

Identifying good practice: a survey of college provision in English language and literature, and modern foreign languages

This report results from a survey of factors which enable post-16 learners to make good progress in sector subject area 12: languages, literature and culture, specifically, in English and modern foreign languages. Inspectors visited 18 colleges where provision in English and/or modern foreign languages had been judged to be good or outstanding at their most recent inspection. The report contains examples of good practice and recommendations for further improvement.

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Executive summary

Standards of work in English classes were generally good at AS and A level and on access to higher education courses. Learners had a good understanding of key literary and linguistic terms and concepts and most were capable of sophisticated and discerning critical analysis, both in discussion and on the page. Work in English at level 2 was generally satisfactory; GCSE English learners were often able to express ideas well.

Standards of work in modern foreign languages were also good, particularly so in the sixth form colleges visited. The promotion and development of active skills, such as focused listening, or critical reading, were strong and successful. Most of the teachers observed made very good use of target languages and stressed the importance of speaking and listening skills, developing good study habits in their learners.

In the best sessions observed in both subject areas, a well-chosen range of activities developed learners' skills effectively while maintaining their interest and stimulating their intellectual curiosity. The expert subject knowledge of English teachers was well used and frequently apparent in the ease with which they made analogies, used relevant examples and offered pointers to further study. The most effective modern foreign languages teachers were particularly skilled in placing language in a stimulating cultural context and in helping learners remember what they had learnt.

Teamworking was well developed in three quarters of the colleges. Teachers met regularly and collaborated on the production of resources. Most senior managers placed considerable trust in their staff teams and allowed them high levels of autonomy. More than half the colleges surveyed for modern foreign languages made very good use of language assistants to support learners and enrich their language experience. Teamworking between permanent staff and language assistants was particularly strong in the sixth form colleges visited.

Resources were generally used well to promote learning, especially independent learning, and 12 of the colleges made very good use of information learning technology to support learners' independent research. In the better colleges, texts were studied productively through drama and other performance media. However, classroom teaching handouts and other paper-based resources varied in quality.

Constructive and detailed feedback on learners' work ensured that they knew what to do to improve and that they were able to take responsibility for their learning. Feedback was often clearly expressed in terms of assessment objectives. Target grades were used well to enable learners to judge their progress. Learners were encouraged to self-evaluate and to identify their own development needs.

In all the colleges visited, teachers had a clear idea of the individual strengths and support needs of their learners. Three colleges were specifically addressing the under-representation of men through the use of targeted marketing, effective publicity and good presentation of role models. Most of the colleges had developed

additional activities for the more able learners, including opportunities to take the advanced extension award.

The colleges monitored learners' progress carefully, making good use of target grades to measure progress. All learners had thorough, individual reviews of progress. Good support was offered to learners who did not meet their target grades or who were at risk of withdrawing. In 10 of the colleges, additional subject-specific support workshops were provided for learners.

The colleges showed a strong commitment to widening learners' experience. A good range of enrichment activities helped learners to develop a broader cultural understanding of their subjects. All offered regular opportunities to see performances in the theatre, and many offered enrichment activities such as debating societies and creative writing workshops that featured sessions conducted by visiting professional writers. Around half the colleges had productive links with employers to promote focused language learning. The best colleges provided opportunities for language learners to develop work-based language skills and skills for working abroad.

Most of the colleges visited had good generic links with feeder schools and planned transition carefully, by offering taster days. In English, there were some good subject-specific links, including open days which promoted the enjoyment of English. However, in modern foreign languages there was insufficient subject-specific collaboration between schools and colleges. Fewer foreign language learners are seeking to progress to college, which reduces the opportunity for colleges to work with prospective learners in the school environment.

Overall, the use of intranets and virtual learning environments was under-developed. Eleven colleges were just moving from a basic intranet to a virtual learning environment. All of the colleges used intranets or virtual learning environments to give learners access to course materials, but few used them interactively. There were, however, some very good examples of the use of virtual learning environments, intranets and the internet in modern foreign languages. For example, learners used internet-based video-conferencing links to speak to their peers in France; learners accessed course materials linked to wider learning resources on the internet as part of a blended-learning package for people who could not attend traditional classes. The better colleges encouraged learners to use the internet to carry out independent research, but too few explicitly taught learners how to evaluate sites.

Key findings

In the English and modern foreign languages provision surveyed, the following factors contributed to raising standards for learners.

