education sciences

MDPI

Article

Beyond "Technical Doing": Reimagining Artistry in the English Curriculum

Michael Daniel Smith

School of Education, University of Sunderland, St Peter's Campus, Charles St, Monkwearmouth, Sunderland SR6 0AN, UK; michael.smith@sunderland.ac.uk

Abstract

This article reports findings from a series of learning episodes in the form of case studies from inside English teaching classrooms that use music and literary extracts to make English Language and its possible applications and interpretations alive to students. Central to this exploration is the concept of artistry, characterised here as a nuanced practice involving four interrelated elements: the possession of an idea worth expressing, the imaginative ability to conceive its expression, the technical skill to work with materials, and the sensibilities required to make delicate, evocative adjustments. For the tens of thousands of young people in the Further Adult, Vocational and Education (FAVE) sector in England retaking GCSE English every year, artistry is an often neglected but vital concept that is routinely overshadowed by more pragmatic and reductive interpretations of the English Language curriculum. Low national achievement rates for re-sitting students do little to incentivize institutions and teachers in experimenting with their curriculum. Moreover, many re-sitting students become demotivated and disengaged due to numerous previously failed attempts to achieve a pass grade. This small-scale, qualitative research study explores and proposes new possibilities regarding how the FAVE GCSE English curriculum can be realised in engaging and meaningful ways. Concepts of artistry are put to work with students in the FAVE GCSE English classroom to bring to the fore how these ideas in the GCSE English Language curriculum might be brought to life in ways which develop understanding and foster interest in the study of English Language.

Keywords: artistry; English; literacy; curriculum

1. Introduction

1.1. Enduring Issues in Policy and Practice in Post-16 GCSE English

The landscape of post-16 vocational education in the study of the English Language in England is one defined by contentious debates surrounding the curriculum, most notably concerning its content, its associated qualification, and how the study of English Language can be adapted in a way that makes it meaningful, relevant and practical for young people.

Policy dictates that students who have not achieved a grade 4 (equivalent to a legacy grade C) by the age of 16 are required to re-sit the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), a qualification that students will first attempt in their final year of secondary school. This policy is underpinned by the Department for Education's (DfE, 2025a) condition of funding requirements for schools and colleges, incentivizing the GCSE as the 'gold standard' qualification that students must achieve before, and up to, the age of 18. In 2022/23, nearly 40% of students in 16–18 education did not secure what is classed as a good pass in both English and maths at the age of 16 (DfE, 2024).

Academic Editor: Beryl Exley

Received: 14 November 2025
Revised: 1 March 2026
Accepted: 7 March 2026
Published: 10 March 2026

Despite the policy's intention to improve the English Language and literacy skills of young people in England, the outcomes of students re-sitting and successfully achieving a good pass grade 4 or above in GCSE English remain stubbornly low. In 2023/24 only 20.9% of 148,569 students in post-16 settings achieved this required standard. This trend is compounded by the fact that the vast majority of students who do not pass at 16 are unlikely to do so later. Research by the Education Policy Institute (2024b) indicates that only a third will achieve a Level 2 qualification (equivalent to a GCSE grade 4 and above) by age 19. Despite this bleak picture there is evidence suggesting that the policy is having an incrementally positive impact in raising language and literacy skills in young people. The percentage of students that achieved both Level 2 English and maths by 19 who had not done so by 16 was 11% in 2004/05, a stark contrast to the current 33% in 2023/24. Ultimately, however, the pervading narrative surrounding the re-sit policy is one punctuated by poor outcomes that remain far too low when the policy's aim is to ensure good outcomes for all students.

The cycle of repeated failure that the majority of young people face as a result of the GCSE re-sit policy has irreversibly scarred the post-16 English curriculum terrain. In recent years a groundswell of opinion from awarding bodies, education member groups and bodies, and educators themselves have led to calls for urgent and fundamental qualification reform (Association of School and College Leaders, 2021; Pearson, 2021; All-Party Parliamentary Group for Schools, 2023; Rethinking Assessment, 2024; Education Policy Institute, 2024a). The English Association (2025) has been particularly critical, arguing that GCSEs are not fit for purpose, damaged by teaching to the test mentality and one size fits all approaches that they see as ill-suited to the creative and holistic nature of the discipline. Despite the concerted efforts of many in advocating for change, a credible alternative qualification remains absent. It remains to be seen if a change in qualification would make a difference to the experiences and successes of young people in studying English.

