

TASSOMAI the learning program



Challenges, tensions and  
opportunities in  
English literature teaching

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# Welcome

Maths and science were my strongest subjects at school - I went on to teach maths before launching Tassomai – but the subject that really changed my life was English Literature.

I learned more studying Julius Caesar than any other subject at that time. To my teenage self, Shakespeare’s tragic history play was a study of life and full of valuable lessons for the future.

My belief in the transformative power of the subject was clear to me then and now and this was only reinforced by our autumn roundtable involving a panel of leading English teaching voices and practitioners.

Our lively discussions revealed much about the creativity and ingenuity of English teachers and the sheer passion with which they deliver their subject, unlocking its vibrancy to a new generation of students.

Their contributions also clearly spelled out the challenges they and their students face now and in the future – challenges that, judging by their impressive response to the pandemic, they will most certainly overcome.

I hope you find this report as fascinating and informative as I found our discussions.

**Murray Morrison**  
Tassomai founder  
[@MurrayTassomai](https://twitter.com/MurrayTassomai)



# Introduction

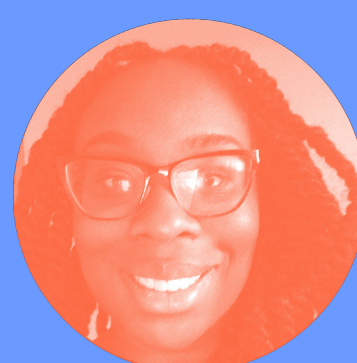
This report is based on an online round table hosted by Tassomai on Wednesday 6 October 2021. Participants were:



**Cat Scutt [Chair]**  
Director of Education and Research at the Chartered College of Teaching



**Tracey Maloney**  
Chair of the Secondary and FE Committee, The English Association



**Elmina Ferguson**  
Head of English, Ark Pioneer Academy, Barnet



**Dominic Salles**  
Assistant Headteacher,  
Kingsdown School and  
founder of YouTube  
channel Mr Salles  
Teaches English



**Rachel Roberts**  
Chair, National  
Association for the  
Teaching of English and  
PGCE Secondary English  
Subject Lead at the IoE,  
University of Reading



**Murray Morrison**  
Founder and CEO,  
Tassomai



**Zara Shah**  
KS3 Coordinator, The  
Grammar School at  
Leeds, Advocate  
for LitDrive



**Becky Wood**  
Lead Practitioner  
Teaching and Learning  
and English teacher at  
Kingsway Park High  
School, Rochdale and  
co-organiser of  
@Team\_English1



**Jamie Engineer -**  
Associate Assistant  
Principle and Head of  
English, Torquay  
Academy

# Pandemic pressures - and opportunities





English teaching, and English literature in particular, suffered the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune when the pandemic bit in March 2020.

English teachers faced the same challenges as every other teacher, dealing with the pressure of swiftly moving to a new model of delivery, while all the time worrying about their personal wellbeing and the wellbeing of their families and their students.

One practitioner told us there was a significant contrast in access to online learning during the lockdowns. At her school, in a highly disadvantaged area, Year 11 was really two distinct cohorts: those who accessed very little at all, and those who accessed pretty much everything.

*“Even when we managed to source everybody a laptop there just wasn't the same level of students accessing it. Unfortunately that comes with high levels of disadvantage.”*

The technical limitations of online were all too apparent in the homes of some pupils. One teacher described barriers to online learning, including unstable wi-fi or background noise.

Independent reading was one of the challenges highlighted by one panellist. *“Before the pandemic, teachers were used to taking students through the text within lessons and very few got large chunks of independent reading. The rapid introduction of independent reading during the pandemic lockdowns was an interesting move and when I observed online lessons I saw more low stakes quizzing so that teachers could decide if the text was being read.”*

We heard from one senior leader who spoke of gaps that had emerged in the workshopping of language and the formulation of writing that was hard to achieve in a purely online environment, but edtech was used effectively for scaffolding context and textual analysis.