- Teachers had high expectations of their learners, who responded well. The best written work was lively, demonstrated clear engagement with arguments and texts, and was lucid in its expression.
- The best teaching in modern foreign languages, particularly in the sixth form colleges, methodically developed the four skill areas of reading, writing, speaking and listening.
- Learners demonstrated very good communication skills, accurate use of language, and good understanding of technical terminology. In English language in particular, considerable attention was given to the development of correct terminology and confident and accurate use of metalanguage.
- In the best lessons observed, learners developed and demonstrated active skills such as focused listening and critical reading. Teachers used a good range of activities not only to engage learners, but also to develop their interest in texts, critical concepts, foreign languages and cultures.
- Colleges had a strong commitment to widening learners' experience through study visits. Learners had frequent opportunities to develop their skills and understanding by taking additional courses, enrichment activities and study trips.
- Imaginative use was made of resources to enhance learning. Interactive whiteboards and data projectors, objects and cultural artefacts were used skilfully in teaching. Although under-developed overall, in the best colleges the resources on intranets and virtual learning environments were well-selected, compelling and easy to navigate.
- Comments on feedback sheets from teachers were invariably tied closely to assessment criteria and targets and, in the better examples, had been the subject of thorough class discussion before use.
- Effective monitoring of learners' progress and good use of target grades to measure progress were combined well with provision of appropriate support. Teachers supported their learners very well by personalising learning and differentiating outcomes.
- Good curriculum management was most prominently characterised by institutions having clear lines of responsibility, a high degree of professional autonomy for staff, and very good team liaison within departments.

Recommendations

The survey identified many aspects of good practice in the departments visited. To further improve the quality of provision, the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) and the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) should:

- increase opportunities to gain internationally recognised qualifications in modern foreign languages
- help colleges deal with the shortage of teachers for some modern foreign languages
- develop further and promote work-based qualifications in modern foreign languages.

The DCSF should:

- work with local authorities, schools, and guidance services, to address the fact that, despite successfully completing GCSEs in languages at school, many learners require particular support to develop the language skills required to study foreign languages at advanced level

The Learning and Skills Improvement Service should:

- take steps to disseminate further the good practice by the relatively small number of outstanding English and modern foreign languages providers
- encourage good practice sharing among sixth-form colleges.

Colleges should:

- ensure that the level of accreditation on some modern foreign languages courses provides an appropriate degree of challenge
- increase opportunities for English and modern foreign languages teachers to share good practice across sixth forms in schools, colleges and providers of adult and community learning
- ensure that learning targets set at individual progress reviews are precise enough to guide learning
- continue to improve English and modern foreign languages teachers' use of questioning to assess learning and management of group work
- improve English and modern foreign languages teachers' use of virtual learning environments.

Factors contributing to good-quality provision

Achievement and standards

1. Achievement in English and modern foreign languages was good or outstanding in all of the colleges visited, with success rates for A and AS levels that matched or improved on already high national averages. Access to higher education programmes that included an English component had high success rates with very good progression to higher education. In all the colleges visited, retention rates were well above the national average.
2. Achievement was good on foreign language programmes such as those of the Open College Network and the Asset Languages Assessment scheme, though this sometimes masked a lack of challenge where colleges used only the accreditation criteria without expanding language use beyond them.¹ In these cases, modules were separated, making it possible to spread one level over four years; this resulted in slow progress for learners. The high achievement rates in languages, particularly at A level, were set against the background of a significant drop in the number of candidates for these qualifications over the past five years, following the Government's decision to make languages optional after the age of 14.
3. Some colleges that offer adult and community learning provision use the systems for recognising and recording achievement on non-accredited programmes that have been developed in Europe, such as the languages passport, and some colleges are offering the International Baccalaureate. There are currently few opportunities for people to gain work-based qualifications in languages, though some National Vocational Qualification units exist. This may be developed further with the introduction of the new language diploma.
4. In the English classes evaluated most of the written and oral work was of a high standard. Learners made useful and perceptive contributions in class discussions, using the appropriate terminology. Teachers had high expectations of their learners who responded well to this. The best written work was lively, demonstrated clear engagement with arguments and texts, and was lucid in its expression. Such work was well presented and carefully produced, with evidence of thoughtful drafting and re-drafting in learners' folders. Learners' written notes showed competent and appropriate note-taking. Poems were often skilfully annotated which demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of linguistic nuance.
5. There were generally good standards of work in modern foreign languages, particularly in the sixth form colleges visited where the four skill areas of

¹ Asset Languages forms part of the DCSF's national languages strategy. It is an assessment scheme for language learners of all ages and abilities, from primary school through to further, higher and adult education, www.assetlanguages.org.uk.

reading, writing, speaking and listening were developed methodically, giving learners the tools to manipulate the language and to further their own learning independently.

Grasp of vocabulary and growth of creative thinking

6. In both English and modern foreign languages, learners demonstrated very good communication skills, accurate use of language, good understanding of technical terminology, and very good comprehension. Learners spoke with confidence in a good range of relevant scenarios, and coped well with different registers and speech patterns.
7. For English language learners in particular, considerable attention was given to the development of correct terminology and confident and accurate use of metalanguage. At six colleges learners were encouraged to use the international phonetic alphabet, and also to keep and update their own glossary of linguistic terms. Explanations of terminology were extremely clear from both teachers and learners.
8. Most of the colleges stressed the importance of learners' speaking and listening skills. In one college, English teachers worked with a member of the performing arts department to develop their skills in supporting learners and assessed the Shakespeare component of a GCSE course through speaking and drama.