Against this backdrop, debates and consultation about the national curriculum are underway and remain a heated battlefield. The Government's ongoing Francis Review (DfE, 2025b) aims to create a 'cutting edge, fit for purpose' curriculum that rethinks essential skills for students who are being switched off. In her interim report (DfE, 2025b), Francis notably remarks on the tendency for some Further Education (FE) providers to 'game the system' in GCSE re-sits by entering students for re-sit attempts before they are ready. Ongoing issues with attendance and motivation in students studying English in post-16 settings are also noted. Whilst not explicitly stated in the interim report, indications are strong that the current Government sees GCSE English as an appropriate and important post-16 qualification for re-sitting students.

These ongoing debates mask a more fundamental concern. The post-16 English curriculum and qualification structure is defined by how the GCSE English assessment methodology—in this case two synoptic written exams at the end of the programme—has an overbearing influence on the makeup of the curriculum and resultantly how it is taught. This is further complicated by the underlying purpose of the resit policy, which is to support students in achieving a good pass. The inevitable impact on the curriculum in this high-stakes assessment system is that it becomes instrumentalized, with the ends defining the means. What emerges is almost paradoxical. The GCSE English curriculum, originally developed as a two-year qualification to be studied by 16-year-old school leavers, becomes a diluted one-year re-sit programme that overwhelmingly focuses on preparing students for the end of year exam, without successfully helping them learn the underpinning skills and knowledge required for these exams. A legacy of low outcomes at national level implores the need for improvement, giving little space and incentive for sustained change in practice. Thus, the cycle continues.

The practice is so prevalent that it is often referred to simply as "teaching to the test" (Haselgrove, 2023). The Education and Training Foundation (ETF), a key professional development body for the sector, explicitly acknowledges the issue by offering courses designed to help teaching move away from a model where 'all GCSE English lessons [are] solely [...] exam preparation' (ETF, 2025). In their practitioner research, Hunter (2024) describes the post-16 English curriculum as a narrowed diet of education in which the broader civic, social and humanistic purposes of study English, such as developing critical citizenship, empathy, or personal expression, are marginalized as they are not rewarded by the instrumentalized assessment framework. Biesta (2010) observes that this is a wider trend that has pervaded modern education. He reminds educators to question whether we 'are measuring what we value, or valuing what we measure?' (2010, p. 12).

This enduring debate is emblematic of how the discourse into the post-16 English Language curriculum focuses on the GCSE English Language qualification, rather than more broadly about how a vibrant, meaningful and enriching English Language curriculum, in any form, might and can be realised in post-16 settings. Many of the challenges that post-16 students face, including lacking motivation and confidence, are symptoms of deeper-rooted issues. For English teachers in Further Education settings, commonly perceived but ultimately ill-informed orthodoxy propose that these issues can be addressed through strategies such as contextualizing learning into a familiar domain for students (such as teaching plumbers English by having them write risk assessments that they will need to write when out on the work site). Whilst well-meaning, such examples detract from the breadth of learning possibilities offered by English and unhelpfully perpetuate that those studying vocational subject routes should focus on perfecting the more functional and instrumental forms of English, to at least build a working knowledge and practice of using language for mechanical means. What is lost here is the power of students developing an understanding and appreciation of language as a way of making sense of the world, and their ability to use language in wide-ranging, evolving and vital ways.

It is here with this backdrop that the central concern of this paper is located. This research aims to provide grounded examples of the post-16 English Language curriculum reimagined. The orthodoxy of contextualizing English lessons to suit specific vocational contexts, often at the detriment of what is being taught, is challenged by the reframing of lessons and learning episodes through an arts-based lens. What is featured below are two accounts from teachers in which arts-based learning materials have been used with further education students to teach English. These case studies seek to offer an authentic and genuine account of how teachers can address these deeply rooted challenges that students in post-16 settings face.

1.2. Developing a Theoretical Framework

To construct a compelling argument for how the GCSE English Language curriculum might be reimagined, this research considers historical, philosophical and critical viewpoints. This synthesis provides a suitable framework through which to analyze the teacher accounts of teaching a curriculum conceptualized through an arts-based lens.

Our first step in developing this framework is to consider the rationale for thinking of the GCSE English Language curriculum through an arts-based lens. Ideas about the subject of English as a means of artistic expression and appreciation are not new. The Newbolt Report of 1921, seeking to inquire into and advise on the role of English in the education system in the post war climate, stated that English:

> "... connotes the discovery of the world by the first and most direct way open to us, and the discovery of ourselves in our native environment ... For the writing of English is essentially an art, and the effect of English literature, in education,

> is the effect of art upon the development of the human character." (Board of Education, 1921, p. 20)