The limitations of a purely online learning experience were felt particularly keenly by one teacher. *“Literature should be a multi-dimensional experience; if we want to experience it fully, we have to immerse ourselves in it. That immersion relies on the readers - both the children and the teacher - and what they bring to the classroom, but most importantly on the discussions that emerge as their contexts come together and everyone begins to talk about their experience of it.”*

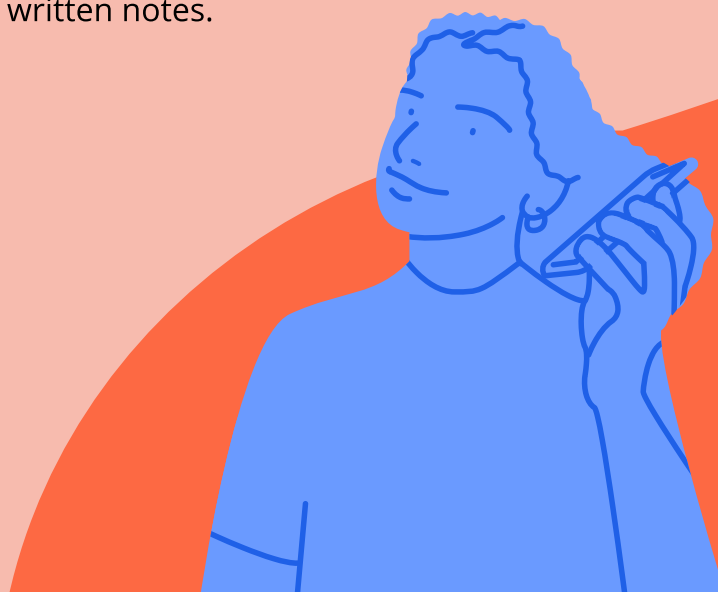
Schools ‘leant into’ edtech to mitigate some of these disadvantages, we heard. *“Analytical writing requires dissection, and dissection is easy to do when you have a visualiser with pupils at the other end who are hooked and have no choice but to listen to you. This is a medium that our students understand; when they type a response to you in the chat box when they are asked a question they are in their comfort zone.”* It’s an approach that has proved so successful that it now forms part of classroom-based lessons.

The personalised chat functions available on visualisers opened up access for students who were normally less confident about thinking and talking about ideas and conceptualising their views about a text.

*“Students who already have quite enhanced cultural capital perform better than students who don’t have that but this approach opened up avenues for these students,”* one panellist told us, who described students using personal chat channels during Teams lessons that remained open afterwards to allow discussions to continue.

Using chat functions to encourage student feedback and quizzing were successful but students had limits to their stamina and it was difficult to maintain online teaching for more than 100 minutes at a time, we heard.

Voice notes also proved popular. Several of our panel described using voice notes to provide students with richly detailed online feedback in less time than it took for the equivalent written feedback. As well as saving time, voice notes could also focus the student more on the detail of the feedback because the nature of the delivery required them to listen to the complete message, rather than ‘cherry pick’ written notes.



