage a time when I will read for pleasure”

(English Learner).

This project looked at how to support learners, who have become disengaged with English, to re-engage with their core literacy skills.

RATIONALE

The project aimed to address the challenge of progress and achievement in English for SEND learners. SEND learners achieve significantly lower than their peers in assessments for measuring national performance (Appendix 3a). We aimed to investigate what works in supporting our SEND learners. The SEND learners involved have a high level of awareness and understanding, but have been hard to reach because they have seen their (particular) SEND diagnosis as a barrier to their learning. We aimed to investigate how best to support these particular learners. More specifically, we aimed to investigate how to best support these learners with re-engagement, motivation, retention and achievement. We aimed to better understand how we could close the attainment gap (for these SEND learners), through an improved support network with better communication between Learning Support Assistants (LSA's) and wider support teams.

Other Contextual Information

Our action research was part of the Education and Training Foundation's OTLA 8 Programme. Strathmore College is an independent specialist college for young people aged 16-24. All the young people have an Education, Health and Care Plan and many require support for their social, emotional and mental health. They are taught in small groups or one-to-one, having been through the specialist education system prior to their post-16 education. They may have had long periods of absence from school. A lack of formal qualifications and limitations in English are expected. The college ethos promotes community-based learning and engagement in meaningful activities and work-related learning. The team consisted of the project lead, an English tutor, the deputy project lead, a tutor and lead on qualifications, key tutors and learning support assistants (LSAs) that work daily with the learners, embedding English skills development in practical sessions.

APPROACH

1. Assessment of learner strengths and areas for development

In a one-to-one teaching and learning environment, comprehensive assessments took place. This included standard BKSB initial assessments, so we had a benchmark reference for progress, Functional Skills style written assessments (some learners were not willing to take an online assessment), and discussions with learners around their perceived areas of strengths and weaknesses. Learners were all informed as to the outcomes of the assessments. Learners were then supported with identifying one or two key focus skills area(s), answering the question: 'What area(s) can I develop to help improve my English?'

Areas that learners identified included:

- Spelling
- Punctuating/writing sentences accurately
- Vocabulary and word recall.

These were captured on our Padlet (Appendix 3f).

2. Staff Training and Involvement

The aims of the project were to provide a close support network for the learners in order to improve their engagement in English, through increased opportunities to practise core skills with an informed team. As such, developing communication and understanding of the learners' literacy needs was key. Strategies to support learners were shared with staff in meetings. Individual learner folders were created online, so that tasks and activities were accessible to all, across all sites. Learners all had an English skills folder, in which bespoke activities were kept. To develop consistency and increase communication, the Project Lead began to have one-to-one support meetings with the staff, to report progress, take feedback and discuss strategies. Learners could choose to be present, supporting their involvement in the process and this helped to secure learner buy in. This was supported through including a log of activity at the front of the folder to develop three-way communication between the learner, LSA('s) and project lead

As staff fed back, a key area that was identified for CPD was how to enable young people to develop their spellings in a way that did not make them feel patronised or belittled. To meet this need, bespoke CPD was organised and delivered by 'That Spelling Thing' (Millar, 2022). This enabled a consistency of approach with learners. LSAs found that learners were more willing than expected to read words aloud and sound them out as a spelling strategy; this worked especially well as learners realised they did not always pronounce words correctly, which had affected their spellings.

3. Learner involvement

Learners fed back verbally, through reflective activity and through written feedback forms. In response, additional project activities included making, and finding bespoke resources, for example, including adapting existing resources such as standard lesson feedback forms to better suit their needs (Appendix 3c).

OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

Teaching, Learning and Assessment

Formal Awards

All the learners involved in the project made significant and rapid progress in their formally awarded qualifications. One (case study) learner, who did not formally study English during his first year at the college, was the first to complete his Level 1 Project; another, the first to take, and pass a Level 2 exam.

Motivation and Volition

Learner engagement significantly increased, as the images of Learner 1's work below highlight. Learner 1 goes from 'I don't know' to giving a clear and concise answer.

