

# **OUTSTANDING TEACHING, LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT**

**FINAL REPORT ON THE OTLA PHASE 6 (ENGLISH) PROJECT - THE  
POWER OF LANGUAGE: EXPLORING BEHAVIOURS AND ATTITUDES  
TOWARDS GCSE ENGLISH THROUGH LEARNING CONVERSATIONS**  
**Sunderland College**

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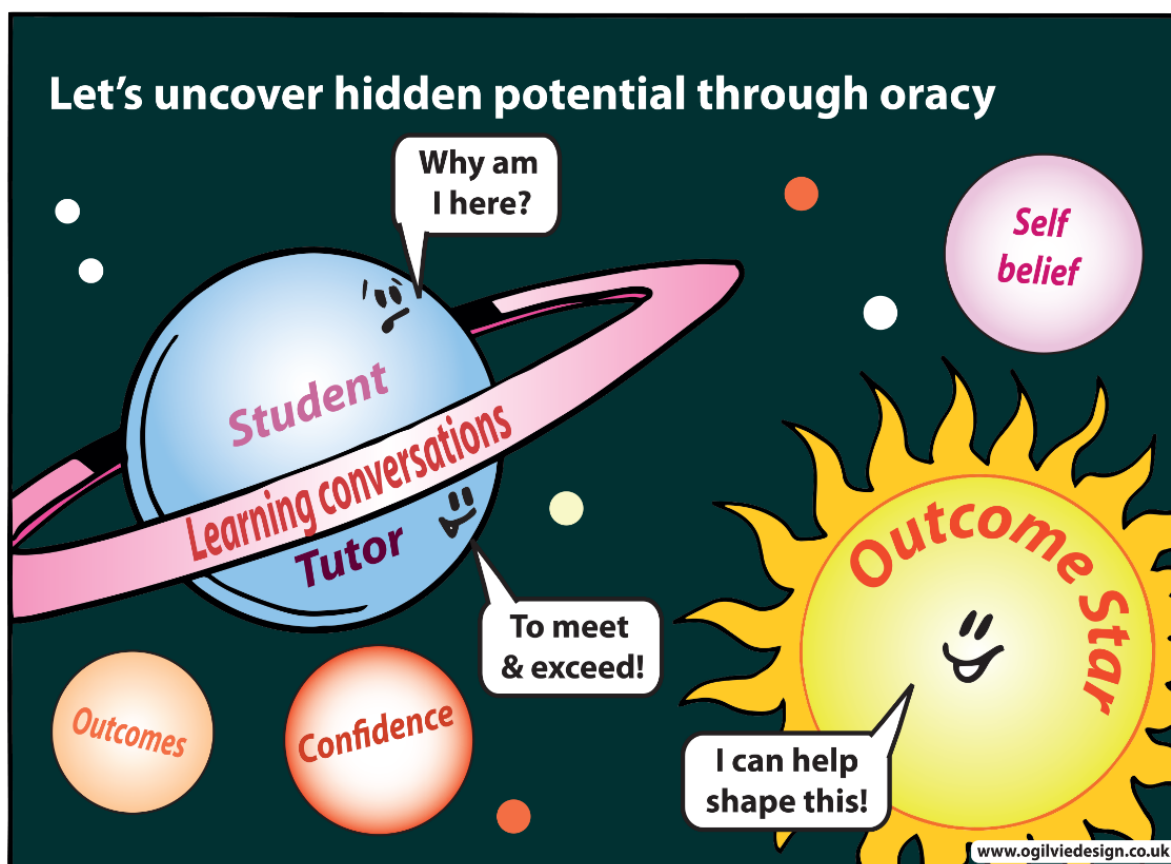


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# Final Report - The Power of Language: Exploring behaviours and attitudes towards GCSE English through learning conversations

Sunderland College



This small-scale research project explored how formative assessment could be used to bring about positive behaviours and attitudes towards learning within GCSE resit in a Further Education college in the North East of England.

## Summary

For most post-16 resit GCSE English students, re-taking a subject in which you have already been labelled a 'failure' is a diminishing experience. It can result in a loss of confidence, not to mention a disengagement and lack of interest in the activity in which you are regarded as being simply 'not good enough'.

GCSE English teachers worked with students and implemented the 'Outcome Star' to evaluate, through learning conversations, levels of learner confidence in their approach to their GCSE English studies.

## Rationale

In the past vast amounts of teachers' time has been used to prepare written feedback to learners on their progress against target grade. However, this has not had the desired impact of improving learner autonomy and confidence.

Therefore, the English team developed the 'Outcome Star' (Appendix 2) as a vehicle for focusing formative feedback. This self-regulating tool was developed and inspired by the Inception Meeting and was designed in collaboration with the Literacy Lead in attendance. The 'Outcome Star' was used as a vehicle for a learning conversation between teacher and learner in order to build learner confidence and halt their perceptions of being a failure. This feedback tool was designed to mitigate the negative feelings of failure that learners begin their college experience with.