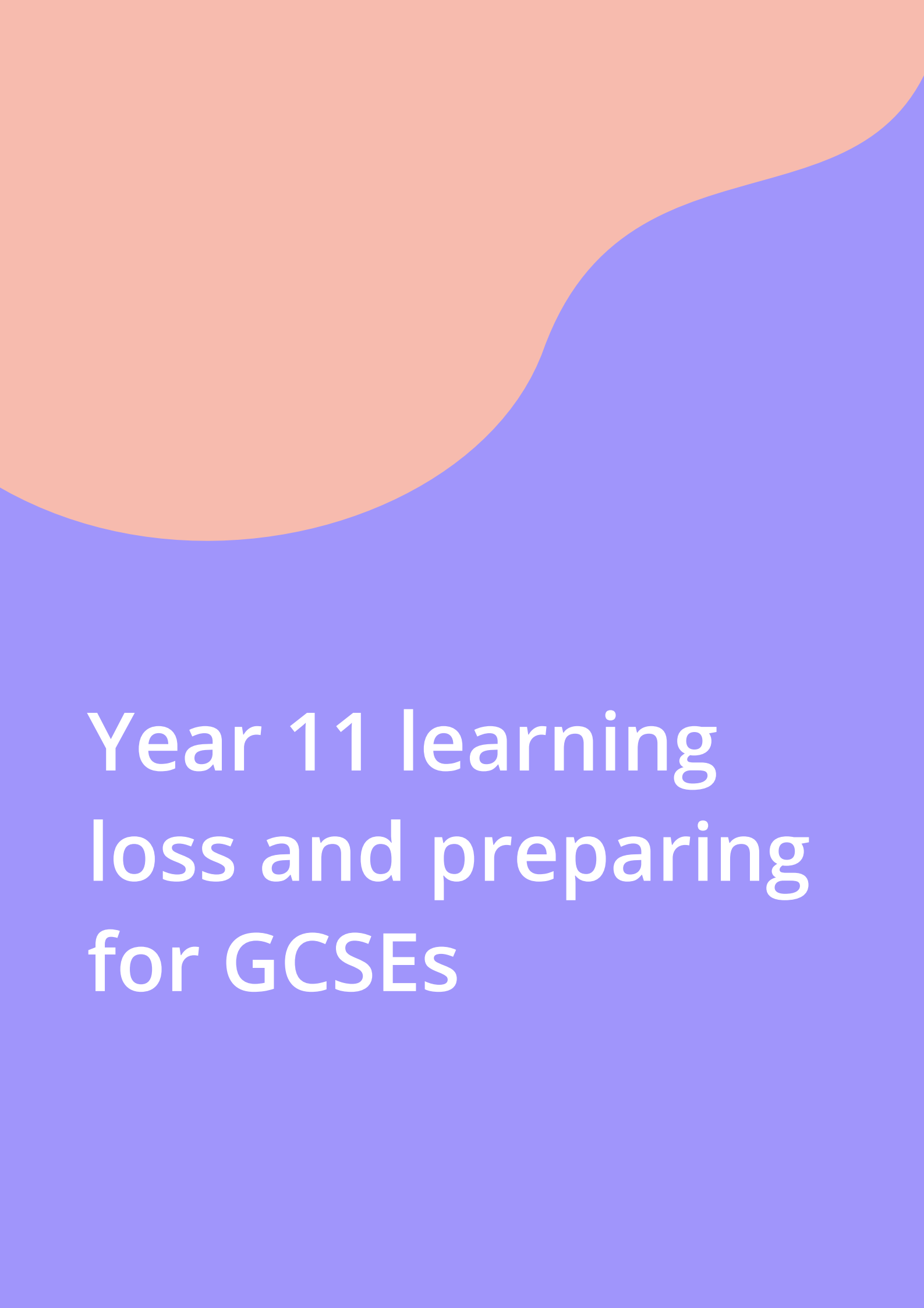


Ensuring that students understood texts was a challenge highlighted by several of our panel. One school introduced online reading logs which require pupils to record what they've read. This is then shared with teachers who use the first 10 minutes at the start of some English lessons to engage in an informed conversation with students about their reading.

Research has shown that collaborative document platforms such as Google Docs have enabled, in some cases, greater participation for students who don't necessarily want to speak out in the class but are happy to share their thoughts in the document.

Techniques similar to these were being used at one secondary school where staff were trained to 'dissolve the screen' and mitigate against anything that might be a source of interference, or mediation between the teacher and the pupil in the online space. For example, pupils were already used to working in the classroom with visualisers and their workbooks, and this approach was adhered to as closely as possible during lockdowns.





# Year 11 learning loss and preparing for GCSEs

Reports from English departments around the country suggest that students are finding it difficult to resume extended writing and teachers have concerns about the accuracy of writing, writing for purpose and returning to handwritten exams.

Low stakes testing has helped students reinforce their knowledge of texts during extended periods of online learning, and following their return to school, but there are concerns that these approaches do not enable the development of more advanced, sophisticated skills-based approaches in English.

*“A colleague mentioned how some of her students found it really difficult to link context to literature in their written responses,”* said one panellist. *“Context can be difficult to integrate, so making those deep, sophisticated links between context and literary texts was an area for development.”*

Classroom discussion was another area of concern. *“Probably the biggest area that children have lost out on, regardless of group, has been oracy because English is about discussion,”* we heard.

In one school we heard that many students’ understandings of the text were considerably lessened by not being in the classroom – an issue that had been picked up through retrieval quizzing. Retrieval sessions are now being held in every single lesson at the school.