This belief, although not always dominant in mainstream circles, has endured. The influential Bullock Report (DES, 1975) was underpinned by the philosophy that "Language . . . is the main instrument of learning in every subject, a major means of personal development, and the medium of imaginative and aesthetic experience." (DES, 1975, p. 50). The National Curriculum (DfE, 2014), introduced in 1988 and which following several iterations is still in use today, upholds the role of aesthetic experience as an important part of learning English. There is a notable shift from what is advocated by the Newbolt and Bullock report, however. The framing of English as art through a personal, imaginative, and emotional lens (a vicarious experience) is instead realized through a critical analytical, and technical lens. Aesthetic experience is still the goal, but it is now accessed and demonstrated by deconstructing how the writer achieved their effects. Where The Bullock Report saw creative writing as an art of personal being, the 2014 curriculum frames it as an art of technical doing.

What we see above is the shift from English as a personal, imaginative experience essential for self-discovery, to its redefinition as a set of technical craft skills. Beyond the construct of the curriculum, we can think of the discipline of English in a broader sense. Eisner (2002, p. 81) proposes that artistry consists of (1) having an idea worth expressing, (2) the imaginative ability needed to conceive of how to express this, (3) the technical skills needed to work effectively with some material and (4) the sensibilities needed to make the delicate adjustments that will give the best forms the moving qualities that the best of them possess. He argues that artistry is a complex and nuanced practice, with interrelated elements that complement and challenge one another. On the matter of language as a means of artistic expression, Eisner (2002) observes that "The linguistic act is the product of a linguistic imagination. The attitude required to use language of this kind is one that alludes to the limiting constraints of literalism in perception and allows one to enter work emotionally." (Eisner, 2002, p. 88) There is a conscious rejection here from Eisner of literalism when it comes to language (and by extension, a language learning curriculum). This recalls Wittgenstein's (1922, p. 5) foundational philosophy and his belief that "the limits of my language are the limits of my world". The argument here is that an English curriculum realized without reference to aesthetic and arts-based ideas and principles reject some of the central tenets of what language is.

We might conclude from this that the mandate for adopting aesthetic and arts-based approaches in the English teaching classroom is a strong one. Even still, the challenge remains as to how this can be realized in view of the contextual challenges noted above that further education teachers of English face. Let us first consider what is meant by artistry. For Eisner (2002), this:

> . . . consists in having an idea with expressing, the imaginative ability needed to conceive of how, the technical skills needed to work effectively with some material [in English the media being words] and the sensibilities needed to make the delicate adjustments that will give the forms the moving qualities that the best of them possess. (2002, p. 81)

In this imagining Eisner contends that it is crucial to resist a superficial interpretation of this term as merely making lessons more 'creative' or entertaining. He argues for a proper focus on the cognitive aspects of art, moving beyond its purely emotional or therapeutic functions (Eisner, 1994, 2002). Eisner identifies several core cognitive attributes fostered through the arts, including the ability to perceive and explore relationships, to think within

the constraints and affordances of a medium, to appreciate that nuance matters, and to hold purposes flexibly in order to explore emergent opportunities (Eisner, 2002).

This conceptualization of the curriculum stands in stark opposition to the logic of standardized outcomes, objectives and assessment. A cornerstone of Eisner's philosophy is his critique of behavioural objectives, and the practice of pre-specifying all learning outcomes in clear and specific terms. While this approach dominates the GCSE assessment model, Eisner argues that it can "hamper as well as help" by foreclosing the possibility of learning outcomes that are emergent, unpredictable, and a "surprise to both teacher and pupil" (Eisner, 1979, pp. 103–109).

This concern with placing a dominant focus on technical skills and knowledge in often linear fashion in the learning of English is equally held by Marshall (2011), who observes:

> Progression, therefore, is a messy business. It does not have a neat order. Instead, one builds up a repertoire. Implicit within the term is the sense of a body of knowledge acquired through exposure, experimentation and practice. It connotes technique, artistry and interpretation but no order in which they should be acquired. (Marshall, 2011, p. 10)

What Marshall (2011) advocates instead is an appreciation that students of English develop what she terms a repertoire, comprising artistic and aesthetic sensibilities, as well as technical skills, that permit a student to work beyond a "rule bound formula" (Marshall, 2011, p. 10).