## Approach and Methodology

The tool was piloted with 2 selected English practitioners both delivering GCSE resit English to Study Programme learners. These teachers worked at 2 different centres, each with cohorts of learners who presented different behavioural needs and academic abilities. Both teachers were committed to the use of the 'Outcome Star' and agreed upon the 10 key expressions linked to attitudes and behaviours which were appropriate for both cohorts of learners.

The following expressions were used:

- I enjoy reading
- Reading out-loud
- Comfortable with my writing skills
- Accurate spelling for my age
- English is important to me
- I take English lessons seriously
- I get involved in English lessons
- I am always prepared for English lessons
- Use English skills away from college
- I enjoy creative writing

In the first instance and as part of the students' initial assessment for GCSE English, the students were asked to carry out a self-assessment using the 'Outcome Star' to grade themselves for levels of confidence, 10 being very confident and 1 being low confidence, on each key expression within the 'Outcome Star'.

Following this, the teacher graded the same key expressions within the 'Outcome Star'. Both teacher and student ratings then prompted more fruitful and challenging discussions that attempted to identify and break down misconceptions and overcome self-imposed barriers to learning.

## Professional learning: Evidence of changes in teaching, learning and assessment practices

The 'Outcome Star' was deployed during the initial assessment period and this generated rich information. The classroom teacher used this information in their interactions with their learners in order to build learner confidence and generate positive perceptions of themselves and their abilities.

This resource encouraged learners to express more fully and analyse their behaviours and attitudes towards GCSE English and afforded the teacher the opportunity to discuss and challenge negative perceptions with learners. When reflecting upon the use of this resource the teachers enjoyed the opportunity to engage in more meaningful learning conversation which helped break down the barriers much earlier than in previous years. In practice the teachers were able to challenge and have more meaningful conversations in relation to students' experience of education and not just focus on progress against target grade.

Towards the end of the research study the teachers evaluated this form of student/teacher collaborative feedback and shared their views in case-studies. Some of the key points from the case studies include:

- Opportunity to engage in more meaningful conversations
- I am able to plan more effectively and understand my students' needs more
- Students grow in confidence and engage in more 'reading out-loud' activities which previously would have been a real challenge
- Lesson planning now includes more time for oracy skills

The 'Outcome Star' is now part of future curriculum planning for GCSE English.

Overall students have engaged positively in the process and they can see how their perceptions can impact on their approach to GCSE English.

## Evidence of improved collaboration and changes in organisational practices

This study was originally piloted with two members of GCSE English teaching staff and it has been agreed that this approach has been adopted as part of the initial assessment for GCSE English across Sunderland College.

In addition to this, the 'Outcome Star' was identified as best practice as part of a college Internal Review of initial assessment and has been shared with all other curriculum areas. At the request of the college's CEO and Chair of the college's Quality Improvement Committee, the resource developed as part of this study was recognised as best practice by the committee.

One of the teachers involved in the project has commented on changes in their practices:

*"I have found that the outcome star is a great way to capture the learners' attitudes to English. What is proving interesting is the propensity for learners to "undersell" themselves, particularly around how seriously they take the subject and their confidence. This has led to some very interesting learning conversations whereby we have the opportunity to unpick the story behind the attitude".*

## Evidence of improvement in learners' achievements, retention and progression

The evidence of improvement is based on teachers' observations of changes in student behaviour and attitudes towards GCSE English. The evidence is qualitative in

nature and outlined in the case studies. One teacher involved commented improvements to current practice:

*"I can challenge and address not only academic progress but also attitudes and behaviours towards English which supports a more holistic approach to student development."*

It can be seen in the teachers' case studies that learners are responding well to the teachers' improved planning for oracy, with learners in both studies being observed to respond more enthusiastically to the new opportunities that teachers are creating

## Learning from this project

Key learning from this project is the importance of considering the holistic progress of learners that is not over-reliant on progress against target grade. Progress in the softer skills, including behaviours and attitudes, are equally important and are invaluable in supporting planning and formative assessment.

The deployment of the 'Outcome Star' as part of the initial assessment of GCSE English students has assisted in addressing some of the negative perceptions and behaviours towards English. This has given the teachers the opportunity to have learning conversations that focus both on academic progress and student resilience and confidence towards their subject.

One teacher commented that:

*"I implemented a number of changes in my sessions, foremost amongst the changes was (and is) the greater focus on trying to develop learner confidence, trying to get the learner to read aloud, write on the board and develop their oracy skills by allowing opportunities for them to have a voice in discussions. I now include oracy within my planning and look at opportunities to generate more discussion and talk about English more."*

Overall, the 'Outcome Star' has huge potential to inform pedagogical approaches in a more timely manner prompted by the rich and broad dialogue that generates valuable information of the students' learning journey to date.