The importance of retrieval exercises was echoed throughout the discussions. One head of English said low stakes testing was now becoming commonplace in her school. *“When I first started teaching English low stakes quizzing was not popular in English. But I realised that it was one of the most important things I could do to get them not just GCSE ready, but to give them the confidence they need to pick up a text and they can say a few interesting things about it.”*



The panel heard that she used quizzing as a way of isolating certain aspects of reading which students might find uncomfortable. *"You can start that process of analysis as they're reading,"* said one panellist. *"Quizzing can help by giving them a quotation and giving them ideas and making sure they have the most accurate answer. For example, there may be several reasons why a writer made use of a certain metaphor – we can guide them by offering them a range of interpretations."*

*"It can help students move from concrete knowledge about a text to, what I love to call, the abstract - the beautiful things that we can say, because there are a million ways to interpret as text, but they need to have that first level of accuracy before I can go onto that."*

Edtech can also help to improve exam technique. One panellist told us of a school that had introduced an exam Thursday to support students to develop an understanding of what makes a high quality GCSE answer. The students get immediate feedback from comparative marking, and in the next lesson they will be challenged on the visualiser to say what they think is a top answer, a middle answer or a low answer, giving three reasons why.

It was clear since emerging from a succession of lockdowns that teachers were no longer relying on familiar means of participation in order to get pupils talking and were putting in place other measures in order to ensure that pupils were able to rehearse their thinking.

One of our panellists told us that she had seen great work by teachers to cajole a more scholarly response from pupils, rather than three-word answers that would have been acceptable in chat boxes. *"I have seen more scaffolding of oracy in that sense,"* she added. *"I have sat in some very nice lunchtime clubs where some schools have begun bullet-journaling. Because dexterity is not where it should be, I've noticed schools setting up these lunchtime activities in and around the library that try to encourage us to do something about that deficit."*



# Future thinking: edtech's support role in English teaching

We heard how quizzing was now playing a central role in retrieval work at a secondary in the south west.

Students do all their extended writing in class and write weekly essays that are marked by the teachers every week in class alongside a piece of descriptive writing. The approach can be summed up as getting pupils to do the things that are hardest in class, and they prepare for these tasks through homework and revision of topics and vocabulary through the quizzing app developed with Tassomai.

The importance of reinforcement was picked up by several contributors. One quoted US academic Daniel Willingham, who said that no-one can think critically or talk critically, or problem solve around a topic or a domain in which they don't have the underpinning knowledge. *"If teachers want pupils to be competent then they have to have the underpinning knowledge,"* said one panellist.

Technology has the power to stem what one contributor described as a crisis in English Literature. Pointing out that A-level English Literature exam entries had declined by 23% since the introduction of the new exams in 2017, which is thought to be a direct impact of the changes at GCSE level. The panelist explained: *"The new exam has deskilled teachers and kids; they're no longer required to be good at literature and come up with interesting interpretations about text and then justify this in essays. Instead we have the poetry essay, where actually you have a superficial knowledge of one poem and the superficial knowledge of another and you compare them in superficial ways."*

But edtech could help by giving students knowledge of unifying principles. *"How does literature interact with themes around class or feminism or religion or science and modernisation? These themes run throughout all the texts that we study from Year 7 through to Year 11, but we don't tackle them coherently,"* he added. *"Every time we approach a text in class, it's there in isolation, it doesn't have a conversation with all the other texts we have taught. Some schools will do that really well but technology will allow you to do that, because you can construct courses that make those links explicit. You can easily scaffold the courses so that as students progress through, they become more and more knowledgeable and articulate, and they're able to use that knowledge in different contexts."*

The panel agreed that quizzing did not have to stop at retrieval and reinforcing concrete facts and could, with the help of edtech, help students to develop a greater understanding of the subject's more abstract aspects. This ambition was summed up by one of our panel, who said: *"I don't just want these students to know that four lines in a poem is a quatrain. I want them to have the vocabulary that they can draw on to explain their understanding."*

We heard of one school that had introduced a Key Stage Five a Day initiative. In the first five minutes of every English lesson students were introduced to an unseen text - either fiction or non-fiction - which they would read and the teacher would check the students' understanding with some retrieval questioning using Microsoft Forms. The texts were compiled to build cultural capital and inspire thought, while the short quizzes were designed to not only reinforce procedural and disciplinary knowledge, but also introduce abstract concepts such as interpretations of language and imagery used by an author. The students then compile their interpretations of this wide variety of reading into digital booklets.