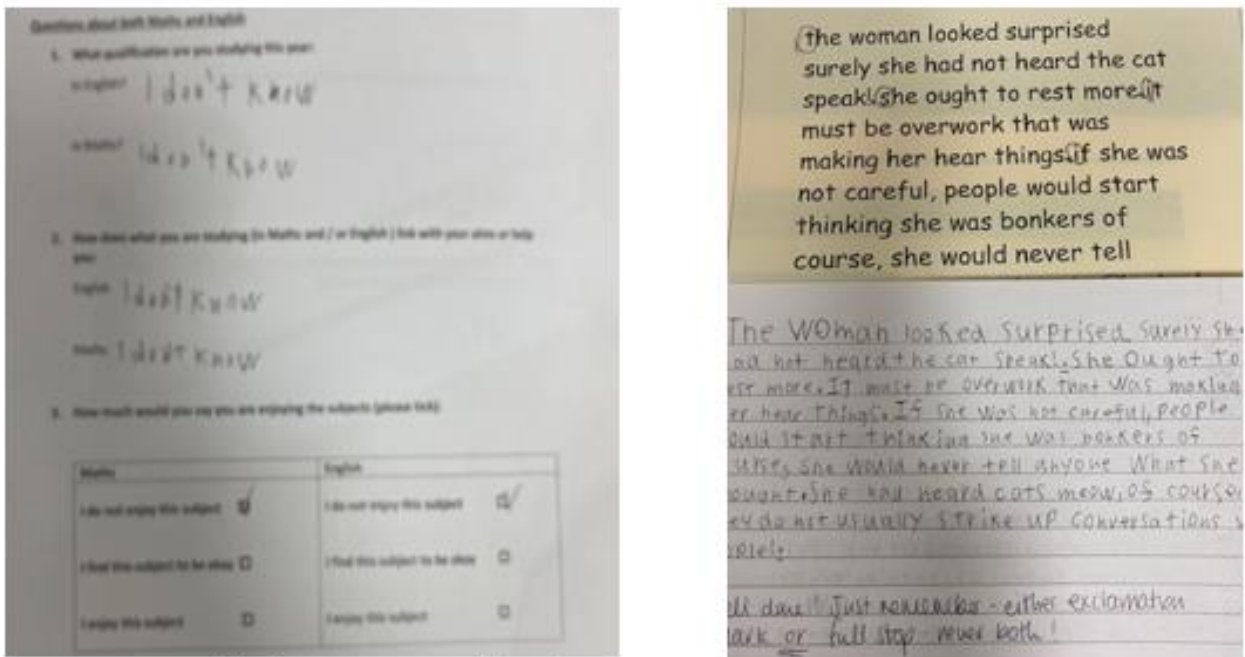


Figure 1.1: Learner 1 feedback in October 2021 and work in January 2022

Raised Aspirations

Learners began to work more creatively and become more ambitious with their work. The first image represents half of the entirety of work completed for formal assessment at the end of the previous year by (case study) learner 2. The second image shows 2 months into the project working closely and consistently with his LSA.

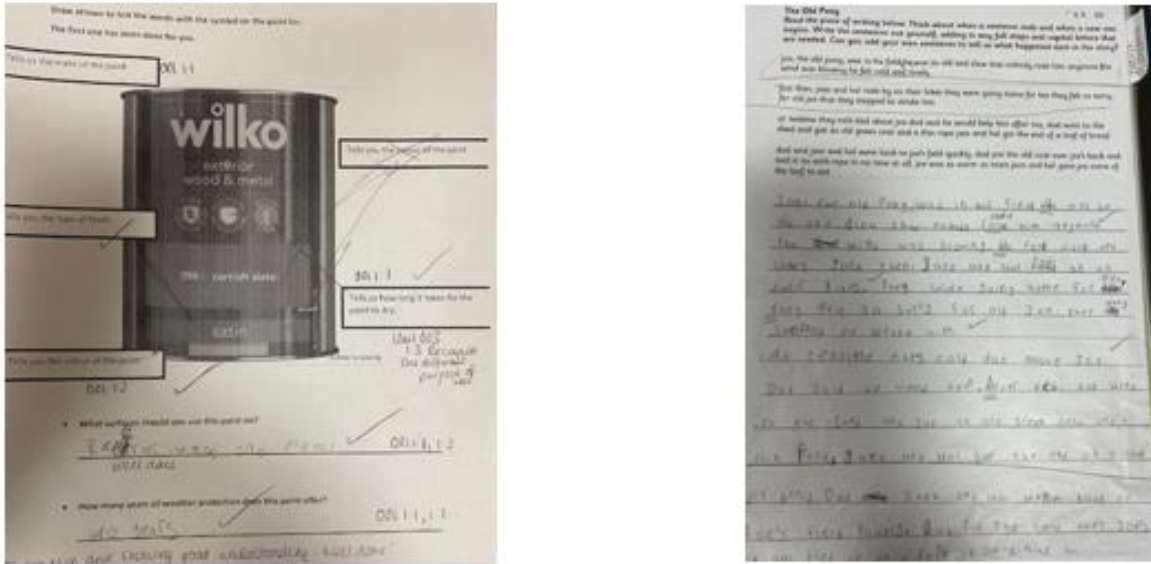


Figure 1.2 Learner 2 showed marked improvements in their work over the course of the project

Improved Resilience

Learners demonstrated resilience through a willingness to visit and revisit work. Learners were willing to undertake activities that they would previously have refused, as they focused on their weaknesses.

In feedback, learners commented on negative school experiences that had impacted on their resilience and motivation for learning - from wanting to give up when presented with easier work than their peers to being bullied because they were perceived to be 'not as able'. This had a long-term impact on the learners and still led to heightened emotions and poor self-esteem. However, in at least one case a teacher differentiating work for a learner led to a sense that the teacher had given up on the learner being able to achieve with peers in a whole-group setting and led to a view that:

'It is easier to say no you can't do something rather than try and do it'
(Learner 1 Interview).