The 'Outcome Star' has the potential to be adapted to include the measurement of learners' employability traits which can be used by Personal Development tutors and curriculum staff.

This particular piece of research worked well on a smaller scale with two teachers and would require inter-disciplinary co-ordination when deployed on a college-wide scale.

# Appendix 1 – Case Studies

## Teacher 1

For the purposes of this case study, I have compared two learners who I feel have very different attitudes about the importance of English as part of their study programme. Both learners have a target grade 4, having achieved a 3 in school.

### Case Study – MB

A new learner to college at the start of the academic year, MB had narrowly missed out on a grade 4 at school and was put forward for the November resit. MB is a quiet and reserved learner who prefers to sit alone and work independently. She has been a model learner and always comes to lessons well prepared and gives her best efforts in class, her commitment has not waivered since completing the November resit and she continues to attend and give her best efforts even though result of November resit is still pending. She is doing a Salon Professional's course as her main Study Programme.

When reviewing her 'Outcome Star', I did agree in principle with many of the ratings she had given herself, though in most respects I scored her marginally higher. For example, MB only awarded herself '4/10' for her enjoyment of creative writing, however, the high quality of her work would suggest otherwise. MB is quiet and reserved and rated herself as '1/10' for reading aloud, this is a skill that she is able to demonstrate and is quite a capable reader though she is not comfortable doing this in front of her peers. The difference is the scores gave me an opportunity to engage in more meaningful conversations regarding MB's perceptions of the subject and also address some of the self- confidence challenges that MB has around her English Skills. This has definitely made a difference in how MB sees her skills now and I feel that she understands where some of her negativity comes from and is able to manage this a little better now. I compared some examples of her work with example answers from learners who had achieved grade 4 or higher previously on the same papers and she could see that her work was of an equal, if not higher quality in some instances, this appeared to boost her confidence.

MB has a strong desire to achieve her English and this is reflective of her work ethic, she does however, lack confidence in some respects but is confident she will achieve a grade 4 in the summer. She can be a little negative at times but this stems from her lack of achievement in school. By talking about this MB is able to recognise this and look at strategies to move forward. MB recognises and understand how Literacy skills will be applied in an industrial context for hairdressers and by having these informed 'learning conversation' I am able to plan more effectively and understand MB's needs more and try and contextualise topics where possible. During the 'Meet and Exceed' weeks I am able to focus on her performance against target grade but also talk about attitudes towards English and I am seeing progress in terms of her more positive behaviour.



## Case Study – RM

RM is a construction learner who is new to college this year. He performed lower and below target grade in his initial assessment and often struggles with motivation and effort. In class RM is particularly weak in terms of effort and engagement. This is a persistent problem in all areas of his study programme. He is by no means disruptive and is quite personable and friendly.

When we started the 'Outcome Star', I rated him lower in many aspects with regard to his attitude and behaviour towards English, for example RM had assessed himself as '7/10' for his enjoyment of creative writing, however, his work in one of the key assessments had been seriously lacking in effort so it was hard for me to agree with him in this respect.

RM also rated himself as '5/10' for involvement in English session, I did disagree with this also as he has been so difficult to engage in lessons. Using the 'Outcome Star' as a stimulus for our learning conversations, I was able to positively challenge these perceptions. More importantly I explained the reason why my scores differed from his, he was genuinely surprised. This led to a better, more fruitful conversation where I was able to present evidence of where I had drawn my conclusions from and he was able to acknowledge why I came to those conclusions.

RM is going to be more of a challenge in terms of behaviours and attitudes, however it is important that I challenge and address not only his academic progress but also his attitude towards English and to support a more holistic approach to student development. I have explained to RM that English (and maths is a compulsory part of his study programme and would continue to be for at least another two academic years if he does not achieve a grade 4 in the meantime, this seemed to be the best way of making him realise that it would be in his best interests to be more proactive and hopefully achieve his target grade as soon as possible, which is more likely with a positive attitude.

## Teacher 2

### Case Study - CB

CB is one of the college's Public Service students, on her initial 'Outcome Star' completion she rated herself quite highly across a number of areas, she identified particular strengths as 'being prepared for lessons (10/10)' and 'attend and be on time for English (10/10)'. Over the course of the year this has proven to be an accurate assessment. CB is always prepared for sessions both practically and academically, she always takes notes and is always ready and eager to learn.