Examples of effective strategies to develop learners' use of appropriate vocabulary and metalanguage

In one sixth form college, the use of metalanguage and technical terminology on an English language A-level course was initiated from the outset with an intensive emphasis during the early sessions. Games and strategies included regular quiz tests and spoken word activities where learners had to demonstrate their linguistic identity by only speaking in the manner given, for example, alliteratively.

At another college, English language learners were confident and familiar with the use and meaning of linguistic terminology such as phonemes, graphemes and morphemes and minimal pairs. Teachers had high expectations and learners were expected to rise to the standard of linguistic practitioners when in class.

At a third sixth form college, learners from a rich variety of linguistic heritage, often speaking two or more languages, and often from refugee backgrounds, were challenged and nurtured to achieve some very good and outstanding results at levels 2 and 3. In particular, creative writing was frequently impressive, with learners' poetry published in local publications. Learners were able to present, enact and write about a diverse range of subjects with confidence. At the same college, Access learners' written work was of a high standard with well-expressed personal histories from learners who had faced and overcome difficulties,

including fleeing war-torn homes. Their voice was confident and their use of language impressive.

In a final example, learners on an International Baccalaureate Higher course at one sixth form college presented coursework of exceptional quality and maturity. Outstanding features included a strong independent and assured critical voice. Learners demonstrated a surety of tone and mastery of their subject, even when dealing with complex texts and critical questions. Wide reading of European texts with analogies and quotations from relevant sources typified the work examined. The written work demonstrated the success of teachers in encouraging an independent, informed view of a very wide range of literature.

Development of skills and understanding through enrichment activities and study visits

9. All the colleges surveyed had a strong commitment to widening learners' experience through study visits. Most of the English learners observed had frequent opportunities to develop their skills and understanding by seeing performances in the theatre. Other particularly successful visits included: those to the Oxford University Press; to visit sites around 'Hardy country'; to bookshops at Hay-on-Wye; and a visit to Ypres for learners studying the poetry of the First World War. In more than three quarters of the colleges, both English and languages learners had the opportunity to attend subject conferences.
10. The better colleges ran additional courses or enrichment activities for learners. In English, four colleges offered creative writing as an enrichment activity. Two colleges ran successful debating societies that boosted learners' confidence and skills in speaking and listening. Three colleges invited poets to run workshops for learners, which developed in them a broad range of creative and critical skills.

Examples of successful enrichment activities for English learners

At one college, enrichment activities offered in the lunch hour included a creative writing group and a debating society. Learners had taken part in debating competitions in a major metropolitan setting, and could identify ways that the debating society boosted their confidence. Learners in the debating society made intelligent and perceptive contributions and learned how to counter arguments rationally and calmly. They showed a good awareness of equality and diversity issues during discussions.

At one sixth form college, a vibrant critical thinking and practical criticism class was offered to learners of English and other subjects, and this was very well attended. Discussion was lively, and ranged from considerations of press articles by figures such as the literary theorist Terry Eagleton, to examinations and critical readings of poems and extracts from prose

works. The mix of learners, which included those studying subjects other than English, gave the sessions a particularly interesting and eclectic flavour.

11. Twelve of the colleges made very good use of enrichment activities to promote interest and learning among languages learners. Many learners took opportunities to study abroad, and often stayed with families where they practised their language in a natural environment. Learners benefited considerably from theatre trips and visits to places of cultural and linguistic interest, and their linguistic knowledge was enhanced by placing studies in a cultural context. The better colleges visited made very good use of links in other countries to extend learners' knowledge and interest.

Good skills development through overseas work experience for modern foreign languages learners

One college had productive European work experience links with France and Germany. It also linked with schools to provide study trips for learners in Germany and Spain. Learners valued the visits for the improvements to language fluency and the independence and autonomy they developed, and for the confidence these brought. Work placements included administrative, tourist and retail settings. The fact that the learners were generally housed in self-catering accommodation meant that many developed valuable everyday language skills that they would not necessarily gain from the classroom.

Celebrations of learners' work

12. All but two of the colleges had attractive displays of English learners' work and activities in rooms and corridors. One college offered learners the opportunity to participate in a short-story competition that was judged by a member of the senior management team. The winning story was published in the college magazine, which was very attractive and well-produced. Another college organised a successful hip-hop event, to engage disaffected learners with poetry and to recognise the skills and interests of these learners.

Teaching and learning

13. Teaching and learning were good in both English and modern foreign language classes in 12 of the colleges visited. In the best classes observed, learners developed and demonstrated active skills such as focused listening and critical reading. In many cases, teachers used a good range of activities not only to engage learners, but also to develop their interest in texts, critical concepts, foreign languages and cultures, and to help them to remember what they had learnt. However, inspectors did not see many examples of clearly differentiated session planning in languages provision.
14. In the best modern foreign languages classes, teachers made successful use of interactive learning methods.