Whilst learners may have some negative views about being educated within a specialist setting - this too clearly has impacted the confidence of these learners; they could see that the close relationships with staff and the very small group setting had led, or was beginning to lead, to an academic achievement that was in line with their peers in school.

The images below illustrate the impact of our action research project in relation to teaching, learning and assessment practices:

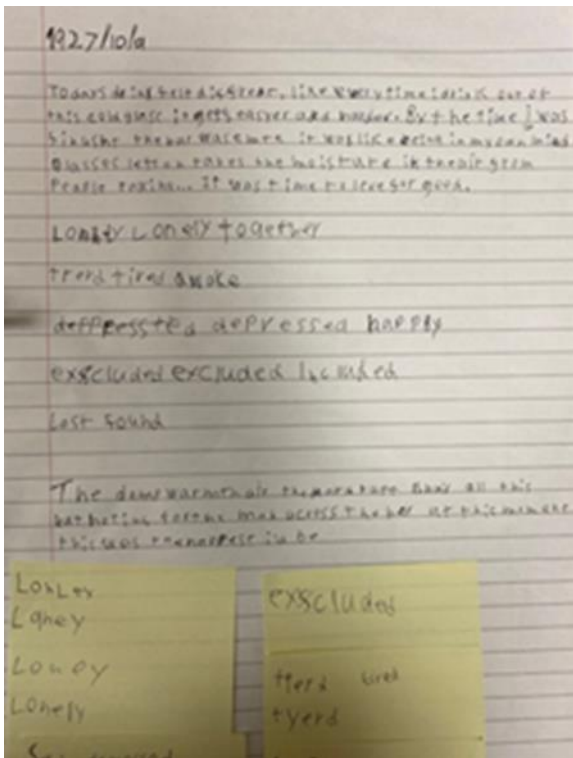


Figure 1.3 Learner work: Creative writing with review of spellings

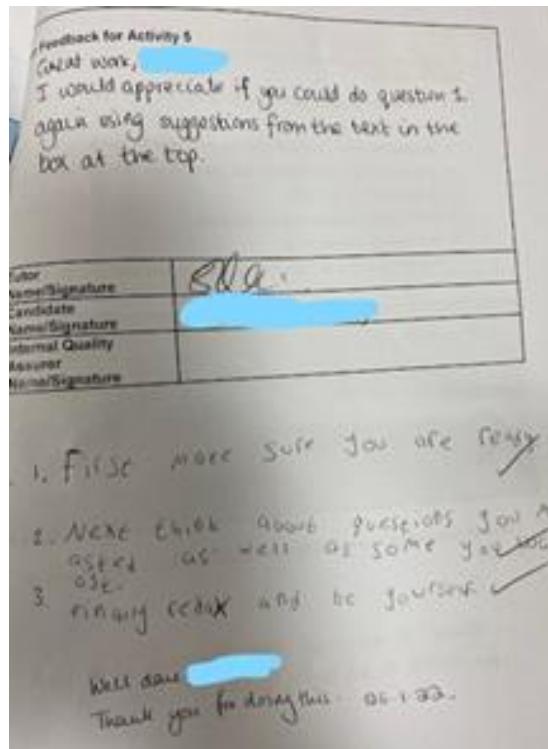


Figure 1.4 Learner 2 - willingness to revisit tasks for improvement

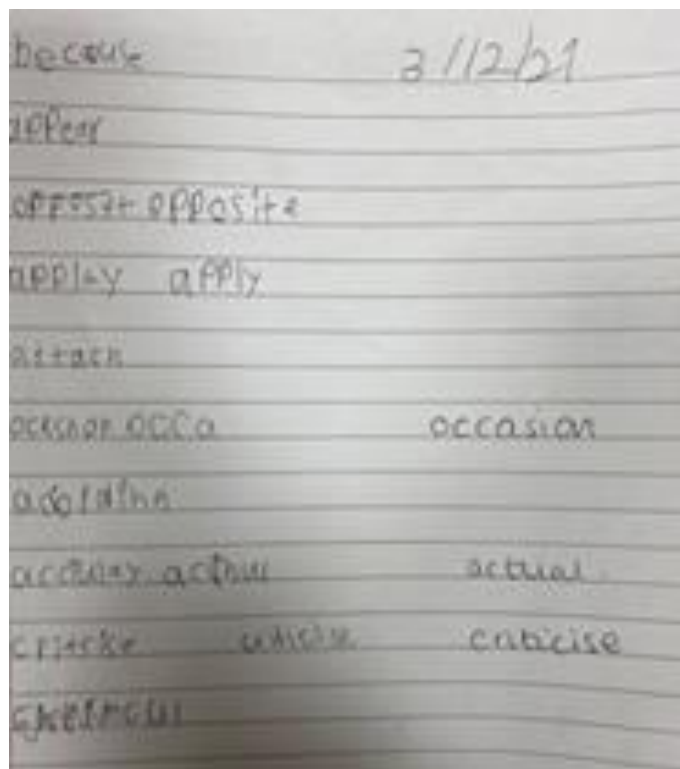


Figure 1.5 Spelling Tests

Professional Development

Professional Standard	How our project outcomes demonstrate this standard
6. Build positive and collaborative relationships with colleagues and learners.	Learners appreciated being involved in decision making around their learning as it enabled them to link what they were doing to their own goals; for example, they were able to choose options of work to tackle the same literacy topic and this helped to forge relationships. They also witnessed and appreciated when staff were working together for the learners' benefit, and this led to greater efforts on behalf of the learners.
11. Manage and promote positive learner behaviour	Our project enabled us to explore learner behaviour and motivations which are closely linked. Behaviour here means positive approaches to learning, a growth mindset, which a number of learners began to demonstrate as they witnessed and understood their own progress and as they realised that they were at the centre of the project.
6. Build positive and collaborative relationships with colleagues and learners.	Here the focus is overcoming 'individual barriers to learning' which proved to be learners' historic experiences and what this had taught them, rather than their SEND. Strategies can be used and employed to tackle barriers of SEND but overcoming the impact on confidence, self-esteem and motivation due to perceptions of SEND has proven the greater challenge.

Organisational Development

The nature of our organisation meant that the project was very person-centred in its approach. Focus skills areas were individualised to the learner, taking account of their individual strengths, areas for development and learning preferences. Having said this, key themes emerged, and it was found that learners wanted to, and felt there was a value in developing vocabulary, improving spellings and use of punctuation. Inevitably, even when their key skills focus was not vocabulary based, learners were introduced to a wider vocabulary and given more opportunities to read independently, and this positively impacted on reading comprehension. Both case study learners felt that it was their reading that improved the most.

This is in line with the research of Quigley (2018), who advocates teaching vocabulary as key to whole school literacy, which he feels is currently 'too unwieldy' (p. 98). As such, our review of English teaching policy and practices will include a focus on embedding English specifically through vocabulary development, with a focus on reading and the discrete teaching of vocabulary, in order to develop 'word-consciousness' (Quigley, p.99). This can be achieved through re-introducing key subject vocabulary focuses (as starters), word wheels (which a number of the learners enjoyed completing), 'word of the day', teacher/ LSA questioning and extension, modelling display, vocabulary worksheets in class and setting expectations with cross-college reading, where learners can identify and record new vocabulary. A number of the learners on the project were given alphabetised books where they could record new vocabulary.

