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Improving writing skills with Year 10 French students

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the author casts over a school in South London and the different approaches taken to improve writing skills in French lessons. By drawing on, and critiquing, current MFL research and practice, the author aims to highlight some of the potential barriers to learning, such as challenging socio-economic circumstances, as well as emphasise the ways in which teachers may mitigate against these. By focusing specifically on writing in French year 10 lessons, the author breaks down the process of writing and helps both students and readers to improve their metacognition around key parts of current GCSE questions. The findings show that structured feedback and consistent praise can have a strong impact on attainment, helping to direct students' efforts and increase their confidence.

Keywords: Socio-economic, French Classroom, GCSE, Writing Skills, Feedback, Confidence, Praise

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1 INTRODUCTION

The school's community

'An outstanding, inclusive, non-selective school. The community is the beating heart of the school'. These are the opening words of the Headteacher's welcome on the website of the school I work in. They pay tribute to the ethos of the school, which sees high-quality education as a tool to promote social justice. They also emphasise the importance of the community to the school. During an interview I conducted with him, the Headteacher explained that the school's community is broadly defined as 'anybody who inputs or is impacted by the school'. This means, first and foremost, students and their families, but also members of staff, the Trust, other local schools and local businesses. Some of these individuals share customs, norms, religions or values. Others are bound together by the place they live i.e. the borough of Lambeth, located in South London.

Importantly, learning a language draws on students' own notions of social identity and self-perceptions (Ellis, 2014; Jones, 1995). The GCSE EDEXCEL syllabus focuses heavily on topics which require students to understand their own identity by taking on new identities and personalities, as well as broadening students' intercultural horizons (Kramsch, 2009). For example, the exam may require students to describe a recent holiday whereas the reality may be that some of the students rarely go on holiday and have no recent experience on which to draw. By talking about their families and their favourite hobbies or holidays, the MFL GCSE syllabus requires students to express themselves in personal ways, which at times can require some students to stretch their imagination beyond their lived experiences. The new GCSE syllabus set to begin in 2024 has set out that speaking questions will be 'relatable contexts (...) within the range of students' own experiences' (Edexcel, 2023). However, what this will look like on the exam paper is as of yet unclear. Sadly, currently, in my school's community, languages are perceived as being difficult. Uptake for French GCSE is declining. French, in particular, has a negative reputation as a difficult subject with a heavy focus on grammar. After introducing my Year 10s (the control group I have chosen for this study) to the GCSE exams and what French A-Level looks like, one student said 'Nah miss I ain't doing that. It's suicidal.', as the rest of the class nodded. Self-confidence is something many of my students struggle with. Coming from a deprived area, with little to no experiences of travelling abroad and using foreign languages, students were also unclear on the purpose of learning languages beyond achieving a GCSE grade. This insularity needed to be combatted.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Self-efficacy and its impact on feedback

Self-efficacy beliefs are an important filter through which students interpret their success and mediate their behavior. They are metacognitive beliefs that learners hold with regard to their capacity to accomplish a task (Graham, 2007). 'Self-efficacy' 'self-confidence' and 'confidence'

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will be used synonymously. In this paper, they will refer specifically to students' confidence in their abilities to write using the French language accurately (Ruegg, 2018).

According to Bandura (2006), students with the same level of ability will perform differently depending on their own perception of their ability. Ferris et al. (2013) also found that confidence influenced students' ability to benefit from teacher feedback. 'Students who lack confidence (...) will more quickly give up in the face of difficulty' (Pajares and Johnson, 1994: 327). They may also focus on their lack of ability and others' opinions about their work therefore increasing their cognitive load (Schharzer, 1986).

Feedback in L2 writing has at times been stated to decrease student confidence (Truscott, 1996). Research by Ferris (2002) and Krashen (1982) also stated that the more written teacher feedback a student gets, the more their confidence drops. However, providing no feedback has a negative impact on student learning (William, 2018). Ensuring a 'sandwich' approach to feedback is therefore optimal (Andrade and Evans, 2013) where praise is given, alongside constructive feedback, and then a final praise. This helps to combat the feeling of negativity and poor performance often associated with language learning.

