Reading the Word Instead of the World: GCSE English Re-sits and the Divorce of Literacies from Their Lifeworld Use

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ABSTRACT
This paper explores GCSE English re-sits in post-16 education. The re-sit policy was introduced in England and Wales to improve national literacy rates, yet persistently poor pass rates have drawn robust criticism of the policy. This article argues that traditional discourses of literacy predominate and contribute towards antagonisms between re-sit students and subject English. The high-stakes nature of the qualification and associated performativity pressures compound the difficulties. High levels of test-teaching and technique-spotting impair the ambit of the GCSE re-sit programme to deliver the type of literacy which the policy purports to improve. This autoethnographic study correlates the GCSE re-sit landscape with Paulo Freire’s ‘banking model’ of education and uses the work of The New Literacies Studies to suggest that dominant “autonomous” discourses of literacy are impeding educators’ appreciation of literacies as situated practices.

Every year, well over a hundred thousand 16-year-olds in England and Wales fail GCSE English Language. A key measure of achievement for pupils at the end of secondary school, GCSE English is considered a crucial gateway into academic or vocational study and employment. Graded 1–9, this exam-assessed qualification annually places approximately 33%1 of candidates at Grades 1–3, below the Grade 4 pass. The Condition of Funding rule (CoF) (ESFA 2014) was a key policy reform in response to concerns about post-16 literacy (Wolf 2011) and mandates the provision of GCSE English Language re-sits for 16–18-year-olds with prior-Grade 32.

I became a teacher not through any great vocational aspiration, but by happenchance. Having struggled at school, the idea of committing myself to the institutions which had constrained my child-self was counter-intuitive. However, I found my feet and cut my teeth teaching English to speakers of other languages (ESOL) in a London Further Education college. In 2014, I switched from ESOL to GCSE English re-sit teaching. I quickly realised that my experience in ESOL had produced a very idealised conceptualisation of education. The differences between ESOL and GCSE shocked me. I went from teaching low-stakes to high-stakes qualifications, from highly motivated to mostly disengaged students and from highly applicable curricula to content which seemed irrelevant to my students’ aspirations. Most disheartening of all, was the abysmal re-sit
achievement rate. With a 75% failure rate, and many students repeatedly re-sitting in their college years, the CoF is widely condemned as failing to achieve its aims (Ofsted 2017, Ofsted 2018; Rodeiro 2018; ASCL 2019; AoC 2017) of ensuring that ‘all 16 to 19-year-olds have the best chance of achieving’ a Level 2 qualification in English to help ‘progress to further study, training and skilled employment’ (ESFA 2014). It was during a chance encounter with a school head a few years ago that I grasped the manifest incoherence of the CoF. Learning that the GCSE failure rate is predetermined by cohort-referencing (ASCL 2019), I realised the absurdity inherent to the phrase ‘best chance of achieving’.

Hoping for alternative perspectives, I recently undertook a master’s course. In preparation for one of the assignments, I visited The Ragged School Museum in east London. This triggered a memory: an English re-sit class, full of rowdy lads from the Motor Vehicle department. We were reading an extract from a 19th century diary of a teacher at a ragged school in preparation for a practice exam question. In the passage, one of the boys had avenged an earlier caning by way of a brick and a strong throw. Reading this, I was struck by a thought: my college was a modern-day ragged school, and I was that teacher, responsible for drilling and disciplining my students, mostly against their will. Later, reading the work of Stephen Ball (2017, 57), I realised how bounded we are by the system of performativity, a ‘regime of accountability’ in which teachers’ productivity is leveraged by a culture of fear. I knew my attendance and achievement rates were constantly monitored and compared against those of my colleagues and began to realise how deeply this impacts my classroom practice.

I wondered how this performativity culture positions teachers, students and knowledge, and creates discourses, or ways of ‘behaving, interacting, valuing, believing’ (Gee 2008, 4). In discussions with colleagues about this teacher-student positioning, the name of the educator and philosopher, Paulo Freire, kept cropping up. Reading Pedagogy of the Oppressed, I was struck by how closely my GCSE re-sit practice seemed to fit with his banking model of education. Freire condemns normative education as systematically oppressive, describing the teacher-knowledge-student relationship in the following manner. The teacher is the agent-subject who narrates knowledge to the student. Representing the worldview of oppressors, this knowledge is imposed onto students, who, as recipients, or objects of the teacher and the knowledge, are oppressed into this hegemonic worldview, and are subsequently dehumanised (Freire 1996).