LEARNING FROM THIS PROJECT

Some learners made rapid progress and some common themes emerged:

- Strong relationships with their LSA/teacher and a belief that there was a plan for their success, which was individualised, leading to a growth of confidence, demonstrated in a willingness to make mistakes and associated improvements/developments.
- An intrinsic or external motivating factor e.g., wanting to improve personally or an external goal, such as access to General Further Education or the workplace. Those learners that developed an intrinsic desire to improve, which may have not been present at the start of the project, spoke most positively about themselves and their achievements and showed the greatest willingness to continue to improve their skills after the project ended. In fact, the project could support the idea that ‘students can perform extrinsically motivated actions with resentment’ (Deci and Ryan, p.55). Such learners made rapid progress but did not readily talk of their achievements and remained self-critical. Those that became intrinsically motivated continued with activities when they had ‘free choice’ to do whatever they decided. For example, Learner 1 chose to read in the mornings at home, with no sense of expectation that he read outside of lessons at all.
- A need for consistency – of staffing, timing of lessons, approaches to learning and staff expectations. The nature of the project meant that these expectations became shared across the team of staff and were based around the learner.

Fundamental to learner progress was the relationship between teachers/LSAs and learners. These relationships seemed to be defined by teachers/LSAs who had high expectations but were willing to give unlimited support and flexibility in order to enable the young person to meet those expectations. This was reciprocated by the learners who then became motivated themselves.

Where staffing changed regularly, the lack of consistency of expectation was seen to impact on the learner progress and motivation was seen to decline. One learner had a period of time out of college but quickly picked up where he left off as he was supported by an LSA who had helped him to succeed previously.

In all cases, the progress became rapid when the learners could see the progress for themselves and ultimately took responsibility for their own learning, with physical evidence that they could do something they had previously believed that they could not do, which perhaps had not been proved before because of a readiness to give up. These learners who could talk about their own progress were then willing to try new things and showed the highest level of resilience, even when presented with mundane or challenging tasks. There is a clear need to be ambitious for all learners regardless of their previous experiences.

We realised the impact of developing vocabulary knowledge on reading skills, through the focus on spellings. With hindsight, we would have introduced a discrete teaching of vocabulary, through the multi method approach to reinforcement, that all staff could support the learning with. This will be reflected in our development planning for 2022-23.

REFERENCES

Deci, E and Ryan, R (2000). Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivations: Classic Definitions and New Direction Contemporary. Educational Psychology 24, pp54-67 [online] Available at: <http://www.idealibrary.com>

Millar, T. That Spelling Thing: more than letters (2022). Available at: <https://thatspellingthing.com/> [accessed 30.3.22].