2.2 Writing stages and the role of feedback

Macaro et al. (2015) break down the process of writing into three stages (1) the conceptualization stage (2) the formulation stage (3) the monitoring stage. The final monitoring stage is linked to feedback and marking, but the research literature does not always agree on how effective written corrective feedback can be. Some authors argue that it is a necessary stage of developmental process, similar to that which children have when learning L1 (Corder, 1967). Others however, such as Krashen, argue that error correction is not only unnecessary but potentially harmful (Krashen and Terrell, 1983; Truscott, 1996). These authors relegate written corrective feedback to a minor role. I tend to side with the more recent studies which have emphasised the positive effects of corrective feedback (Ellis et al., 2008; Sheen, 2007). Finally, research has emphasised the importance of commenting on and shaping the process of writing, rather than focusing solely on the end product and giving feedback only on that in the hope that it would help improve students' writing (Macaro et al., 2015). This links back to the idea of community and the setting of high expectations. Expectations must not be lowered simply based on socioeconomic status (Ramalho, Garza and Merchant, 2010). Focusing on student strengths and enhancing family involvement through positive praise and phone calls home are key to harnessing students' potential. (Haberman, 1995; Johns, Schmader & Martens, 2005).

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 The stages of writing applied

As I began to work on the skill of writing with my Year 10s, I was drawn towards the research of Macaro et al. which outlines the three stages of writing (Macaro et al., 2015, p.71). Their work

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clearly breaks down the different processes which are involved in writing. The first stage, the conceptualisation stage, is where the learner generates the ideas and concepts he wishes to communicate: 'What do I need to talk about to answer the question? I am going to…'. This is often generated in their first language (L1). The second step is the formulation stage. This is where the concept is given language through which it can be expressed. Importantly, in this stage the student has to mediate the tension between the sophistication of the language they wish to employ and their knowledge of the second language (L2) (Pachler, 2014, p.63). This is also a barrier I regularly witness with my students, who often ask me for vocabulary or chunks of sentences which have not been introduced before or which they could express more simply in another form. For example, during a mock exam one student asked me 'Miss, how do you say 'X is the best TV programme ever created?' ('X est la meilleure émission jamais crée!'). I told the student that I could not help, but that perhaps he knew how to say 'My favourite TV programme is… It's the best!' (Mon émission préférée est... C'est la meilleure!'). Students often know a lot more than they think they do, and it is simply the ability to manipulate the language during this formulation stage which needs to be improved. This leads into the final stage: monitoring. Monitoring happens at different stages throughout the writing process. The student for example will check: is this what I wanted to say? Am I using the right language? However, monitoring can also come from peer-to-peer support, when students swap books and mark each other's answers. A teacher may also provide this support.

3.2 Improving French writing results

As a teacher I believe that all my students can bring something valuable to a lesson and that getting to know each pupil individually may give me an insight into their experiences of school, the community and wider society (Gale, Mills and Cross, 2017; Bruner, 1996; Bourdieu, 1991). I chose to focus on a Year 10 class as I wanted to tackle one of the school community's biggest setbacks in the last decade: exam results. My year 10 class is a small class of 7 students, whose targets range from 5 to 9. The hope is that their exam results will be outstanding, however historically my school's MFL exam results have been significantly below the national average.

In 2007, my school was founded at the request of the local community, with a strong body of parents advocating for an inclusive, non-selective school. However, since its opening in 2007 the school has struggled to achieve results on a par with the rest of the borough's schools. Only 24% of students achieved a grade 5 or above in their English and Maths GCSEs in 2019, against 39% of students in the local authority and 43% across England. When one takes into account progress across a longer number of years, using the Progress 8 score, which tracks a students' progress from the end of KS2 to the end of KS4, the picture is also bleak. My school belongs to the 20% of schools in the country who score -0.5 or less, i.e. 'below average' according to the Department of Education. Results are therefore something which the community has struggled with.