The GCSE English Language re-sit is criticised as unfit for purpose (Higton et al. 2017; ASCL (Association of School and College Leaders) 2019), a judgment which accords with my own experiences. Taking this censure as its starting point, this article seeks to investigate why the re-sit fails to achieve its stated purposes. I do not seek to generalise but to describe the re-sit landscape from the perspective of my own and my colleagues’ experiences by exploring two events from my past: an interaction with a student named Michael, and a comparison of two GCSE re-sit lessons. I will attempt to explain these events using data collected from a study I carried out in 2020. This, in combination with Freirean understandings, will hopefully help elucidate some of the profound problems of the GCSE English re-sit programme.
Writing to reflect: A methodological process

Although a novice researcher, I am a seasoned reflective writer. I realised the power of writing some time ago. I say ‘power’ not to describe the impact of my writing product, but the nature of the writing process. As a methodology, writing is an inductive learning tool which focuses the mind to coax out coherent thought. I use reflective writing to help understand my values, attitudes and practices in relation to the people and institutions I interact with as a means to develop ‘responsible and ethical action’ (Bolton 2014, 7). My reflective practices were unsystematised until I came across Bolton’s work. Loosely applying her methods to this project, I began with free-association writing: recollections of events, conversations, interactions and ideas. Following Bolton’s process, my aim was to work from the ground up, allowing analysis to emerge from the data, and for this to then stimulate further data collection. Grounded theory thus provides the underpinning principles as well as a method for this study (Charmaz 2006).

This article attempts to provide an account of teachers’ experiences of the GCSE English re-sit environment, layering data derived from multiple sources (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011). I have centred much of this investigation on my master’s dissertation (Veitch 2020), hereafter referenced as ‘my 2020 study’. This is a qualitative investigation of GCSE English re-sit teachers’ attitudes towards the qualification and the CoF, basing its findings on interviews with nine teachers who I purposively selected as critical of the re-sit programme. This present article seeks to draw inferences by synthesising data and knowledge from these sources: 1) teacher-participant comments from my 2020 study, 2) my own comments from this study, referenced as (Rose); I treat myself as the tenth teacher-participant, 3) my recollections of events and encounters, 4) my own teaching materials, 5) existing research.

I chose this autoethnographic approach because the insights of the GCSE English re-sit shared in this paper are bound up with my experiences: my teaching practices, as well as encounters with students, colleagues, discourses and knowledge. Traditional research paradigms, in separating the subject and object, do not serve this study, nor do they embody Freirean understandings of the teacher-student relationship.

Michael’s full stops and the discourses of literacy

The classroom is still and warm. The familiar sound of pen on paper fills the room, and looking up from my own writing, I see fifteen heads bowed in silent concentration. I can feel them thinking, almost hear it. It’s late September, and the students are two weeks into my re-sit course, a compulsory addition to their Motor Vehicle programme. I’ve set a diagnostic test – I want to capture their writing-skill starting points so I know what I’m working with. We’ve spent the first part of the lesson discussing their experiences of exams and coursework, and the students have plenty of strong opinions. There’s some vocabulary, an agreed structure on the board, and I’m confident they’ll be able to draft decent emails to the Secretary of State for Education. I return to my own piece, a withering condemnation of the recent GCSE reforms. A small shift in the room distracts me. I look up and notice Michael has stopped writing. He’s leaning back in his chair, arms folded, staring at the door. I try to catch his eye, but he ignores me, so I go over. ‘Finished’, he says, maintaining full eye contact with the door. ‘Let me see’, I reply,
indicating the half-page of scrawled writing. He tuts, and leans further back, arms still defiantly folded. I try to hide my irritation as I reach for the paper. 'It’s a start,' I say, 'but you need some full stops.' Michael tuts again, hunches his shoulders defensively, and mutters: 'I can’t be arsed.'

It is surprising that I recall this interaction so vividly, given the frequency with which GCSE English re-sit students display these sorts of negative emotions. Like Michael\(^5\), many young people I work with seem to associate subject English with failure and fear, exhibiting a lack of confidence and motivation, a point widely observed (Highton et al. 2017; Ireland 2019). What triggered this recollection was, I suspect, the sense of an emerging dilemma. How could I mesh my developing understandings about literacy with my assumptions about young people’s abilities? And how could I square this with the demands of the GCSE curriculum?