Effective use of interactive learning methods

In one college, learners enjoyed a 'running dictation' exercise in an AS German lesson as they, in groups, had to reassemble a paragraph about the internet. They had to refer to the text on the wall, remember it, dictate it to their fellow learners, and then take turns to get the next sentence until they had completed the paragraph. This required the full use of the four language skills throughout. In the final part of the lesson, each group had to summarise the content of their paragraph, as the exercise had naturally produced an information gap extension activity, where each group had discrete information which had to be supplied to the other groups to allow them to make sense of the passage as a whole.

15. Target languages were used well for classroom business, such as informing learners where to access paper; for instruction, such as telling learners to open their textbooks; and for interaction, such as asking for silence during most classes. Teachers modelled language very well at an appropriate level for their learners. It was not uncommon for staff to debate points of language and culture in the departmental office, prompting new initiatives in teaching and learning.
16. Planning and preparation of learning was good or outstanding in all the English lessons surveyed. Teachers knew their learners well and planned learning effectively to meet their needs. The teachers also took good account of the variety of strategies to be used in teaching, so that practical requirements and resources could be put into place before lessons. In around a third of colleges, teachers were particularly adept at using learners' own skills for coaching and leading teams in group activities.

Planning and teaching to reflect learning styles of learners

At one sixth form college, in a GCSE English literature lesson analysing Nissim Ezekiel's poem 'Night of the Scorpion', group work based on different learning styles was used particularly effectively. The learners were invited to communicate their understanding of the poem's range of possible meanings through a variety of media. Groups were set various tasks that included a performance presentation of the poem, art work reflecting major aspects and images in the text, a dramatic enactment of particular events within the poem and a traditional critical analysis. All groups presented their interpretations and spoke about their choices. The plenary then joined the images, performances and analysis to address how their examination answers would reflect the outstanding points of the poem. The lesson addressed a wide variety of learning styles and learners made excellent progress in their understanding and appreciation of the language and effects of the poem. The oral and written communication, close reading and group working skills utilised were of a high order for a class which took place at an early stage in the one-year GCSE course.

17. Teachers were generally very well qualified in English and modern foreign languages. However, in some languages, such as German and Italian, there are shortages of qualified teachers. In English, the majority of staff possessed higher degrees in English or a cognate discipline. Expert subject knowledge was frequently apparent in the ease with which teachers made analogies and used relevant examples and pointers to further study. In one college, for example, teachers with Teaching English as a Foreign Language qualifications made very good use of English as a foreign language teaching techniques when teaching GCSE English, and successfully extended learners' awareness of language structures.
18. In two colleges, English teachers also taught literacy and/or key skills communication and the skills developed in these areas enhanced their teaching of English, particularly at GCSE level. Teachers were able to communicate clear information about language and grammatical structures, which learners found helpful.
19. Learners' behaviour was generally good in all the colleges surveyed. In about one third of the colleges, there was an exceptionally strong culture of respect, attentiveness and diligence. In one college which included among its learners some very vulnerable and challenging individuals, learners were attentive and hard working with excellent working relationships with teachers. The college ethos of respect for individuals was mirrored in the very good listening skills of the learners and the respect with which they treated each others' views.

Good practice in promoting independent learning

20. Well-planned group work encouraged English learners to express their opinions and to work independently. All the colleges visited encouraged learners to use the internet to carry out independent research, though they did not always explicitly teach learners how to evaluate sites.
21. In the better colleges, constructive and detailed feedback on learners' work ensured that they knew what they needed to do to improve and that they were able to take responsibility for their own learning. Feedback on drafts of coursework assignments was helpful and constructive, and gave learners clear indications of what they should do to improve, without being over-directive.
22. Feedback was often provided against clear assessment objectives. Good use of target grades enabled learners to judge their progress. They were encouraged to evaluate their own performance and to identify their development needs.
23. Many of the colleges developed good independent learning skills in preparation for examinations. For example, at one college, before beginning revision English learners were required to complete a form on which they were encouraged to honestly assess their areas for development and to plan how they would address them.

Use of resources to develop skills

24. The best English resources evaluated were thought-provoking for learners, attractive and well-produced. Some resources on intranet and virtual learning environments were compelling and easy to navigate. However, resources varied in quality across all English courses. The quality of resources in a minority of cases was poor and some resource references were dated. Many of the poorer resources were only updated when new examination specifications were introduced.
25. In 12 of the colleges visited, imaginative use was made of objects and cultural artefacts. For example, in one college, during an AS English language session on the language of advertising, learners were each given a product and asked to write advertising copy, using techniques previously discussed. At the same college, in an International Baccalaureate class, learners studying revenge tragedies were given props such as bottles, a skull and a mask and asked to construct a typical revenge plot using these objects. In modern foreign language classes, realia were used extensively to contextualise learning. For example, teachers brought packets and bottles into the classroom to help learners to identify products and to understand shades of meaning in the way they were described.
26. On the modern foreign languages courses observed, resources were used well to enhance learning. In one sixth form college, for example, learners used video conferencing effectively to speak to their peers in France. They heard up-to-date colloquial language and learned about the latest issues that were important for French learners. The ability to interact through this medium gave them a better understanding through non-verbal information, such as body language, gesture and facial expression. Tutors in another college used their first-hand experience of different countries and cultures well to introduce interesting and appropriate realia into their teaching.