Quigley, A (2018) Closing the Vocabulary Gap Routledge: Oxford

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: The Project Team

Project Role	Name	Job Role	Contact
Project Lead	Sarah Munton	English Tutor	sarahmunton@aspriscs.co.uk
Project Deputy	Leanne Flowers	Tutor/IQA	leanneflowers@porygroup.com
Project Team	Gaby Pugh	LSA	gabriellepugh@aspriscs.co.uk
Project Team	Bethannie Whitehead	LSA	bethanniewhitehead@aspriscs.co.uk
Project Team	Emma Dudley	LSA	emmadudley@aspriscs.co.uk
Project Team	Lauren Leese	LSA	Laurenleese@aspriscs.co.uk
Mentor	Lesley Littlewood	Mentor	leslittlewood@msn.com
Research Group Lead	Gail Lydon	Research Group Lead	gaillydon@me.com

Appendix 2: Learner Case Studies

Learner 1 Case Study

Learner 1 (L1) did not formally study English during his first year of the college. At his previous school, having been given differentiated work, he perceived himself to have limited abilities, which led to disengagement with the differentiated activities and his approach became “It is easier to say no you can’t do something, rather than try and do it.”

Various assessments showed that L1 had many strengths: he understood inference and implication easily in spoken language, enjoyed non-literal language and had a strong understanding of abstract concepts. However, his writing skills limited his ability to express these higher-level concepts, with a specific challenge being spelling: he scored Entry Level 1.9 in his spelling diagnostic which was weaker than both his reading score Entry 2.9 and writing score, Entry 3.3.

He was challenged to choose the skills area focus of improving his spelling to work on, both in sessions with his tutor, but also across sessions with his LSAs. He engaged in a range of activities aimed at improving his spellings, identifying visual representing words as especially beneficial to him.

He felt this positively impacted on his reading as it enabled him to learn the spellings and meanings of words together and discretely, prior to seeing them with the context of a text. Ultimately, he tackled some comprehension questions on T.S. Eliott’s *Prufrock* and Angela Carter’s *The Blood Chamber*, both of which were also selected because of their human and psychology elements. He no longer felt overwhelmed by reading but read every morning. He understood how to break down sounds of words and showed significantly high levels of personal motivation, acknowledging that he can “envisage a time when he could read for pleasure.”

Learner 2 Case Study

Learner 2 (L2) did not engage in English lessons until the end of the year prior to the project start, when he was linked with LSA, GP. He had no formal qualifications.

GP (L2’s LSA) set clear expectations for work completion for L2. With the project lead, she created and found work sheets that focused on developing L2’s skills but could be completed within 10-15 minutes. This led to L2 feeling a sense of task completion. GP provided coaching and scaffolding as necessary. L2 was also able to demonstrate that he could achieve his target - writing simple sentences accurately, and he quickly moved on to new targets with a higher level of challenge. He began to complete significant amounts of work over longer periods of time. GP was increasingly asking the project lead for more tasks and a variety of tasks to challenge L2 and together they compiled a schedule for his sessions, which he committed to.

Unfortunately, an incident led to L2 having an extended period of time out of the college, which was a cause of concern in the light of the progress made. However, when he returned, he very quickly picked up his skills again with GP, who was still his one-to-one support. He was informed of when his English sessions would be prior to his return and GP adopted the same approach and re-

established her expectations.

Currently, L2 is close to completion on his EL2 Awards, which demonstrates an increase of one Functional Skills Level since his assessments at the project starting point. GP reports that he feels a sense of progress with his reading, aware that he asks for significantly less support from her and, having successfully secured a work placement, checked with GP that he would still be able to attend his English lessons.

Appendix 3: Context and 'in-project' developments

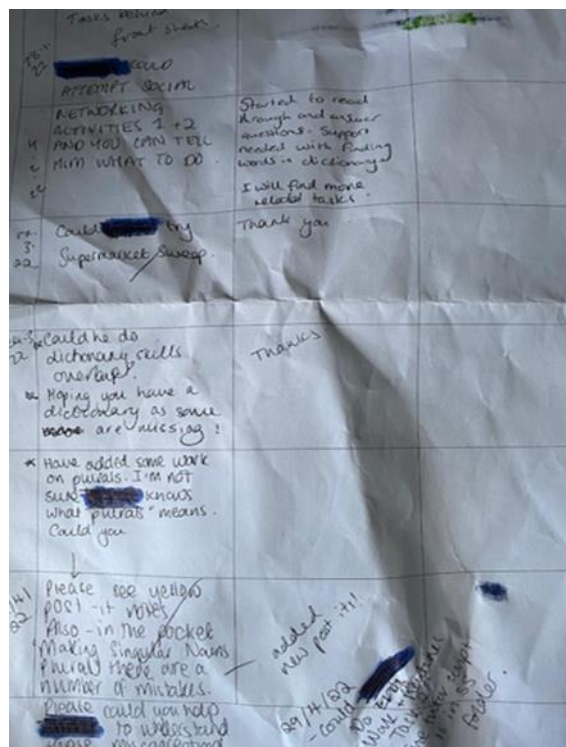
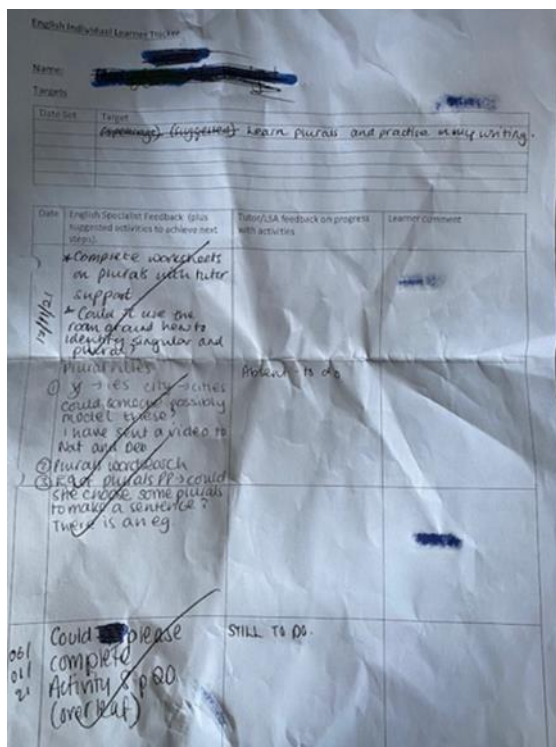
3a. Performance of Learners with SEND v Learners without SEND in National Benchmarks for 16-year-olds