What was surprising was her self-assessment of 'reading out-loud (5/10)' and 'I get involved in English lessons (5/10)'. My initial impression was that this seemed quite low given the supporting scores around it. Over the course of the year I have noticed a definite disparity between CB's original grading and the behaviours and attitudes she has so far exhibited. Despite CB only awarding herself a 5/10 for 'reading out-loud' she has so far volunteered twice to read out the full source material to the class. She approached this willingly and executed the vocalisation in a confident and fluent fashion. In relation to 'I get involved in English lessons', it is evident from every session that we have had so far that CB thrives on getting involved, she is always keen and eager to answer questions. From discussions with her though she has explained how she is supporting and working in collaboration with her younger sister to complete English revision whilst at home, which is very promising.

Speaking to CB about her experience of English at school may go some way to offer a rationale for her initially low scores, she explained that whilst at school she felt that she was ignored by the teacher and never actively encouraged to share her opinion or get involved. This information has afforded me the opportunity to "unpick" some of her barriers to learning. I have involved CB in a number of student led discussions to help build confidence, allowing her the opportunity to express her opinion in a supportive and friendly environment, taking the lead (where appropriate). I have encouraged CB to "find her voice" in class. I am setting the sessions up in a way that encourages more structured debate and ensures that every learner gets the chance to answer questions and develop responses. Varied questioning techniques ensure this is possible. Knowing the background to each learner and the challenges they face allows for differentiated stretch and challenge activities to be employed.

### Case Study - EW

EW is a very quiet member of the class with some support needs (EEA in place). His initial 'Outcome Star' assessment responses indicated someone who found English language to be a challenge. This in turn has clearly had an impact upon his attitude toward the subject. EW has graded himself as a 7/10 for 'attend and be on time for English', yet so far this year he is on 93% attendance and 100% for punctuality. He also graded himself as a 4/10 for 'English is important to me'. I highlighted this with EW during 1-1 and explained that there was a disparity between his assessment and mine. I explained that his attendance and punctuality would not be as high as they are if he did not in some way see the importance of the subject he is currently studying.

It is worth pointing out also that whilst many of EW's scores are quite low in relation to his assessment of his actual "English skills" he has shown a fantastic attitude to the completion of any of the tasks he has been set (including the completion of homework). He does try and is clearly keen to do well. The 'Outcome Star' is a way of capturing this and demonstrating to the student that they are making progress. It is important that we focus not just on target grade progress but also recognise and record the progress and development of the wider skills involved within educational development.

### **Case Study - JD**

JD initially graded himself as an 8/10 for 'attend and be on time for English', and whilst this is quite high it is worth pointing out that at this stage of the academic year he has 100% attendance and 100% punctuality. The learning conversations that take place give me the opportunity to share this information and challenge his lower perception of his commitment to English. In addition JD scored himself rather low at 5/10 for 'English is important to me' and my discussion with JD outlined that perhaps his perception was a little skewed. I was able to reinforce to JD that 100% attendance and punctuality is not indicative of someone who does not see the importance of a subject. Alongside this Jason also graded himself a 7/10 for 'reading out-loud', and 1/10 for 'I enjoy reading'. Within the class he is the only member who volunteered to read aloud, he performed admirably in this task reading both fluently and confidently. JD has shown that he is capable of producing some very good work, it is important with a learner like JD that we show him where his strengths lie, in order to help build his confidence.

### **Conclusion**

Perhaps one of the most interesting things about the Outcome Star action research project is how (for the most part) students/learners actively undersell themselves in terms of their attitudes and behaviours towards English. Perhaps this comes from their previous "lack of success" in the subject, this perceived struggle with a subject they perhaps have not had the best relationship with. The Outcome Star and the subsequent learning conversations have afforded me the opportunity to show the learners that they do perhaps need to look at their current status and see that they are better than they think. There seems to have been a marked improvement in confidence and approach to the subject, particularly from the learners outlined above. The learners are much more involved in class and are much more likely to offer an opinion, read aloud or write up a response on the board. In terms of hard data CB in particular has showed a marked improvement in her written responses and is operating at the grade she has been targeted with a view to exceeding it. The other learners included in this overview have also shown a greater degree of focus in class and are more reflective in their approach to the questions they are faced with.

In terms of my practise I am allowing more time in sessions to develop learner voice, I am careful not to punctuate the silence after a question has been posed, with my own opinion. It is important to me that the learners are given ample opportunity to develop their own thoughts and opinions in sessions.

# Appendix 2 - Outcome Star Example

## OUTCOME STAR

GCSE English

Teacher's Name \_\_\_\_\_

Student's Name \_\_\_\_\_



Enjoy reading

Reading out-loud

Comfortable with writing skills

Accurate spelling for my age

English is important to me

Take English lessons seriously

Get Involved In English lessons

Always prepared for English lessons

Practise English skills outside of college

Enjoy creative writing

Stage	Date	Colour
Student self assessment		
Teacher feedback		
Meet & Exceed evaluation 1		
Meet & Exceed evaluation 2		

10 – Very Confident

5 – Slight Confidence

1 – Low Confidence