The use of modern foreign languages resources

One sixth form college used resources particularly well to support learning. Staff integrated resources to form a personalised package for each student. Learners benefited from both structured and informal access to language assistants; exchange visits; cultural visits and activities; work experience using the target language; the availability and expertise of the teaching staff; and a bank of resources in various media. These were organised to provide a coherent overall resource to support specific aspects of individual learning.

27. In the colleges visited, the vast majority of modern foreign languages and English classrooms contained interactive whiteboards and/or data projectors, which were generally used effectively. In one college, they were used particularly well to differentiate learning. The teacher used projected images of her own family to teach basic vocabulary in Spanish, enhancing this with more

sophisticated language for those learners who could cope with the additional stimulus. All learners enjoyed the activity and participated fully. Learners were at ease with the technology, and used it well themselves to make presentations to their peers. Few rooms contained sufficient numbers of books or computers for learner use, although three quarters of the colleges had bookable computer suites that were used well in many cases.

28. In the better colleges visited, teachers had developed resource packs for English learners. These were often developed collaboratively. In AS and A2 English language they sometimes replaced text books. Learners found them useful for revision. Some resource packs focused very clearly on course requirements whereas others were collections of materials of broader application.
29. In the advanced level modern foreign language teaching observed, teachers frequently spent the AS year developing and enhancing learners' basic language skills using very focused, effective resources. Few learners, even those with good grades at GCSE, entered college with adequate language skills to succeed at advanced level learning without this support.
30. In all but three of the colleges liaison between subject teachers and library and learning resources staff successfully maximised the effective use of resources. In the best examples, varied strategies encouraged reading and included careful consideration of the gender implications of text selection, and an effective early assessment of learners' reading habits. Most colleges demonstrated good awareness of the diverse range of backgrounds and expectations of learners, aided in the most notable examples by school visits from college librarians.

The effective use of resources to enhance teaching and learning

In one sixth form college, learners had excellent access to language assistants to develop language skills. In addition to group sessions each learner had at least one half-hour session with a language assistant weekly to work on specific aspects of their course. Assistants had been in Britain for a maximum of two years, so their language was very current. They worked very closely with teaching staff to ensure that they were reinforcing mainstream learning effectively. There was an excellent dialogue between permanent staff and language assistants to identify and address any problems learners might have encountered on their course. In addition, staff were able to keep their own language skills at a high level through their interaction with the language assistants.

Use of information learning technology to support and enhance learning

31. On most of the language courses evaluated information learning technology was used very well to enhance learning and to promote and support independence. The internet was used well to access genuine language models

and to communicate with people from different cultures. A large number of the colleges used sites such as YouTube very well in modern foreign languages courses, to promote understanding and discussion of current cultural and linguistic issues.

Examples of good practice in the use of information learning technology in modern foreign languages teaching and learning

Teachers at one sixth form college made exceptional use of information learning technology in learning to add value to their lessons. In an AS Spanish lesson, learners watched a YouTube recording on binge drinking as they identified the main reasons for Spanish youth over-indulging in alcohol. Similarly in an A2 German lesson, the teacher had carefully selected a German clip that introduced neo-Nazism from a satirical perspective. Learners enjoyed discussing how the clip exposed extremist attitudes. In an A2 French lesson, good use was made of a French fair trade video clip to review learning, introduce new vocabulary and prepare learners for their written work. Learners in this group then wrote a 'Wiki', which is a shared web page that allows open editing by all group members, in response to a statement posted by their teacher. Good practice was gained by learners in writing short phrases to be read and critiqued by their peers. Teachers also made good use of podcasts and other modern technology to enliven their lessons. The college had recently purchased a new digital media system and teachers were starting to use these clips in their lessons.

One community college used its intranet particularly well as part of a blended learning package, enabling learners to enhance and personalise their studies. Here learners incorporated their own materials with those of their teachers. They could interact with other learners and with staff between sessions. The college used its intranet very well to support people who could not regularly attend classes or who needed a different type of resource to learn with. The intranet was well structured, and gave copious, relevant links to other sites to support learning. It was used well to share good practice between tutors, and a good number of teaching and learning resources had been adapted for use with other languages.