After the lockdown which saw the closure of UK schools from January to March 2021, I knew that writing without scaffolding or support was something my students were dreading. Covid had taken away a lot of their confidence, and also led to a lack of practice. A number of students had messaged me on Google Classroom to let me know that they were struggling. They had had access

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to laptops and online translation tools which had made them lazy in terms of their writing. Indeed, I was noticing an alarming increase in the number of homework tasks in which Google translate had been used to produce answers. Once back in school in March, we would have 3 weeks in person teaching before the spring holidays when we would be aiming to finish a module on hobbies and what you do in your free time: 'tes passetemps et ce que tu fais dans ton temps libre'. We had reached the stage in this module when students had been introduced to all the vocabulary and grammar in this unit of work, but now needed to assemble all of this into a coherent answer. It was a perfect time to implement my writing intervention.

For my intervention I wanted to focus on combining practice, in which the learner had to generate an action, interpret feedback and try again to get nearer the goal, with production, in which the learner produced something for the teacher to review (Laurillard, 2012). When planning my intervention, I focused on modelling and shared writing. I planned to model the three stages of writing (the conceptualization, formulation and monitoring stages) for my students. This included showing pupils models of the genre they needed to emulate, but also ensuring that the support was withdrawn at an appropriate stage to allow for progress and independence. Thinking aloud and shared writing were two approaches I incorporated into my sequence of lessons. This involved talking students through writing strategies, from the initial conceptualization 'What is required of me? Ok so what hobbies do I enjoy? Why? I need to write 80 words' to the formulation stage 'Ok so thinking about writing conventions, when I am writing an email to a friend, how can I start my answer? Cher, chère…'.

Through a series of five 100 minute lessons, I guided my students through a repetitive sequenced approach to writing. Firstly, we established together the clear aims and purpose of the task we were given. The task was always an exam question, taken either from past papers or from practice examples given by the exam board.

3.3 Example question

'Écris un e-mail à Dominique. Tu dois faire référence aux points suivants:

- Tes émissions préférées à la télé
- Ce que tu n'aimes pas faire et pourquoi
- Une activité récente
- Tes projets futurs concernant un nouveau passe-temps.

Écris 80-90 mots en français.'

We would set out together what was required by the question, the register needed and the tenses needed to answer the question. Secondly, I would provide my Year 10s with a model answer, exploring the features of the example and what made it a great answer. Students would carry out activities with the text, such as adding in their own comparatives or adjectives used to demonstrate more complex use of language, sequencing sentences or manipulating and using vocabulary.

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Thirdly, to demonstrate how such a text could be written we would look at some specific grammar points or key expressions. Fourthly, we would compose an answer to the question together. Importantly, we would work on sentence starters and how to structure the beginning and end of a letter or an email (depending on the format that was required in the question). Finally, the independent writing took place. For the first three lessons, this process was scaffolded. The attempts were open-book and I would answer any questions students had about vocabulary or grammar, allowing for confidence building. This repetitive process which we did across three lessons, culminated in a summative assessment in which students had to produce their own answers to an exam question without any scaffolding available. This final stage of the writing process was key to address OFSTED's recommendation that 'Students' writing, especially in Key Stage 4, too often relied on model texts or scaffolding'(OFTSED, 2011). This series of stages, which was adapted from the DfE's guidance aimed to deconstruct the language learning process to ensure that students were taught strategies explicitly to move from word to sentence to more complex paragraphs.

An advantage of this model was that by repeating the process of writing multiple times over 3 weeks, by planning, drafting, editing and acting on corrective feedback, students gained confidence and felt a sense of achievement. Having a tangible example of what they could produce on paper was also a way to also show them that they were more than capable of producing excellent answers. Of course, it would be a gradual process, but creating the awareness that they could do it was already a massive step.

4 RESULTS

To judge the impact of my intervention, I looked at two key sets of data. The first was data collected from the students' formative and summative assessments, including the word count & the grade obtained on their writing pieces. The second was a survey, conducted pre and post intervention which asked students to rank on a scale of 1 to 10 how confident they were about their writing skills and how likely they thought it was that they would achieve a grade 5 or above on their French GCSE.

The intervention

'Writing is part of a process with equal focus on the writer as he is writing as well as on the finished product' (Macaro, 2003). We write everyday as a means of communication. I am writing now to communicate my ideas. We write emails and text messages. Yet this is the skill my Year 10s struggle most with and the skill that the English and History departments also reported most difficulty with. In a survey conducted with my Year 10 students, on a scale of 0 (not confident at all) to 10 (super confident), students on average said they were a 3.7 (not very confident) with their writing skills. 43% of respondents suggested that being taught how to structure/answer the question was what they needed to improve.

