Transition from Year 6 to Year 7 in the English Department

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Warning: this article does not pretend to take the place of any published research, nor does it pretend to be in any way 'learned'. It is more an anecdotal and observational look at the Year 7 response to English lessons during the first half term of secondary school, particularly focussing on how pupils’ expectations have been realised (or not) and how these pupils have coped with the transition from primary to secondary school (with regard to English lessons).

It may be useful to understand some of the background to the school in which I am Head of English. The Ofsted inspection of February 2010 sums up the school’s profile as follows:

The school is smaller than average. Just under half of the students come from minority ethnic backgrounds and most of these speak English as an additional language. Students of Bangladeshi and Indian background form the largest groups. The proportion of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities is above average. The most common needs are moderate learning difficulties and behavioural, emotional and social.¹

The September 2010 intake is fairly typical of the above. In English, 33% achieved Level 5 at Key Stage 2 SATs, with 39% at Level 4, 21% at Level 3 and 7% with ‘No level or below’ the level for testing. 28% of pupils are eligible for free school meals. This information may, or may not have a bearing on what follows.

Research took place in the early years of the new millennium to examine the impact of transition; in particular, research led by Cambridge University.² The National Strategy used many of its findings to write Transition Units (2004)³ and the document Curriculum Continuity - effective transfer between primary and secondary schools (2004).⁴
In this article, I hope to examine the reaction of pupils to the transition between primary and secondary school between Years 6 and 7 with regard to English, and relate their experience to previous research.

Year 7 pupils joined us from twelve different primary schools in 2010. While the Curriculum Continuity document suggested that:

Curriculum continuity refers to:

- knowing which topics and, in English, which texts have already been covered;
- knowing what skills and understandings have been well established;
- knowing the pace and style of previous lessons in the subject;
- using this knowledge to launch pupils’ secondary education in a way that will reassure them, challenge them and take them forward rapidly.5

Many Heads of English may find this to be a daunting, if not Herculean task! With the best will in the world, the everyday teaching load of many teachers precludes the suggested ‘twilight sessions’ with primary colleagues, let alone the suggestions of visits to question Year 6 staff to ask them details of their English lessons or ask them to comment on your own Year 7 curriculum. I am sure many readers may be engaged in such worthy activities but, mea culpa, I am not one of them!

So this begs the question of whether our Year 7 pupils have been done a disservice. We do, of course have information from Teacher Assessments and details of any special educational needs, plus other relevant information from the class teachers which is given in the transfer process. Nevertheless, as the introduction to the Transition Units states:

… it is often difficult for Year 7 teachers to gauge the curricular strengths and weaknesses of pupils who are new to their schools.6

I did use the English Bridging Units when they were first published, as I am sure other schools did, but I found, in common with research that:

there can be problems if the transfer school receives pupils from a large number of feeder schools, where the units have been handled in different ways, and if pupils regard them as ‘last year’s work’.7
When the pupils first arrived, we kept them in form groups to allow them to make friends and for us to assess them before grouping them for ability. We devised a ‘Transition’ unit of sorts, which was basically a series of revision lessons with ‘mini assessments’ to check understanding. I was aware of research that noted:

...pupils revisit topics they have already covered. On occasion, it can be illuminating to visit old territory and see it in a new light. But mostly, pupils find it dull. However, it has been my experience that many pupils ‘regress’ during the long summer holiday and need to refresh their knowledge if they are to get off to a flying start.

I decided to allow Year 7 pupils a half term ‘settling in’ period before I asked them any questions about their experiences of transition. Of the 125 pupils questioned, there were sixty girls and sixty five boys. As might be expected, there were some differences in the responses from girls and boys. If I think it is of interest, then I will mention it.

When asked about their experience of English lessons at primary school, I asked the pupils if their lessons were known as ‘English’ or ‘Literacy’. Only eight pupils answered that they had been taught ‘English’ lessons. Indeed, for some pupils, it took several lessons at secondary school before they used the words ‘English lessons’, tending to refer to ‘Literacy time’. There did not seem to be any misunderstanding about the content of English lessons, for when asked what they thought secondary school English lessons would be about they replied with fairly predictable topics: writing, Shakespeare, punctuation, plays, spelling, developing existing skills, grammar, poetry and essay writing. Unfortunately, some pupils mentioned that they thought the work would be much harder (more girls) and/or boring. 13% mentioned that they thought that the work would be the same. (They did not explain if this was a good or bad thing!) I had decided that finding out what pupils had enjoyed at primary school might help us develop our Year 7 schemes of work. As research showed:

Transfer schools still have difficulty in striking a balance between the need to provide new and exciting challenges in the work they set Y7 pupils while at the same time ensuring a smooth progression between primary and secondary school and meeting KS3 targets. There was quite a variety of responses, as you might imagine. Many cited writing stories (26% girls but 9% boys), poetry, drama, games and one
unusual answer of ‘tests’. Sadly, a number of pupils stated that they had enjoyed ‘nothing’ of their primary school English/Literacy lessons: 30% of boys and 8% of girls. I had wondered what the impact of Key Stage 2 tests would have had on pupils’ perception of English/Literacy in Year 6 and I asked the question about what they had not enjoyed. Not surprisingly, some pupils had mentioned the very things that their peers had enjoyed. However, 28% of boys stated: ‘everything’/‘lots’ while 10% of girls expressed similar thoughts. 10% of the girls mentioned ‘tests’ while the boys presumably included their feelings under ‘lots/everything’. 10% of girls used the word ‘boring’ which may reflect the lead up to the tests. Garton’s research indicated that:

Heads acknowledged the existence of a ‘push’ during Year 6. Two strategies dominated heads’ approaches to Year 6: regular use of ‘practice tests’ (reported by 82%) and the provision of ‘booster’ classes (74%). A majority concentrated their more experienced teaching staff in Y6 classes, reduced the scope of the curriculum taught during Y6 and focused the efforts of any support staff here (around 60% in each case).10

This may help explain some of the more negative attitudes from these pupils, especially as Garton remarks:

The reality is that for many pupils much of Y6, in the run up to the tests, consists largely of revision with an emphasis on whole class direct instruction. This squeeze on the curriculum and the restricted range of pedagogy employed in Y6 has implications for teaching at the lower end of the secondary school. 11

The findings may also reflect the pupils who thought that secondary school English would be ‘harder’, ‘boring’ or ‘the same’.