Edtech also offered huge potential for professional collaboration, we heard. For example, one social media based English teacher network now had a follower base of 35,000 English teachers across the country working together and collaborating. The network recently hosted an English teachers conference with 500 people physically in attendance and many more participating online.

**Conclusion**





Much has been learnt since March 2020 when the first lockdown began. It was during this time that English teachers used their ingenuity to attempt to replicate the learning environment as closely as they could online.

In the process they tried and tested a range of skills – and technologies - that are being applied in the classroom today. Low stakes testing, often delivered through apps, appears to be an increasingly common method for retrieval and reinforcement of learning, as does online collaboration, the use of voice notes for feedback and visualisers.

The sense that English teachers are a resourceful and determined group doesn't hide that they are worried about how the disruption continues to affect some of the core aspects of English teaching and learning, including the degree to which students understand texts in independent reading and their ability to create complex, nuanced and sophisticatedly argued extended writing.

Another major theme of our discussion was the complex challenge of balancing functional, concrete knowledge of texts with the development of student skills of understanding and articulating abstract concepts.

These challenges cannot be addressed without English teachers being in the classroom, that is clear, but it is also apparent that edtech does have a valuable supporting role that can be further developed through genuine partnership with the English teaching community, helping teachers to bring students back up to speed through quizzing, speeding up and enhancing feedback, opening up access and supporting students to develop the complex skills and understanding of abstract concepts that will ultimately help them get the most out of the subject and achieve exam success.

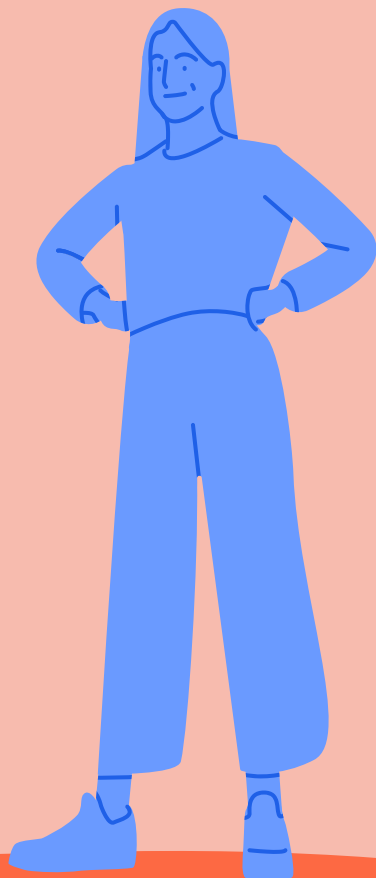


# Key advice



Each of our round table guests were asked to share one key piece of advice for English teachers in the 2021-22 academic year:

- Focus on the text and allow for conversation
- Keep on teaching great curriculum material
- Write a curriculum you would teach to your own children if there were no exams
- Ask yourself, where is the text in this lesson?
- Read, listen to podcasts, connect with others in the profession and don't reinvent the wheel, refine it
- Look at wider scholarship around the text and use that to introduce a wider variety of voices in the classroom
- Chunk, chew, check. Use the 'chew' part to allow for interrogation, reflection and conversation
- Don't panic – allow students to talk about what they don't know



Links to further  
reading and  
resources:



## Links to further reading and resources:

[The Oracy Skills Framework and Glossary](#), by Oracy Cambridge, The Hughes Hall Centre for Effective Spoken Communication

[Retrieval Practice in the Classroom](#), by [Andy Atherton](#), English teacher and blogger

[Englicious](#), English Language Resources for Schools

[NATE](#), National Association of Teachers of English

[The English Association](#), a membership association and learned society for individuals and organisations passionate about the English language and its literatures

[The English and Media Centre](#), particularly the series of projects around the use of talk in the English classroom, which can be found [here](#)