My conceptualisation of literacy at post-16 level has shifted from the singular to the plural. Roz Ivanič (2004) theorises several discourses related to writing. She posits that what prevails, especially at policy level, is a discourse of literacy as skills. This relates to an understanding of literacy as technical competency measurable against a set of standards, which, once learned, is transferrable to any context. This discourse reveals itself in the following anecdote: an aid to a previous Education Secretary, Estelle Morris, commented, ‘literacy and numeracy aren’t curriculum, they’re standards’ (quoted in Alexander 2004, 24). It is also revealed in my own academic writing. Critiquing the validity of the GCSE re-sit in achieving its purported objective as a ‘gold-standard’ signifier of the candidate’s literacy skills (Gibb 2018), my 2020 study endorses the skills discourse, referring to: ‘transferrable literacy skills useful for their students’ future lives’. Despite problematising policy makers’ skills discourse of literacy, my use of the word ‘transferrable’ in 2020 reveals contradictions in my own constructs. I seem to be speaking the discourse I am critiquing. Some of the other teacher-participant comments from my 2020 study also reflect this discourse. Six out of ten use the words ‘basic’ or ‘underpinning literacy’, echoing this notion of literacy as foundational, somehow detached from the context of its use. It is likely that we are interacting with each other’s ideas of literacy as well as the dominant discourse identified by Ivanič.

The New Literacies Studies (NLS) is a field of thought which offers an alternative perspective. It challenges the idea of ‘autonomous’ literacy: a technical, cognitive skill located within the individual, proposing instead that literacies are situated outside of us, that they are what we do rather than what we know. NLS theorises that literacy practices are embedded in and shaped by social structures, and therefore vary depending on the situational context, domain of practice and discourse community. According to NLS, literacy practices therefore represent and reproduce the power relations ingrained in social structures, with some literacies more dominant and influential than others (Street 1997; Barton and Hamilton 2000).

These understandings pose a problem for subject English teachers. One of the teacher-participants in my 2020 study comments:

\[\ldots\text{ thinking about punctuation, it’s like where do I need a full stop? You probably need a full stop before you’ve written 20 lines, a whole page of writing, and I find that’s very difficult in terms of me as a teacher to process their ideas when I get pages and pages without a single full stop. (Mark)}\]
Mark’s comment evokes the following criticisms of NLS: how can teachers reconcile pluralistic understandings of literacy practices when the curriculum demands Standard English (Stephens 2000), and how can we not teach Standard English, when the use of this privileged dialect clearly confers such great advantage (Davies 1999)? This polarised positioning of literacy, the descriptiveness of NLS versus the prescriptive nature of curricula, seems irreconcilable. My own interaction with Michael illustrates this dilemma. A Freirean approach might provide a useful perspective. Michael’s comment, ‘I can’t be arsed’, could be interpreted as follows: Michael is: 1) rejecting the need for full-stops, 2) disowning Standard English, 3) repudiating the privileged world view that it represents, and 4) resisting the imposition of this/my world onto his. It appears that Michael rejects the role of students to be ‘meekly the receptacles permit[ting] themselves to be filled’ (Freire 1996, 72).

Back then in the classroom, I did not consider this. I did not interpret Michael’s words literally. Instead, I took them to indicate a deficit of Standard English punctuation knowledge within Michael, his ‘I can’t be arsed [to use full stops]’ to mean: ‘I can’t use full stops’. As possessor of this seemingly valuable knowledge and administrator of the ‘diagnostic’ test, I position myself (or am positioned) as a doctor assessing a patient’s malady, or Michael’s literacy defects. The ‘but’ in my response: ‘but you need some full stops’ negates attempts to conceal my irritation at Michael’s non-compliance with Standard English conventions and classroom norms.

This deficit conceptualisation of students’ abilities is noted by Ivanič et al. (2009). Recognising a crisis narrative about declining standards of youth literacy, often attributed to new technologies such as social media, they critique this as a deficit discourse promulgated by policy makers and some educators:

We set up students to fail, because we implicitly or explicitly buy into the crisis narratives that circulate more broadly. These shape our pedagogic practices and lead to self-fulfilling prophesies that students are not capable of appropriate forms of communication. (15)

First reading about this, I identified this deficit discourse within myself and some of the teacher-participants of my 2020 study. For example, Owen’s comment: ‘It would be nice if there were some legs on the table’ shows that he conceptualises literacy as a foundation skill (the legs) which supports but is not integral to higher-up knowledge (the table-top). The implication is that his students, lacking these ‘legs’, are unable to access more advanced knowledge.