32. In the sample of colleges the use of virtual learning environments was under-developed in English teaching and learning. Eleven of the colleges were in the process of moving from an intranet to a virtual learning environment. All of the colleges used information learning technology to enable learners to access course materials, but only a few used it interactively. In most colleges it was possible for learners to email their teachers, and in a small number of colleges, learners sent assignments to staff by email. One college made good use of text messaging as a way of communicating with learners.

33. One college had specialised in providing online learning opportunities to those under-represented in further education.

The college had a highly innovative approach to e-learning, and produced some excellent results. High-quality materials and strong support for learners enabled good achievement among those who might not otherwise be able to study. One learner serving with the army was able to gain a qualification while overseas, and another learner was able to send a GCSE oral assessment to the college via an international video link. The college had built up a body of highly experienced staff with up-to-date knowledge of learning technology and it ran an i-media course, in conjunction with a local university.

34. One college had made considerable developments in providing GCSE English learning online and through blended learning and was developing blogs and Wikis as learning tools. At another college, a creative writing class had set up a Wiki for learners to comment on each other's work. In most colleges, Youtube was used as a source of teaching and learning materials. Two colleges made good use of departmental information learning technology champions.

The use of information learning technology to enhance teaching and learning in English

At one sixth form college, a 'share-point' provided excellent online access to extensive resources for staff. The college Moodle, with remote log-in, provided learners with similar access. High-quality, frequently updated subject and unit handbooks provided full and useful information on texts, subject specific vocabulary, major critics and examination requirements. Handbooks were used well during lessons and provided excellent support for learners' progress. Learners valued the electronic and written material highly.

Assessment to enhance learning

35. Formative assessment was generally supportive and helpful to learners. All of the colleges had clear entry criteria, and, where necessary or appropriate, good initial assessment for learners. Few colleges had language aptitude tests for learners in modern foreign languages. Long-term target-setting was usually clear and well planned; however, in around a quarter of the colleges visited, there was insufficient emphasis on clear, short-term targets for learners, and in some cases lesson objectives in modern foreign languages classes were imprecise.

Examples of good practice in formative assessment in modern foreign languages

In one college, learners were encouraged to review their own learning in accordance with the college model, which provided a progressive framework for teachers and learners. Adult learners in a mixed level

Spanish lesson reviewed their understanding and use of present tense reflexive verbs to describe everyday events and then held up red or white cards to demonstrate to the teacher how well they had understood both the formation and use of this construct. They then wrote on either card to express what they could do well and what they needed more practice on. The teacher collected these cards to use in the planning of the following lesson. Similarly, in an A2 Spanish lesson on environmental impact, learners completed prepared sheets to review their understanding of the lesson content that were then collected to help the teacher plan the next lesson. The review and reflection on learning provided good links between lessons and ensured that the planning of learning met learners' needs.

One university that provided further education and work-based learning courses in modern foreign languages had introduced a good initial assessment placement test to ensure that learners were directed towards the most suitable Asset language level. The university carried out a training needs analysis for all of its company training and devised schemes of work on the outcomes of the analysis. Formative assessment was good. In lessons, teachers made good use of activities to check learners' understanding. Homework was set frequently and marked promptly, to a good standard. The department recently reviewed the quality of its marking and devised a standard form for all teachers to use for feedback. Learners received detailed feedback on their written work which showed clearly the strengths of their work and what they needed to do to make improvements.

36. Assessment practice in English was particularly strong in all the colleges visited. Written work was marked in detail, with frequently copious notes and comments that were useful in helping learners to improve their work. In most cases, teachers made comments which were supportive but which challenged and encouraged learners to work better and harder for success. However, the weaker teachers provided insufficient comment or detailed feedback on already excellent quality work.
37. Comments on feedback sheets from teachers were invariably tied closely to assessment criteria and targets and, in the better examples, had been the subject of thorough class discussion before use. One college had a particularly good student assessment handbook which outlined ways to improve work and strategies to reach targets.

Good practice in English assessment

At one sixth form college, very clear feedback sheets were designed with assessment criteria included. Learners received precise advice on how to improve their work in detailed comments that were tied closely to assessment criteria. The handbook on improving work provided more detail aligned to assessment criteria leaving learners in no doubt not only

where they needed to improve, but also how they should go about effecting that improvement.

Support for learners

38. All of the colleges visited supported their learners very well by personalising learning and differentiating outcomes. Teachers of modern foreign languages knew their learners very well, and worked hard with them to ensure that they had adequate structure to be able to build their language skills effectively. Mistakes were analysed and corrected sensitively so that learners understood the nature of the error and could eliminate it. In the best provision seen, this was systematised so that learners were not overwhelmed, but could concentrate on a few relevant points at a time using peer support to reinforce learning.
39. All of the colleges monitored English learners' progress carefully, making good use of target grades to measure progress and provide appropriate support. All learners observed had thorough individual reviews of progress, and had been made aware of the support available. Good support was offered to learners who did not meet their target grades or who were at risk of withdrawing. In 10 of the colleges, additional subject support workshops were provided for learners. One college held a parents' evening specifically for the parents of learners who were not making good progress.
40. The better colleges had good systems of support from staff other than teachers. On a distance learning course at one college, support for learners was provided by a dedicated administrative team that worked with the learners from application to completion of course and receipt of results. Good support for learners was provided in another college by well-qualified learning resource centre staff who developed learners' study skills. In one sixth form college, learning support assistants were particularly effectively deployed to support GCSE English learners.
41. Good mentoring support was provided in the better colleges, some using paid mentors, many of whom were ex-college learners who had completed their courses successfully. Another college offered an online mentoring facility, also provided by ex-learners, to support its distance GCSE and A Level learners.