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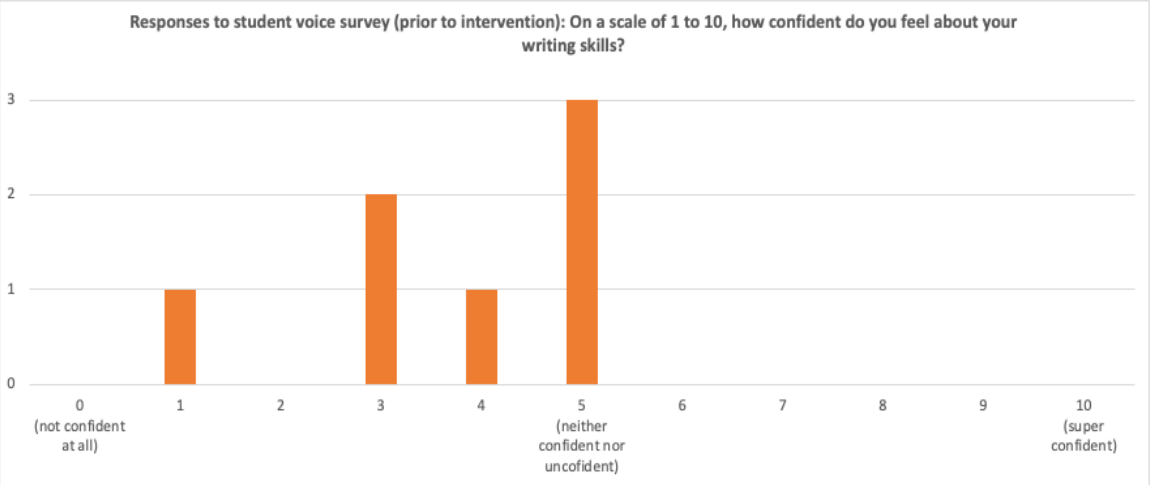
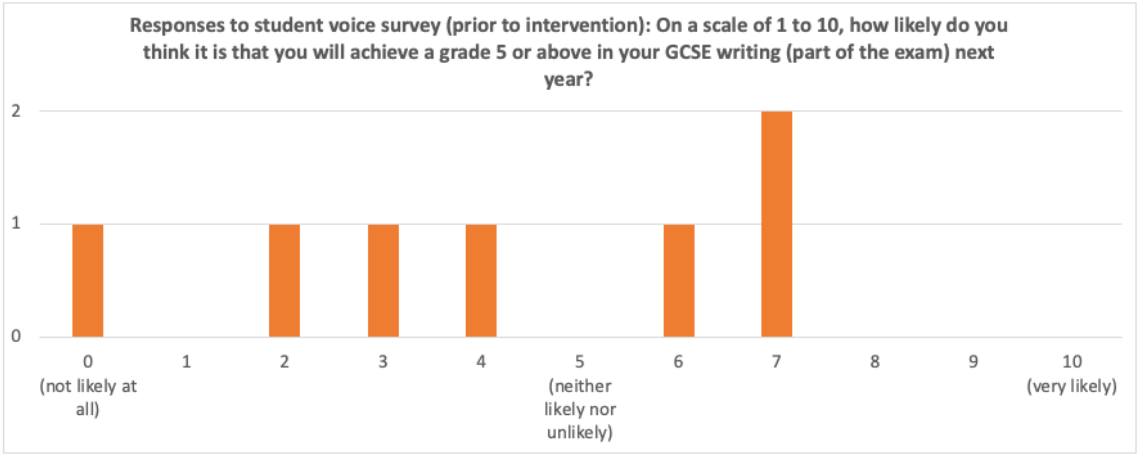
4.1 Student voice survey (conducted pre-intervention)

On a scale of 1 to 10, how confident do you feel about your writing skills?



When asked about how likely they thought they were to achieve a grade 5 or above in the GCSE writing part of the exam next year, while 3 of them thought this was a possibility, the majority saw this as unlikely.

4.2 Student voice survey (conducted pre-intervention)



These answers definitely surprised me as their teacher. My prediction is that all seven of my Year 10 students will achieve a grade 5 or higher next year and that, based on the work I have marked, their writing skills are fairly strong. What is missing is confidence.