Now, re-reading the pages relating to this deficit discourse, I notice my own first-reading annotations, scrawled in the book’s margins: ‘This is me! Too relativistic!’. At this moment of first reading, I associated Ivanic et al.’s perspective with one of the teacher-participants from my 2020 study: ‘We’re not interested in punctuation and full stops and so on. I’m with James Joyce on this one. I’m more modernist’ (Tina). I was instinctively critical of this. I attributed it to a mindset of post-modern relativism which teachers cannot afford to adopt, commenting that it expresses ‘a sort of post-truth’ (Rose). Later, reflecting on these points, I was conflicted. Like Mark, I could not let go of the certainty that full stops perform a vital role in creating clarity, yet I was alarmed to identify myself as this educator whose deficit thinking was apparently undermining learning. Discussing these feelings with a friend, I laughed when she gently pointed out that my social media messages are dogmatically replete with full
stops, commas and every other conceivable punctuation mark. This observation was poignantly ironic because my friends seldom punctuate their messages in this way. This illustrates two things: 1) the pluralistic nature of literacy practices, 2) my self-positioning as teacher-of-literacy and upholder-of-standards. It was this conversation which switched my mind to consider what Ivanić et al. propose as a way of Rethinking Literacies.

What these NLS and Freirean understandings build, and what Ivanić et al. (2009) offer is a way for teachers and students to collaborate in learning how societal power relations are expressed in and circulated by literacy practices. If students like Michael and I could study our multiple uses of literacy, and if we could analyse their functions and resonances in relation to society, we might understand Standard English as a dialect of power, and one which we can choose to adopt where appropriate. In doing so, students like Michael might find good reason to master Standard English conventions such as full stops, understanding these as essential code-switching tools. In other words, just as Michael resisted his student-positioning, educators can also resist their teacher-positioning. Instead of adopting: ‘I need to teach Michael full stops’ as the default mode, teachers could say: ‘Let’s examine when full stops are beneficial so we can step in and out of Standard English at will. And while we’re at it, let’s learn about the power relations tied up in normative constructs of literacy’. I am grateful to Michael for teaching me this.

Test-teaching, technique-spotting, and reading the word versus reading the world

In my years of teaching GCSE English re-sits, I became increasingly troubled. I began to sense that my way of teaching literacy was un-educative and somehow damaging. This section explores this intuition; the feeling of disconnect between my understanding of literacies, and how I was teaching.

I became aware that I was spending much of my class-time on the reading and writing assessment objectives of the GCSE English Language specification. The qualification is assessed by two exams. Each paper has a reading section, followed by writing. Candidates first answer various essay-style questions in response to an excerpt from literature in Paper 1 and two non-fiction texts in Paper 2. This is followed by a piece of creative writing for paper 1, and a non-fiction composition in paper 2. The aims of the reading sections are to assess candidates’ abilities to:

- identify and interpret explicit and implicit information
- analyse how writers’ language and structure achieves effect
- compare writers’ perspectives
- evaluate texts critically (DfE 2013).

The GCSE re-sit is a big deal. With over a hundred thousand post-16 students retaking every year (DfE (Department for Education) and ESFA 2014), the stakes are high for students, teachers and colleges. Students need the Grade 4 gateway pass for university and employment (ESFA 2014), and since re-sit results are a key performance measure for
providers, colleges also need Grade 4s to thrive (DfE [Department for Education] 2014). Teachers are under enormous pressure from both sides to grind out the Grade 4s, a pressure I have felt intensely.

For the purposes of this paper, I want to illustrate the impact of these performativity pressures by comparing two GCSE re-sit lessons. Lesson A in Table 1 represents the type of teaching I do early in the academic year when I feel relatively little exam pressure, whereas Lesson B is more typical as the June exam looms and is what I consider a ‘test-teaching’ lesson; note 7 explains my selection of these lessons⁸. I have often felt uncomfortable about the way the exam constrains my pedagogic practices and curriculum choices. This is a well-documented phenomenon; multiple studies show how high-stakes assessment leads to teacher-centred, transmission-style pedagogies such as drilling and lecturing, as well as the narrowing of curricula to align with the exam (Jones 2007; Stobart 2008; Ryan and Weinstein 2009; Hardy 2015; Gewirtz et al. 2019).