In 2019, at the end of KS4 64.6% of pupils achieved Grade 4/ C in maths and English, which drops to 11.1% for Learners with SEN and an EHCP.

	Number of pupils at the end of key stage 4	Average Attainment 8 score per pupil ⁴	English and maths GCSEs		
			Percentage ⁶ of pupils entered for components	Percentage ⁶ of pupils who achieved 9-4 ⁷	Percentage ⁶ of pupils who achieved 9-5 ⁷
Disadvantage¹³					
disadvantaged pupils	143,816	36.7	93.6	44.7	24.7
all other pupils ¹³	398,752	50.3	98.2	71.8	49.9
All pupils¹³	542,568	46.7	97.0	64.6	43.2
Special Educational Needs (SEN)					
SEN provision¹⁶					
No identified SEN	464,515	49.9	99.1	71.0	48.2
All SEN pupils	76,961	27.6	84.1	26.7	13.8
SEN support	56,588	32.6	96.5	32.3	16.8
SEN with a statement or EHC plan	20,373	13.7	49.7	11.1	5.5
All pupils^{1,16}	542,568	46.7	97.0	64.6	43.2

3b. Folder Log – to improve communication consistency when staff might change

Early in the project, it was realised that with staff working across various sites and being unable to hold regular on-site meetings, we would need to develop communication approaches. This very basic log was kept at the front of learner folders to share progress and next steps when multiple staff were working with a learner.



3c. Standard (all-session) feedback form and adaptation for L2 Learner

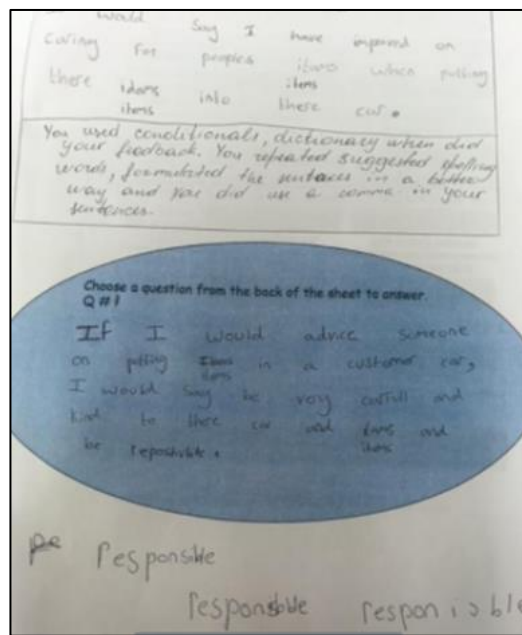
Name: _____
 Date: _____

Identify one of your targets that you feel you have made most progress towards today.
 Target: _____

How have you worked towards this target today?