The next question, which still addressed pupils’ expectations, asked if Year 6 teachers had told them anything about English lessons at secondary school. The vast majority claimed ‘no’. Only nine pupils answered ‘yes’, with some of these giving information such as being told that: ‘you'll have to work harder’; ‘there’s lots of homework’; ‘you won’t get as much help’ – hardly the positive message we would hope.

Having read that:

Pupils stated that in Y7 there was more variety in English and that it was more interesting.12
I raised the question of what might be good about secondary school English lessons. Again, there was a wide variety ranging from topics such as Drama, films, writing stories and reading books to experiences such as ‘more challenge’, ‘fun’ and being in ability groups.

The final question about pupils’ expectations was, unremarkably, about pupils’ worries about secondary school English. There were a lot. Thirty eight pupils thought that the work would be too hard, fourteen were worried about homework, ten pupils thought that they might not understand the lessons, three boys worried about ‘getting things wrong’, six boys mentioned ‘writing’ but did not elaborate, only two mentioned spelling as an issue, and a few included ‘teachers’ (meant in a negative way, presumably), and ‘tests’.

As regards the ability of the Year 7 pupils to cope with the move to secondary school and for some, the discrete subject of ‘English’, how did they cope? After reading their answers to the questions about their expectations, I was rather worried. However, Galton had found that:

> The dominant assumption has been that continuities in pupils’ learning need to be strengthened. But when we tuned in to what Y6 and Y7 pupils were saying it became clear that while continuity matters for some aspects of transfer, discontinuity is also important – especially for pupils.13

I asked the Year 7 pupils three questions about their experiences during the first half term. The first question was a straightforward one: So far, what have you enjoyed in English lessons at secondary school? I hoped that they would mention some of the special activities we had devised but their answers were more surprising. Ten boys, but no girls, stated that they had enjoyed ‘nothing’, while eight boys and no girls stated ‘everything’. 10% of the cohort stated that they had enjoyed the assessments we had given them (which really surprised me). 10% also mentioned that doing longer pieces of writing had been enjoyable. Other pupils mentioned spelling activities, punctuation revision, and three pupils mentioned homework. Other responses from individuals included ‘the teachers don’t talk too much’ and ‘we are left alone to get on with our work’. (I don’t know if they came from the same primary school.) It does not seem that revisiting Year 6 topics briefly was too much of an issue for our Year 7 pupils. Not one pupil mentioned the trip to see ‘Farm Boy’ at a local theatre! Perhaps they did not regard this as English?

The ‘million dollar question’ was: What have you not enjoyed about English lessons at secondary school? Rather like the earlier question, there
were complete opposites to some responses. 10% of all pupils stated that they had not liked the tests/assessments, 5% did not like homework, six boys stated ‘everything’, seven girls did not like the revision of skills lessons. Other responses included ‘using exercise books’, ‘hard work’ and ‘writing’. I do not think that any of these responses told me anything that I would have not expected from an average eleven year old.

The final question was: If a Year 6 pupil told you that he/she was worried about English lessons at secondary school, what would you say to them? I hoped that the responses would tell me if the Year 7 pupils had settled in without too many real problems. There were only two areas of concern for some pupils: homework and hard work. Without knowing who the pupils were, it is hard to tell if they were weaker ability pupils, but I would suspect so.

The ‘advice’ fell under these broad headings: ‘you can ask for help if you need it’, ‘the work is the same/not much different to Year 6’, ‘it’s a different name for Literacy’. Many pupils provided ‘advice’ like: ‘you’ll enjoy it’, ‘it’s good fun’, which indicated to me that all was well.

To conclude, it seems that our Year 7 pupils have adjusted to their English lessons at our secondary school and there are no major concerns about their being able to cope. I think that there will always be some moans and groans from children, no matter what you provide. However, it becomes quite clear, that Year 6 pupils need more information about what the Year 7 curriculum entails and that the early weeks at secondary school need to be fun and dynamic. Reassurances must also be made to address the concerns of some pupils.

I also think that I need to look again at pupils’ expectations, as while some were pretty accurate, there was a lack of knowledge and understanding which, if addressed, could help to improve attitude and motivation. In order to provide the Year 6 pupils with more information, I shall certainly try to visit the main feeder primary schools and talk to pupils about ‘English’ as a subject. I am still not sure that a transition project (of the original model) will work, owing to the number of feeder schools and the fact that some pupils will have classmates who are going to a different secondary school. It might be possible to relaunch some activities which pupils can attempt over the summer holidays; I tried this three years ago but only half the pupils brought it back. Perhaps the answer is some exciting and dynamic initial activities so that no pupil, being asked what they had not enjoyed about English, will answer ‘everything’.
References

5. ibid.
6. English Transition Units for Year 6 and 7.
7. Middle Years of Schooling: (7-14) Continuities and Discontinuities in Learning, Department for Education and Skills, Research Report RR443, 2003.
9. Middle Years of Schooling: (7-14) Continuities and Discontinuities in Learning.
10. ibid.
11. ibid.
12. ibid.
13. ibid.