To unpack the phrase ‘test-teaching’, various studies have identified and ranked test-teaching practices according to their impact on the validity⁹ of the assessment (Mehrens and Kaminsky 1989; Haladyna et al. 1991). Although I am interested in how performativity pressures affect teaching and learning rather than validity, these studies provide a useful starting point. Reading through the test-teaching descriptions, I was surprised to recognise many of them as commonplace in my own practice. I have selected four of these test-teaching points which felt the most familiar; they are listed unranked in Table 2 and inform the test-teaching continuum in Figure 1. The literature cited above considers these four practices as relatively adverse with respect to validity; see Welsh, Eastwood,

Table 1. GCSE English re-sit lessons A and B.

| Lesson A | Lesson B |
|----------|----------|
| **Text:** letter from Jourdon Anderson ‘To My Old Master, Colonel P.H. Anderson’ | Texts from past exam paper: Reinventing the Wheel (Charles Starmer-Smith)/A Wheel within a Wheel, Frances Willard. Context: Cycling |
| **Context:** Slavery | |
| 1 Students discuss images, people’s names, and place names. Guess country, century, and context | Teacher recaps format of Component 2 reading paper & process for first 10 minutes of exam |
| 2 Teacher & students read letter together, discussing context, relationships, and purpose of letter | Students apply first 10-minute process, skim-reading two texts, noting genre, audience, purpose & writers’ perspectives |
| 3 Students answer comprehension questions relating to above points | Teacher & students read exam question, unpack what it’s asking |
| 4 Students discuss feelings of writer, then select most accurate summary from options. Pick out quotes from text as supporting evidence | Students match different language techniques with their definitions |
| 5 Students discuss writer’s tone, then select best description from options. Pick out quotes from text as evidence, discuss and note down how language expresses tone | Students find 3 different techniques in each text, write corresponding quotes, and note down effects of language |
| 6 Teacher & students read exam question, unpack what it’s asking | Students compare good and bad PEA exam models, guessing which is which, and discuss what makes the good one better |
| 7 Teacher models PEA exam style paragraph | Students read examiner’s comments and marks about the good/bad models, then students identify PEA process for Grade 4 |
| 8 Students write own answer, using points & quotes identified previously | Students write own answer, using techniques & quotes identified previously |

**KEY** PEA = Point, Evidence, Analysis (a framework for structuring a paragraph for an exam style reading response essay)
Table 2. Test-teaching practices identified as deleterious in relation to exam validity.

| Point of reference | Test-teaching practice |
|---------------------|------------------------|
| (i)                 | Pedagogic practices which mirror the same format as the exam questions |
| (ii)                | Setting lesson objectives based on test items |
| (iii)               | Using score-boosting activities |
| (iv)                | Instruction and practice on parallel test materials |

Figure 1. Test-teaching continuum.

and D’Agostino (2014) for a synthesis of this ranking. The two lessons in Table 1 are reconstructed from my own teaching materials, and are chosen to represent each extreme of the test-teaching continuum in Figure 1. I have taught Lesson A several times since first reading Jourdon Anderson’s remarkable letter; my students respond in very different ways, but always positively. In contrast, I have taught many versions of Lesson B.

In choosing Lesson B as a typical example of test-teaching, I anticipated that it would match most of the criteria in Table 2. In fact, each stage of the lesson corresponds to a test-teaching practice. Stages 1–3 focus on the exam process and question, providing instruction and practice on parallel test materials (point iv). This is followed by Stages 4–5 which train students to ‘technique-spot’, to quickly identify linguistic techniques such as alliteration or metaphors in a text. The teaching method here, of matching techniques with definitions and quotes, mirrors the way we expect students to answer exam questions (point i). At Stages 6–7, the analysis of how exemplar PEA paragraphs are graded could be considered score-boosting activities (point iii). This is followed by a practice exam question at Stage 8, namely a parallel test material (point iv). Given that every objective of Lesson B relates to test items (point ii), we can surmise that this is a test-teaching lesson in its entirety.

I expected my non-test-teaching lesson to present in the opposite direction. However, when I methodically applied the test-teaching criteria to Lesson A, I was surprised to find that two of the practices from Table 2 correlate. At Stages 6–8, students work on an imitation exam question which I devised myself. This is undoubtedly a parallel test material (point iv), and the objectives of these stages are clearly based on test items (point ii).