Examples of good practice in supporting learners

One college employed paid mentors for each subject area including English language and English literature. Many of these mentors were ex-learners of the college who had progressed into higher education and provided good role models for learners. A2 learners acted as mentors for AS learners. Learners appreciated the support offered by mentors, and teachers found that mentors could be particularly supportive in encouraging learners, particularly men, to complete coursework within deadlines. Mentors, often having more recent experience as learners, had

credibility with current learners. Mentoring support was recorded and monitored clearly and each mentor was supported by a specified member of the teaching staff.

One sixth form college provided outstanding support for learners in the transition from GCSE to A Level studies. The department was particularly inclusive and successfully supported learners from a wide range of backgrounds. An Advanced Foundation Programme was made available as a preparatory course for those learners requiring GCSEs. The English GCSE was very well managed and enjoyed a high profile within the department. Most staff taught across all the course levels offered, and great importance was placed on the success and progress of GCSE learners. Advanced Foundation Programme learners had identified tutor groups throughout their college careers to provide very close support and monitoring. The learners recognised and valued highly the support given.

In the same college, expert learning support for literacy needs was provided to all English learners. The communication between teachers and support staff was excellent and included very specific delineation of support needs set out clearly in written guidance to tutors. For example, teachers may have been pointed towards particular spelling needs such as homophones or given specific advice on the most useful assessment procedures for individual learners. Good practice in supporting literacy needs was disseminated throughout the department by learning support staff.

In another college, learners taking GCSEs received, in addition to their formal teaching allocation, two one-hour tutorials to support language development. Teachers took on the role of tutor and support teacher. Support was carefully integrated and planned to complement the main course of study. In lessons observed, learners were particularly well supported in studying the presentation of information through websites. Learners used laptops with ease and demonstrated a good grasp of audience and language.

42. Learners generally received good advice and guidance on enrolment for GCSE English retake classes. In most colleges, only learners who were likely to achieve a grade C were entered for a one-year GCSE retake programme. Other learners were referred to more appropriate two-year programmes or to qualifications such as the adult literacy test or key skills communication at level two.

Provision to meet the needs and interests of learners

43. The range of courses to meet learners' needs was generally satisfactory in languages. Many institutions offered language tuition for complete beginners, and this was well received. All colleges offered French, most continued to offer German, and most offered Spanish. Some colleges had a wider offer, but many had reduced their offer because of the difficulty of recruiting adequately qualified and experienced teachers, such as in German and Italian.
44. Although colleges were generally offering fewer opportunities for language learning than previously, most of the offers were very well focused on the needs of identified user groups. This was particularly so in the context of languages for work, where many colleges were working well with employers to give learners good opportunities to practise their skills. Other colleges focused well on enhancing the linguistic competency of the local workforce. One community college, for example, had strong links with a good number of employers in the local area, and offered appropriate, highly focused language training in the workplace. This included provision in British Sign Language, which was offered to public service employees.
45. Two-thirds of the colleges visited provided a standard range of English courses, which usually included GCSE re-takes, and A Levels in English language, English literature, and less frequently, in combined language and literature. Only three colleges offered International Baccalaureate courses. However, around one third of colleges provided a particularly wide range of courses tailored to meet the diverse needs of their learners. At one sixth form college, for example, provision included a range of English for Speakers of Other Languages courses, entry level, pre-GCSE, GCSE, AS and A levels and Access programmes in English. Learners progressed successfully through these pathways to level 3 courses and higher education. Support in English for learners studying sciences was also provided and, again, with extremely good progression.
46. Some colleges were specifically addressing under-achievement and low levels of engagement by certain groups. For example, two colleges used English-based Access courses successfully to attract men into further education. Courses were advertised in appropriate media and entry was restricted to men. Curriculum content was not specifically tailored to reflect male interests or experiences.
47. More than half of the colleges had developed additional activities for the more able learners, including opportunities to take the advanced extension award.
48. The better colleges had good generic links with feeder schools and planned transition carefully, offering taster days. In English, there were some good subject-specific links, including open days that promoted the enjoyment of English. However, in modern foreign languages there was insufficient subject-specific collaboration between schools and colleges. Fewer language learners are coming through from schools, reducing the opportunity for colleges to work with prospective learners in the school environment. Contacts were therefore

more generic, concentrating largely on interesting learners in languages so that they could take an introductory course in college.