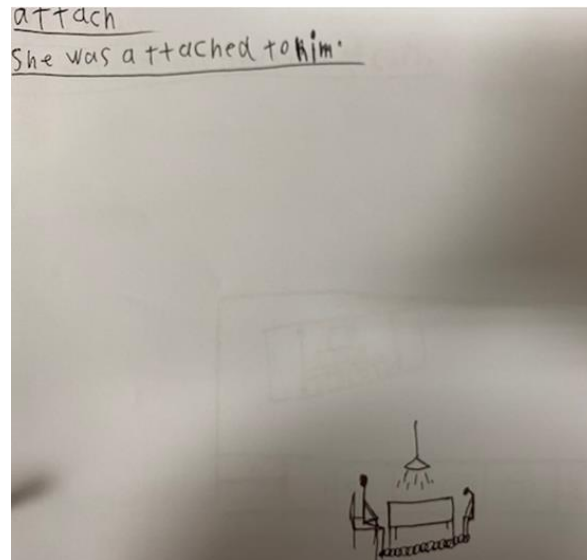
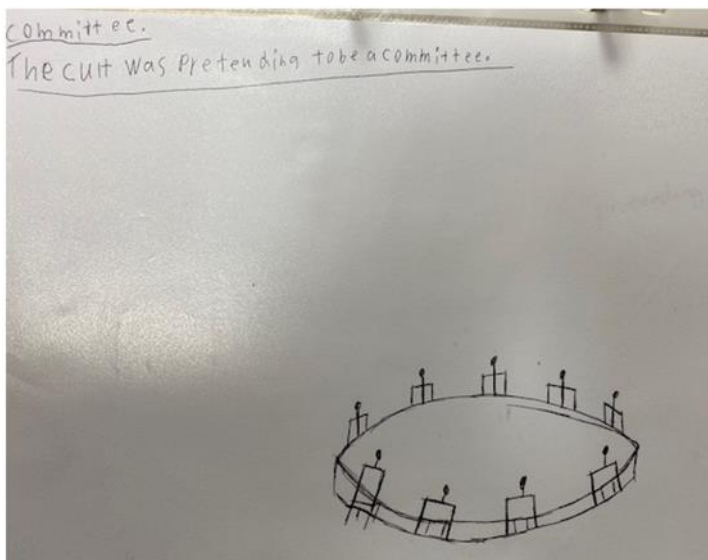
What could you improve on next week and how could you develop your skills?

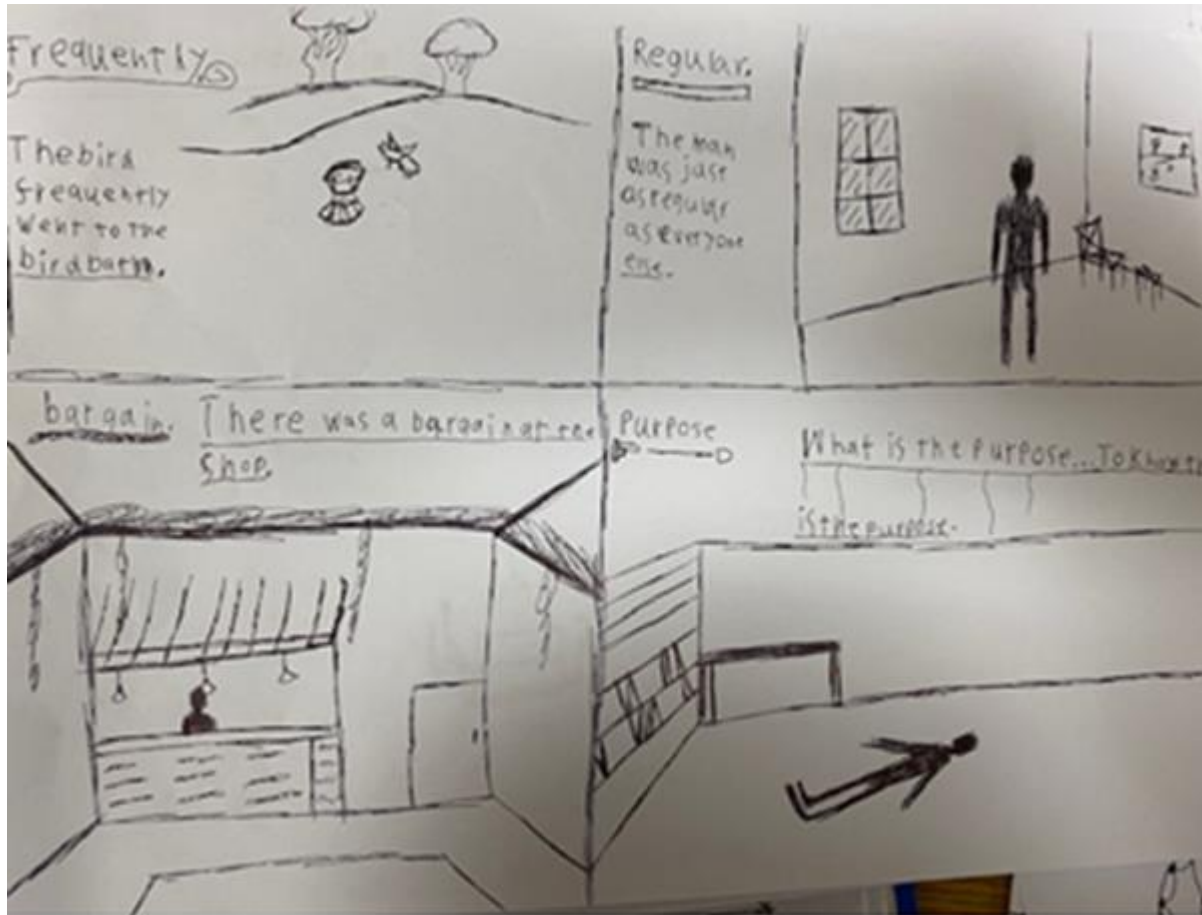
Staff feedback:



3d. Entry Level 3 vocabulary as drawings

One learner reported that learning these word spellings and meanings, meant that he could then recognise them quickly in the context of a novel. This made reading more enjoyable and less overwhelming. These drawings (learner created around 20) were also used to create a display at college.