This analysis of Lessons A and B illustrates how my understandings of test-teaching are shaped by performativity pressures. Even though I attempt to resist test-teaching, these practices seep into the lessons I consider devoid of them. The realisation that I test-teach more than I think demonstrates that these practices are so ubiquitous and normalised, so embedded into our every-day habits, that we do not recognise our own test-teaching, unwittingly accept its logic, and struggle to resist it even when we want to (Hardy 2015). Many of the teacher-participants in my 2020 study speak of similar conflicts. Table 3 shows that most are critical of test-teaching yet judge its prevalence
in their own practice as high or moderate. All except Amir and Tina seem to accept a fair amount of test-teaching as inevitable. Test-teaching is possibly perceived as necessary to preserve achievement rates, and the stakes considered too high to risk jeopardising results, a point with which Reese, Gordon and Price’s study concurs (Reese, Gordon, and Price 2004).

I now want to investigate Lesson B’s technique-spotting in more detail. It would be interesting to explore the ways in which technique-spotting impacts the validity of the reading exam. However, here I focus instead on how technique-spotting expresses and shapes our understanding of reading: what it is, and how we teach it, or the ontology and epistemology of reading.
It might help to conceptualise technique-spotting as a discourse of reading. This phenomenon has been criticised as a widespread and reductive construct of subject English (Alexander 2007; Locke 2008; Child et al. 2015; Cuthbert 2019; Collyer 2021), and my 2020 study echoes this view, with some teacher-participants commenting that technique-spotting is a core focus of reading. Two of the teachers problematise the identification of linguistic features such as rhetorical questions and personification:

The students walk through the door of a college thinking that the way that they show understanding of something is by not really thinking about what the text is about in any great sense, not showing any understanding about the writer’s purpose or how it is built. But just spotting something that they’ve been taught to identify, usually a rhetorical question, and then their analysis is not linked in any way to the meaning of that paragraph, that sentence, that phrase. It’s just about ‘here’s a technique that I’ve learned about, and this is the job of that technique’. (Amir)

We’re encouraged to start a lesson with ‘let’s define these key technical terms and make sure everyone can understand them’ and then the whole lesson becomes about the technical term and the actual texts are just a means by which we test out whether they’ve understood the technical terms. … tricks and techniques to dig out what a text is meant to be saying. (Bernie)

Amir and Bernie’s comments are insightful. Their dismay relates to a perception that technique-spotting is a false way of reading, a way of cheating by using ‘short cuts’ to identify meaning (Bernie). Technique-spotting practices transmit the idea that linguistic techniques have an inherent function and a transferrable meaning, i.e.: the effect of the rhetorical question is to engage the reader. This is deceptive, because the meaning of the rhetorical question is unique to the text, and therefore bound to the reader’s global interpretation of the text and its world-context. Technique-spotting objectifies reading by divorcing form (the language writers use) from content (what writers mean) or as Alexander (2007, 105), quoting Yeats, notes, it separates ‘the dancer from the dance’. This disconnect between form and content-context might be explained as Reading the Word rather than Reading the World (Freire and Slover 1983). Reading the World involves perceiving the dynamic between text and context. In contrast, Reading the Word alone, common to traditional reading lessons, is nothing more than ‘mere exercises aimed at our simply becoming aware of the existence of the page in front of us, to be scanned, mechanically and monotonously spelled out, instead of truly read’ (8).

Amir and Bernie attribute technique-spotting to performativity pressures. Below, they compare the exam to a hurdle race and a video game, the winning of each requiring this technique-spotting hack:

… this comes back to the high-stakes exam. They’re trained to think about the exam as this progression hurdle that they need to get over. (Amir)

You push shortcuts and simple solutions that make it easy for them to repeat the task in an exam situation.