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Students write with two broad aims in mind: learning to write and writing to learn (Manchón, 2011). This dual process plays out in MFL, where students need to first learn how to write in an additional language, dependent on audience, genre and language structures (learning to write). However, in order to be successful at this, students also need to learn the new language, for example by copying new vocabulary into their books and practicing this vocabulary through tasks (writing to learn). These two processes are intertwined and co-created (Manchón, 2011). My role is therefore to give my students the tools and structures needed to communicate.

The biggest hurdle in the process of writing is to bridge the gap between the concept that the learners have in their head and the linguistic resources they have at their disposal to express it (Macaro et al, 2015). This is something I regularly witness with my Year 10 students, as they repeatedly ask 'Miss, how would you say this?'. Often these questions come in the form of entire structures/sentences which the students hope to translate directly from English into French. This continuous attempt at compromise between the knowledge the learner possesses and what he is trying to say is what I wished to explore further with my intervention. The aim of my paper is therefore to take a look not only at the end product of a writing task, but the process of writing, and how and why students struggle with it.

4.3 Data from assessments

	Formative Assessment (open book): grade out of 20	**Summative Assessment (closed book): grade out of 20**
Student 1	9	13
Student 2	11	15
Student 3	12	15
Student 4	15	17
Student 5	16	20
Student 6	17	20
Student 7	17	20

Figure 1: Assessment data from formative and summative assessments

	Formative Assessment: number of words written	**Summative Assessment: number of words written**
Student 1	24	86
Student 2	43	82
Student 3	65	134
Student 4	87	137
Student 5	86	141
Student 6	92	139
Student 7	91	145

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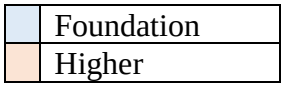
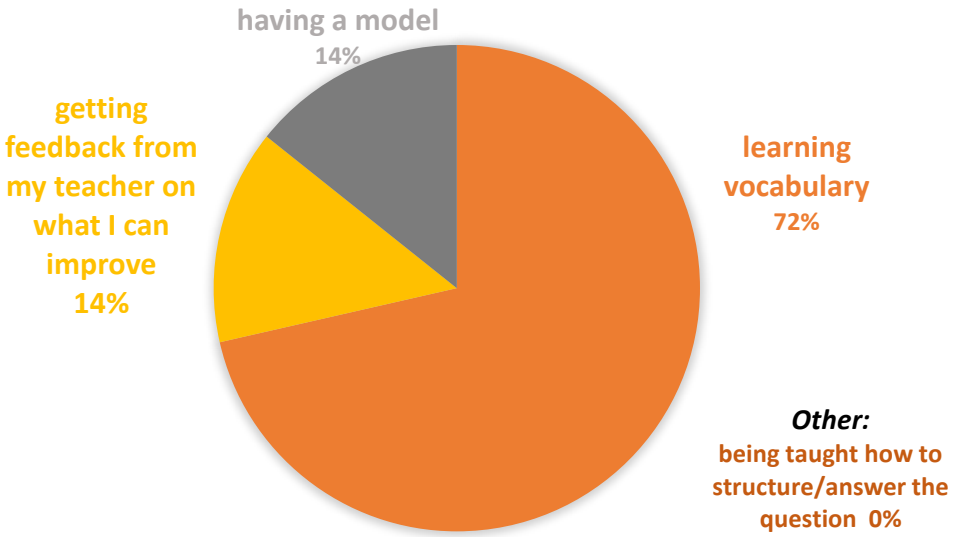


Figure 2: Word-count from formative and summative assessment

The grades obtained were moderated by the two other French teachers in the department against the EDEXCEL exam board's criteria to ensure that they were as impartial as possible. The second set of data came from a survey conducted before and after the intervention which asked the students a series of questions about their confidence in their writing skills and what they thought they needed to do to improve.

