



TEACHING ENGLISH

THE POWER OF ANNOTATION AND TARGETED RETRIEVAL

As English teachers, we love nothing more than a heavily annotated text; to us, it is the sign of a pupil listening and 'work' being done in a lesson. We have always insisted that pupils hand in copies of their literature texts as part of any work scrutiny because as all English teachers know, we can easily spend multiple lessons adding more and more annotations to a text until every last bit of the page is covered in a student's writing – there may not be much in their exercise books for a few lessons in a row, but we can guarantee that with the trusted tools of a visualiser, highlighters and a clean copy of the text, both teachers and students are armed with the ammunition to ensure that no stone is left unturned in the unpicking of all possible interpretations of a piece of literature.

But does this mean that a pupil has 'learnt'? At what point do we differentiate between a pupil who has conscientiously copied down every single word spoken and written by the teacher and what they have processed as part of the learning process?

This year, as part of the Lionheart Educational Trust training days, Chris Curtis, a Head of Department, writer and blogger, delivered a session to all English teachers in the trust focused on annotation and retrieval in English lessons, highlighting that students who, it seems, after two solid years (and maybe more) of heavily annotating and re-annotating their texts, still manage to underperform in exams. So many of us left the session questioning our own practice and reflecting as classroom teachers, Heads of Departments and Trust English teams; how exactly can we ensure that a pupil is

learning, digesting and able to apply their knowledge of content to an exam situation without relying on pages and pages of annotations that potentially may only reflect a pupil blindly copying from the board for multiple lessons?

Chris made many valid points throughout his session, allowing teachers to question their day to day practice. How do we know that those specific annotations that Pupil X has made in their own copies of the text means anything to them? Has that knowledge been processed to then give the pupil the ability and confidence to tackle an exam question?

Now, well into the Autumn term, many of us are questioning our practice and reflecting on how best to ensure that the pupils in front of can benefit from meaningful annotations that are relevant and digestible as part of the revision process.

The session then moved to knowledge and retrieval, highlighting the huge volumes of knowledge needed by a pupil to succeed in English. Gone are the days where 'learning some quotes' is enough and observers continuously questioned why we, as English teachers, are focusing on plot for such a sustained period of time. This then begged the question – what knowledge is the most important knowledge? Chris used a concise example that he had created with his team focusing on the retrieval of Romeo and Juliet. The model focused on 84 key points he wanted his students to know about the play; knowledge that is essential to succeed. The



retrieval questions where ordered in plot, quote and technique categories that allowed pupils to see the link between overarching themes and language. As a Trust English team, we are going to focus on condensing the knowledge for our key texts in a similar style so that our retrieval ensures that there is a focus on content that pupils really need to know in order to retain knowledge and utilise it in an exam scenario.

Reflecting on all aspects of delivering key content in English lessons, Chris addressed the idea that without knowledge of plot, we are stuck. Yes, there is value in annotation and value in retrieval practice, but finding

that balance between essential knowledge without cognitive overload will ensure that we give our pupils the best opportunities to succeed. Ultimately, a shift in mindset is needed; the quantity of annotations in a pupil's book does not reflect the thinking process of a pupil. We cannot continue to open a book and let ourselves be dazzled with the beauty of a heavily annotated text, but rather reflect and feel confident with the idea that sometimes less is more.

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