[Daniel Willingham](#), brilliant articles on science and education

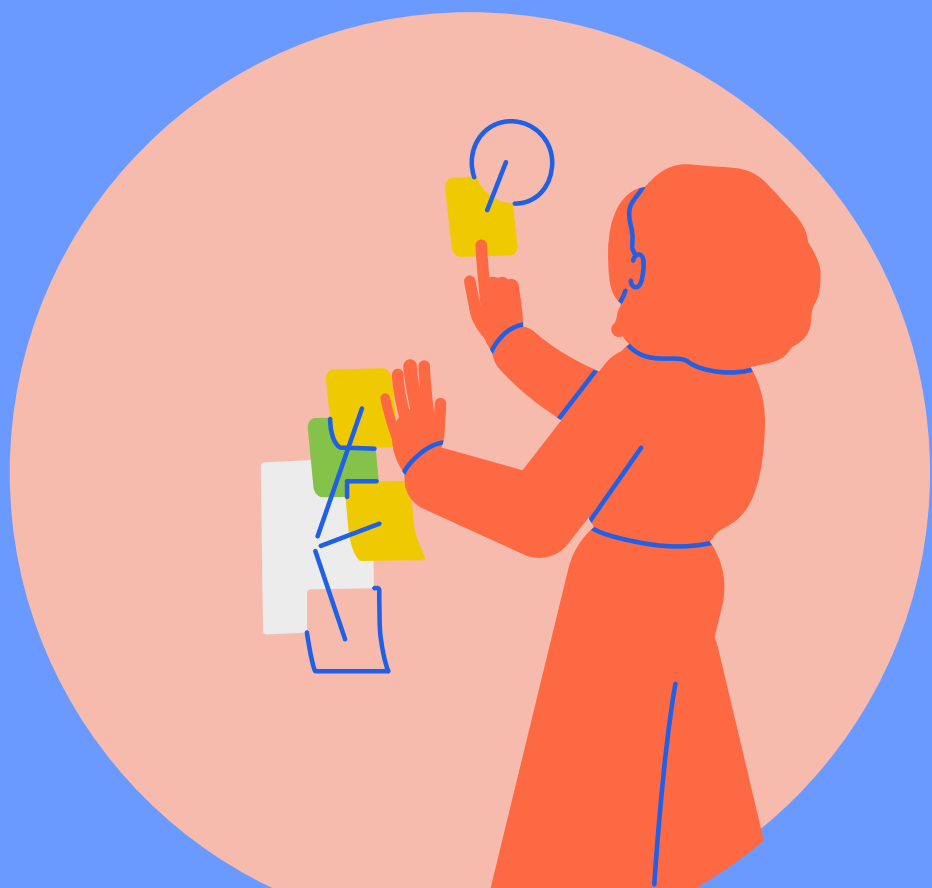
[LiTDrive's remote CPD](#), new sessions launched at 10am every Saturday

[Naylor's Natter](#), a podcast for teachers looking at CPD and evidence based teaching

[Massolit](#), short video lectures in the arts, humanities and social sciences

[Mr Salles Teaches English](#), a YouTube channel run by Dominic Salles covering English literature and language revision for AQA texts

[Team English](#), @Team\_English1 is an online Twitter community for English teachers to share resources, blogs and ideas, co-hosted by Becky Wood



# About Tassomai



## Tassomai and English teaching

Tassomai is an intelligent learning program that raises attainment in secondary education, giving students personalised daily practice activities and identifying learning gaps. The program also significantly reduces the time that teachers need to spend on admin and marking.

Tassomai covers science, maths, Year 7-11 English Language and Key Stage 4 English Literature. The English content includes retrieval practice quizzes and short Tassomai tutorial videos for a range of commonly studied GCSE texts and some lesser known contemporary works.

More than 500 schools now use Tassomai as a homework tool, with over 250,000 students benefiting from the software. Parents can also sign up as private subscribers.

For more information about Tassomai or to set up a free 5-week school trial visit: [www.tassomai.com/schools](http://www.tassomai.com/schools) or email [enquiries@tassomai.com](mailto:enquiries@tassomai.com).



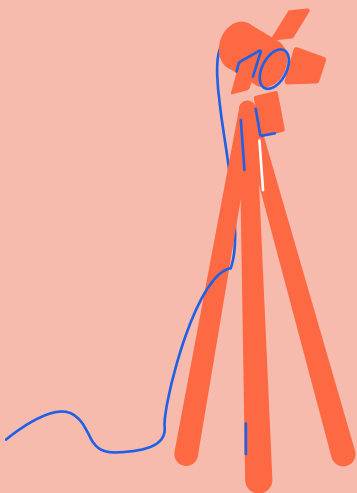
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Education Resource Awards 'Supplier of the Year 2021' and winner of the Collaboration with a School award

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