4.5 Student voice survey (conducted post-intervention)



Judging from the first set of data, the intervention was a success in that students' grades increased from an average of 13.8 out of 20 on the formative assessment to an average of 17 out of 20 on the summative assessment. Importantly, this increase occurred in the more difficult, high stakes, summative exam. However, not only did their grades improve, the amount they were writing was also increased from an average of 71 words on an exam question which requires 80-90 words to an average of 120 words. 'Making accurate and productive use of assessment' (Standard 6 of the Teachers' Standards for England) meant that I could evaluate the extent to which the learning objectives I had planned for had been met, but also provided learners with the evidence needed to inform further learning (Pachler, 2014). The feedback given on their first two formative assessments meant that I could adapt my teaching to ensure that it met the students' needs (Black and William, 1998), and that students were able to assess themselves against the exam board's success criteria. Pupils were aware of how they could improve their writing and knew precisely what they needed to do and what grade they could expect. By structuring my feedback in a way which highlighted the positives as well as giving students clear guidance on how to improve their work, the success criteria were made explicit to students (Black and Williams, 1998). However, I believe the most important step was providing opportunities for pupils to self-assess (Black and

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Williams, 1998). This meant providing models, where pupils could work in pairs or as a class to understand what was required of them. The models I used were often of a student in the class or a model answer offered by the exam board. Therefore, students were provided with three key elements – the *desired goal*, evidence about their *present positive* and some understanding of a *way in which they could close the gap* (Sadler, 1989).

Interestingly, I was also able to compare my Year 10s to another class of Year 10s, a control group with whom I did not carry out the intervention. As my reading had led me to expect, the class of Year 10s who received feedback on their writing outperformed students in the control group, who had received no feedback, on the summative assessment (Ferris and Roberts, 2001). While the average for the class who I did the intervention with was 17 out of 20 on the summative assessment, the average of the control group was 14.4 out of 20. These findings were something that I shared with colleagues in my department and we spoke at length about the importance of feedback. My head of department has been openly sceptical about providing feedback on formative writing tasks and so I was keen to share with her the impact it had made. My research was well-received and we agreed that the more corrective the feedback, the better (Ellis, 2009). As such, we came up with our own book scrutiny scheme in which we would check each other's feedback on students' work in order to learn about the different ways we can implement feedback and which may be more effective.

From the students' perspective the shift was also clear.

Teacher: 'What do you think I can do to help you improve your writing skills?'

Student: 'Nothing, I need to do it. Although, I'd like to get feedback the way we have in the last few weeks.'

This exchange shows the extent to which the student's view of the problem had changed post-intervention. For the students, the single most important thing they could do to improve the quality of their writing was no longer 'being taught how to structure / answer the question' or 'having a model' but had shifted to 'learning vocabulary' and importantly 'getting feedback from my teacher on what I can improve'.

5 CONCLUSIONS

My intervention's aim was to show my students their potential. In large part, this was a success. Following my intervention, the students were more inclined to take ownership of their learning and were able to identify what they could do to improve their writing skills. This, in turn, boosted their confidence and led them to have higher expectations of what they could achieve. When asked about how likely they thought they were to achieve a grade 5 or above in the GCSE writing part of the exam next year, 71% of respondents said this was likely, compared to only 28% prior to the intervention. Key to this increase in confidence was practice, including the use of past exam questions, as this encouraged the students to believe that they had the required knowledge to complete the question and achieve a grade 5 or higher (Macaro et al, 2007; Macaro et al, 2015; Sheen, 2007; Black and William, 1998).

Upon reflection, I think that one of the potential drawbacks of my intervention was its heavy focus on exam questions rather than on creativity and spontaneity. As OFSTED remarks, 'writing is rarely imaginative and exciting in MFL classrooms' (OFSTED, 2011). While it is important to tackle the community's weakness (exam results), it is also possible to encourage confidence and communication in other ways (Macaro et al., 2015). For example, rather than simply focusing on exam forms (writing an email or a blog), working with song, rap or poems could have helped boost learner confidence (Barton, 2006). Furthermore, going forward, I think it is important to stress the interlinked nature of the GCSE syllabus and how learners can reuse vocabulary and grammar from this module in other contexts. Being able to recycle language and adapt it for different situations is what will differentiate them from lower achieving students (OFSTED, 2011). Another important step, which I hope to take in the future, is to engage more with other departments and the wider school community to find out how they provide feedback on writing pieces, especially in subjects such as History and English which require students to write longer pieces on their exam.

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