It’s about learning a prescribed set of knowledge, and then being able to regurgitate it, and that gets you a badge that allows you to move to room B. (Bernie)
Their evident despondency might relate to what Yandell (2012, 283) observes as a ‘grossly reductive, technical-rationalist version of what reading is and how development in reading might be encouraged’. Bernie alludes to this in observing how ‘texts are just a means by which we test’ technical knowledge, and: ‘we’re encouraged’ to teach ‘a prescribed set of knowledge’. These comments suggest that: 1) measurable knowledge is valorised above other knowledge with the text reduced to an instrument in pursuit of this (Biesta 2017); 2) the knowledge taught (technique-spotting) is devised by other people, or ‘technologists’ (Winch 2017). Lesson B’s technique-spotting seems to position teachers, knowledge, and students in the manner set out in Figure 2. Here, teachers are the objects of knowledge which is determined by technologists. Re-positioned as subjects with respect to their students, teachers uncritically transmit this knowledge to students who are passive objects of the teacher’s administrations. This, according to Biesta (2017) is an act which undermines teachers’ telos, their understanding of education’s fundamental aims, and arguably also their subject knowledge.

In contrast, Lesson A might be considered more transformative in the Freirean sense of the word. The lesson begins with context-exploration. Here, students interact with the text, a letter from freed slave Jourdon Anderson to his previous master. Classroom dialogue might enable students to Read Jourdon’s World and empathise with his situation: What knowledge do we have of slavery? What do we understand about the power relations between Jourdon Anderson and Colonel Anderson, and how is this expressed by their respective names? How would we react if a previous oppressor sought to re-impose his power? And how does Jourdon’s use of language mediate all of this?

Lesson A provides opportunities for students to Read the World and Word, whereas Lesson B merely Reads the Word. The question here is, why do we resort to technique-spotting? Why is Lesson B the default for so much of my re-sit teaching? I propose that the answer is two-fold: 1) performativity pressure to produce Grade 4s within the constraints of time; 2) a deficit understanding of students’ abilities to Read the World, as illustrated by my interaction with Michael. It takes time and skill to context-explore,
but most of all, it takes trust. Reading the World requires a Freirean praxis of critical consciousness. This involves a complete re-thinking of the teacher-student dyad, a re-positioning of both as co-creators of knowledge. In learning knowledge from each other dialogically, teachers and students are both simultaneously subjects and objects of each other and the knowledge (Freire 1996). In contrast, the three positionings set out in Figure 2 seem to represent a philosophy of education which accords with Freire’s banking model.

**Concluding discussion: recoupling the dancer and the dance**

The frustrations expressed by most of the teacher-participants in my 2020 study suggest an awareness of the conflicts inherent to our banking model. This is brought into sharp focus by the way the CoF interacts with the GCSE English qualification and the wider re-sit context to position the teacher-student-knowledge triad so absurdly. I suspect the teacher-participants perceive technique-spotting as a safe mechanism for generating Grade 4s, an expedient way to bypass time-consuming context-exploration, and resort to it unwillingly or unwittingly. A minority of my 2020 study participants seem to accept this as a pragmatic reality (Owen and Sue), whereas most struggle to reconcile our practices and beliefs.

Lesson A demonstrates that it is possible to adopt a Freirean approach in our teaching of GCSE re-sits, and that linguistic analysis can provide a useful and valid route to developing various types of literacy knowledge, for example critical literacy (Garcia et al. 2015). However, the predominance of Lesson B type classes in re-sit teaching indicates that post-16 subject English does not really teach and assess the type of literacy that the Condition of Funding policy purports to improve.

Another barrier presents itself. As I think and learn about the post-16 literacy landscape in England and Wales, illustrated in this study by the exploration of Michael’s full stops and my technique-spotting practices, I have become aware that the CoF has created a study-skills model of literacy development (Lea and Street 2006). By placing literacy so firmly within the remit of subject English, the CoF seems to have separated literacies from academic or vocational subject contexts, and in doing so, has undermined the principle and practice of embedding. Embedding, which refers to the seamless integration of language and literacy within vocational (and academic) curricula (Courtenay and Mawer 1995), benefits post-16 students in multiple ways (Casey et al. 2006). I can find scant research into how the CoF has impacted embedding, although the challenges of embedding GCSE English are alluded to in Highton et al.’s report (Highton et al. 2017). I would speculate that the resource intensiveness of providing GCSE re-sits (a) has crowded out much of the integrated literacy work on vocational courses. Similar unintended consequences of policy have been observed in other contexts (Maguire et al. 2019).