3e. Learner 1 End of Project Interview Notes – A Reflection on Personal Progress

Theme 1: Motivation

Q. At first you wouldn't be taught by anyone for English; just me, because you saw me as a specialist. Now, you will do English with a number of staff. What's made the difference?

Learner response identified that 'consistency' was 'the most important thing';

'I knew when I would be doing English with you and that it would always happen at that time and then when I started doing it with other staff, I knew it would be X on a Monday, X on Thursday and X on Friday.'

Being able to compartmentalise when he did English was a theme, and that it was for a given time with a start and end point. As a result, he didn't mind doing it every day.

Q. And was that plan was communicated to you?

Learner response indicated that the plan being held with one person was very important and that the English tutor communicating with him, and with staff when he was with them, was important to him.

Q. You seem to know where you have improved. Is it important for you to see improvement?

Learner indicated that it was important for him to see the progression he had made, rather than to achieve any award. He felt strongly that he just wanted to know that he could do better than before

and that learning new skills was helping him make progress.

Theme 2: Progress

Q. What do you think you have progressed in?

Learner immediately answered '*reading, definitely*'.

Q. And what do you think led to that progress?

Learner said: '*You taught me lots of little words and then I could understand them when I was reading ...*'. Learner explained that learning the words and spellings of those words, outside the text, meant that he could then understand them when he read and so was introduced to less new vocabulary. He explained that 3-4 years ago he would never have read a book because the words would look overwhelming on the page. He now reads every morning; a Stephen King book and a Boxing book (provided to the college by our mentor).

Q. Could you envisage a time when you would read for pleasure?

Learner said: '*Yes, I can envisage a time when I will read for pleasure*'.

Q: What else do you think you've progressed in?

Learner said that with spellings he felt he had improved; he just needs to stop trying to remember the letters but remember the sounds. He also said he now needs to learn how to use the colon.

Theme 3: Reflections on the past.

Q. You really surprised me, because when I started to give you work, I thought there would be no way you would do such things as correcting punctuation, or daily spellings, but you did it. Why were you so willing to do them? Would you have done them at school?

Learner strongly suggested he wouldn't have done the tasks at school and said, "*It is easier to say no you can't do something rather than try and do it.*" He reflected on previous experiences of having different (differentiated work) and being aware that he had been given it because it wasn't felt he could do the main class work. He reflected on thinking, when he was around 11 years old, that if he couldn't do the main work, he probably couldn't do the "easier" work either and ultimately gave up, rather than trying.

We discussed this. On the one hand we acknowledged that the teacher was differentiating to help, but that this had evidently created an emotional response in the learner. He felt unable and perhaps given up on. This affected his learning longer term progress, he felt. Now he seems to have a stronger understanding of his own intelligence, abilities and skills (learner is a talented artist). He also has a sense of wanting to improve and achieve for himself.

3f. Action Research Padlet Board

This Padlet was used to record our progress during our action research project and was an opportunity to showcase learner progress and personalise learning.

https://padlet.com/c_collins2/OTLA8_Strathmore

OTLA Project 2021-2022 - Strathmore College

Learner Led Achievement Through Collaboration

AJT

Spelling

Writing Complex Sentences with Correct Punctuation and Grammar

Add comment

sarahmunton 7mo

Great Progress

Excellent independent spelling at Level 2 on Friday across a range of technical vocabulary.

AJT also independently used the spelling rule I had previously taught him (split infinitive slid - slide).

Add comment

AMo

sarahmunton 7mo



Add comment

sarahmunton 7mo

Original Project Focus

Developing my vocabulary

Add comment

BRI

sarahmunton 7mo

Learner Progress

BRI used all of the previously unknown words correctly in sentences this week: doubt, debt, occasion, various. Would be great if he could just practise the spellings a little more this week.

Add comment

sarahmunton 4mo

Success

BRI provisionally passed his writing assessment

ED

sarahmunton 6mo

"Sometimes you've got to close a door to open a window." 03/12/2021



Add comment

Appendix 4: Participants and Stakeholders

No of learners?	30	No of staff?	63
No of organisations?	1	No of employers/ stakeholders?	1

Appendix 5: Research/ Evaluation Approach

Participant/observer (e.g. practitioner reflective accounts, logs)	X	Interview/survey (e.g. polls, questionnaires, learner interviews)	X
Observation of practice (in person, video, observation notes)		Document analysis (e.g. learner work, session plans, annotated resources, policies)	X
Custom test/assessment (of knowledge, skill, attitude, participation) for your 'intervention'		High-stakes learner assessment (e.g. A Level results, End Point Assessment, BTECs)	
Before/after assessment (e.g. measures of progress or change in attainment, participation)	X	Comparative trial (e.g. comparing participants' outcomes against a 'control' group)	
Other (specify):	Action Research.		

Thankyou

<https://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/prep/>

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