Leadership and management

49. Learning in modern foreign languages was well managed in most colleges, and in English was generally very well managed. Learning was structured well to support learners in all cases. Good management was most prominently characterised by institutions having clear lines of responsibility, a high degree of professional autonomy for staff, and very good team liaison within departments.
50. Teachers of English and modern foreign languages promoted equality and diversity well through imaginative and constructive use of resources. In the better examples teachers used opportunities within the curriculum to inform and challenge learners in their attitudes towards equality and diversity. This was particularly strong within world languages such as French and Spanish.
51. Teamworking was well-developed in all but two of the colleges visited, in both English and modern foreign languages departments. Teachers met regularly, shared resources and worked collaboratively on the production of resources. In the better colleges, teachers shared classes. In most colleges teachers carried out forms of peer observation to identify and disseminate good practice. There was, however, insufficient sharing of good practice between colleges, particularly sixth form colleges.
52. Strong and open lines of communication between staff and between staff and managers epitomised the best leadership and management of English and modern foreign languages:

At one college, communication within the department was good and focused strongly on individual learners' needs. The head of department met with individual staff weekly to discuss learners' progress. In addition, there were two formal staff meetings each month. The head of department also met the quality assurance manager and the head of curriculum every week. The focus of these meetings was on teaching and learning practice.

53. In the colleges visited, teaching staff were enthusiastic and showed exemplary interest in individual learners' progress. Teaching staff in most colleges met frequently to discuss and monitor learners' progress. Managers supported teachers well, and good staff development was available in most institutions.

At one sixth form college, very good management was characterised by a very cohesive and supportive department with shared values and principles at the heart of all the work. Teachers taught across a variety of courses and all courses of every level were valued equally. Staff displayed great confidence in colleagues, and were ready to ask for help if any difficulties were encountered.

54. In general, self-assessment activities were thorough, and suitably self-critical. The better colleges engaged in good consultation with learners and involved staff widely in the preparation of self-assessment documents. The best self-assessment reports were linked clearly to effective action plans and quality improvement strategies, which were understood well by staff.

Notes

A sample of 18 colleges was selected where the English language, literature or modern foreign languages provision had been judged to be outstanding or good by Ofsted at their most recent inspection. The visits were conducted between November 2007 and April 2008 by four HMI and one Additional Inspector. During each visit, the inspectors observed lessons, scrutinised learners' work, curriculum teams' plans, schemes of work and self-assessment reports and held meetings with learners, lecturers and managers.

Useful websites

The QCA website includes some material across the range of sector subject area 12 subjects; www.qca.org.uk.

The Learning and Improvement Service's (LSIS) website has useful information on innovation and excellence in the post-16 learning and skills sector; www.lsis.org.uk.

The LSIS excellence gateway is for post-16 learning and skills providers. Here you will find further examples of good practice and self-improvement; suppliers of improvement services; and materials to support teaching and learning; <http://excellence.qia.org.uk/>

National Association for the Teaching of English. A voluntary organisation dedicated to good practice in the teaching of English; www.nate.org.uk

The English Association. The oldest established association in the United Kingdom for all those interested in English at all levels, from primary to higher education; www.le.ac.uk/engassoc/.

The English Subject Centre. A part of the Higher Education Academy, supporting the teaching of English literature, English language and creative writing across UK higher education; www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/.

The National Association of Writers in Education. The organisation supporting the development of creative writing of all genres and in all educational and community settings throughout the UK; www.nawe.co.uk

Council for College and University English. The council represents, promotes and defends the concerns of English in the higher education setting; www.ccue.ac.uk/

National Literacy Association. The NLA works with children and young people who are underachieving in literacy; www.nla.org.uk/

CILT, The National Centre for Languages. The Government's recognised centre for expertise on languages; www.cilt.org.uk

Institute of linguists. The professional credentialing body and member organisation for linguists, translators and interpreters in the United Kingdom; www.iol.org.uk

Association for Language Learning. An organisation representing teachers of all languages in the United Kingdom; www.all-languages.org.uk

British Association for Applied linguistics. A professional association based in the UK; www.baal.org.uk

Annex: Colleges participating in the survey

Bolton Community College, Lancashire

Chichester College, West Sussex

The Sixth Form College, Colchester

East Berkshire College, Slough

Greenhead College, Huddersfield

Joseph Chamberlain Sixth Form College, Birmingham

Leyton Sixth Form College

Mid-Cheshire College, Hartford

Nelson & Colne College, Lancashire

Oldham Sixth Form College, Manchester

Peter Symonds College, Winchester

Richard Collyer College, Horsham

Thames Valley University

The Sheffield College, South Yorkshire

Totton College, Southampton

Reigate College, Surrey

Runshaw College, Lancashire

Yeovil College, Somerset.