I want to stress the importance of returning to The New Literacies Studies’ first principles. In charting the journey towards understanding my own constructs of literacy, aided by my colleagues, students and the opportunity to study, I hope I have shown that the autonomous idea of literacy is a powerful discourse in the post-16 context in England and Wales. This point has, of course, been made by others in relation to other contexts (Ivanič 2004; Garcia et al. 2015; Sandretto and Tilson 2015). Sandretto and Tilson note
that understandings of literacy and therefore teachers’ practices are shaped by a ‘tangled plurality’ of discourses, a mixture of curricula, assessment technologies, policy and research (227). However, the predominance of the autonomous literacy discourse suggests that alternative academic discourses are but a whisper, with the apparent impact of NLS on post-16 educators’ beliefs and practices negligible. Since many of the participant-teachers of my 2020 study conceptualise literacy as a basic skill, divorced from the analytical content of subject English, they might consider literacy as beyond their teaching remit. This seems to mesh with Goodwyn’s findings that most school subject English teachers in England consider themselves teachers of literature but not of literacy (Goodwyn 2011, 2021). This point places post-16 literacy policy as well as subject English more widely in a catch-22.

In this paper, I have depicted post-16 subject English as profoundly instrumental. This approach to teaching autonomous literacy as a skill, often severed from meaningful subject content, critical thinking and educative pedagogies, likely manifests in other levels of subject English. The reflections presented in this study therefore have wider implications. I would like to see more opportunities for teachers of all subjects and levels to critically engage with different constructs of literacy. This, I believe would stimulate more meaningful embedding work, and draw literacy out of the current study-skills silo of subject English into vocational and academic curricula. This is not to say that subject English language and literature is a lost cause in post and pre-16 literacy development. If English teachers also explored their constructs of literacy, they may see a way to developing new approaches (or rediscovering old ones!) which better integrate literacies with language and literature content, even within the constraints of the current GCSE and Functional Skills delivery models. An expanded view of Subject English, based on a more open understanding of literacy, might also help erode some of the damaging assumptions we make about vocational students.

This is an experiment I am keen to trial. I am now teaching Functional Skills English, a much lower-stakes qualification. I do less test-teaching, more context-exploration, and can try out the understandings I have learned from my students, colleagues, Roz Ivanic et al. and Paulo Freire, amongst others. I have not yet interviewed my students, but I hope that despite some initial bafflement at these uncustromary approaches, they might begin to perceive the relevance of subject English to their lives and aspirations.

**Notes**

1. In 2018, 375,105 pupils at the end of Key Stage 4 achieved Grades 9–4 out of a total of 538,088 (DfE 2018).
2. The Department of Education lists the qualifications approved to meet the conditions of funding. 16–18-year-olds on full-time study programmes with prior Grade 3 must retake GCSE English, whereas those with Grades 1 or 2 may take stepping-stone qualifications which include Functional Skills (FS) or ESOL qualifications.
3. The majority (90%) of GCSE re-sits take place in Further Education (FE) colleges. The achievement rate in Sixth Form colleges (6FC) is approximately double that of the FE sector: an average of 22.6% in FE between 2016–2019, compared to 46.6% in 6FC. The overall achievement rate across both sectors is 24.7%, averaged between these years.
4. This extract is from the November 2017 AQA exam (AQA 2017).
5. All names are pseudonyms.
6. I use the term ‘code-switching’ to mean adapting one’s language (register, tone and dialect: grammar, vocabulary, punctuation etc) to make it appropriate to the situation of the spoken or written communication event. Appropriacy relates to normative socio-cultural linguistic conventions pertaining to the situation, ie: the genre, purpose and audience of the communication event.

7. To select the two lessons in Table 1, I used my digitally saved records of lesson materials. In my practice, I either source authentic texts myself, or use past exam texts, and create accompanying worksheets which relate to classroom activities such as gap-fill, matching, labelling, comparison or multiple-choice exercises, discussions or writing frames. These printable worksheets are for students, and do not include teacher instructions. Realising that these files represent an authentic record of my teaching practice, I searched over fifty documents, and selected two which I considered would best represent each extreme of the test-teaching continuum in Figure 1. After identifying the two sets of material for analysis, I used the student worksheets to reconstruct the lesson activities, in each case, considering how I would naturally teach the resources.

8. ‘Validity’ here refers to the degree to which the candidates’ test scores represent their knowledge of the subject.

9. Anderson’s letter is available at https://www.facinghistory.org/reconstruction-era/letter-jourdon-anderson-freedman-writes-former-master

10. The Casey et al. report investigates the impact of embedding in 15 FE colleges in England. It finds numerous benefits of fully embedded courses, including higher student retention, improved achievement in both vocational and language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) courses and more positive student attitudes towards LLN.

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