What this section has established is the mandate for an arts-based English pedagogy. This is one rooted in personal discovery, imaginative expression, and emergent cognitive development (DES, 1975; Eisner, 2002), and stands in stark tension with the current curriculum's focus on deconstructive analysis and "technical doing" (DfE, 2014). It has sought to frame the central theoretical conflict of this research: a "rule bound," standardized assessment model that prioritizes pre-specified outcomes (Eisner, 1979) versus a "messy," repertoire-based vision of progression that values artistry (Marshall, 2011). To move from this theoretical framework to its practical implications, the following section outlines the methodology employed to investigate this challenge, detailing how practitioner accounts of teaching and navigating this curriculum were gathered, conceptualized, and analyzed.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Question

The central research question guiding this enquiry is: How do English teachers in Further Education (FE) settings navigate the tension between instrumentalised GCSE assessment requirements and the pursuit of an aesthetic, arts-based pedagogy? This question seeks to uncover the strategies teachers use to reconcile technical doing with artistry.

2.2. Practice-Focused Research

This is a study in practice-focused educational research. It does not set out to test a hypothesis, or to justify the use of a specific set of research methods. Rather, as Armstrong and Moore (2004) state, it aims to "carry out the evaluation of a particular intervention which has an identifiable focus and purpose, but which does not predetermine outcomes, or discard those that are unexpected" (Armstrong & Moore, 2004, p. 2). McNiff and Lomax (2004) observe that one of the prevailing reasons for educators engaging in practice-focused research conducted by front-line practitioners is to "investigate what is happening in their particular situation and try to improve it. They not only observe and describe what is happening; they also take action." (Armstrong & Moore, 2004, p. 14).

This enquiry aims to illuminate some of the issues relating to the teaching of GCSE English Language in FE contexts, whilst simultaneously reporting research findings in prox-

imity to the context in which they were found. When reporting findings, the intention to offer what Bassey (1998) terms 'fuzzy generalizations [. . .] which suggest that, for example, it is possible or it may be in some cases or it is unlikely' (1998, p. XI). Underpinning this is what Bassey describes as a best estimate of trustworthiness, "a professional judgement based on the experience and reading of the researcher. [. . .] Making a best estimate of trustworthiness demands that the researcher thinks about the empirical findings of a research project in terms of who may use it—and how useful it may be to them" (1998, p. 1).

2.3. Philosophical Foundations

The research is guided by a constructivist epistemology, which posits that reality is socially constructed and that knowledge is co-created through the interaction between the researcher and participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This stance rejects the notion of a single, objective truth about teaching and learning. Instead, it seeks to understand the "multiple realities" and the "complex and subtle" nature of classroom life from the perspective of those enacting it—in this case, the teachers (1985). The aim is not to prove that an arts-based curriculum works in a universal sense, but to interpret and understand how such an approach is conceptualized, planned, and experienced by teachers attempting to translate aesthetic principles into practice.

2.4. Designing the Instrumental Case Study: Teacher Narratives of Practice

The research design adopted is case study, and within this, two distinct "cases" are presented. Following Merriam (2009), each case is a "bounded system": a single lesson, taught by a different FE English teacher, that explicitly aims to realize aesthetic and arts-based principles. The research is instrumental in that the cases are selected not for their intrinsic uniqueness, nor as icons of best practice (something that Coffield (2008) warns vehemently against) but to illuminate attempts from teachers to bring artistry within the context of the FAVE GCSE English context.

The teacher participants featured in this research were selected through purposive sampling. Both teachers are based in a large Further Adult, Vocational and Education (FAVE) college in England. They represent a group of educational critics, practitioners who actively reflect on the limitations of "teaching to the test" models. These practitioners are emblematic of a substantial groundswell of professional opinion, supported by major awarding bodies such as Pearson and professional groups like the English Association, that views the current 'one size fits all' approach as unfit for purpose. The scale of this critical group is further evidenced by the national reach of the Education and Training Foundation (ETF), which amongst its professional development offer provides dedicated training to support the transition away from a model where all lessons are solely exam preparation.

The two participating teachers were initially briefed as to the purpose and scope of this research and invited to reflect on how they might adopt the principles of arts-based and aesthetics into their practice when planning and teaching a lesson. Eisner's (2002, p. 81) definition of artistry was also shared as a framing tool. No further preparatory work took place between the researcher and teachers, with the intention of providing them opportunity and agency to draw on these ideas and principles in a manner they saw suitable and beneficial.

Following this initial briefing, data was generated through semi-structured interviews, designed to elicit rich, reflective accounts from the teachers' perspectives. Following each lesson, in-depth interviews were conducted with the participating teachers. Both took place within a week of the lesson being taught. The interviews were designed to elicit the teacher's rationale for the lesson design, their reflections on its execution, their perceptions of its impact, and the challenges they face in realizing the principles of arts-

based and aesthetics into concrete pedagogical practice. The intention of these interviews was, as Dörnyei (2007) notes, to "explor[e] the participants' views of the situation being studied" (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 38), and to better understand some of the complex issues of tacit knowledge and individual judgement practice through "reporting multiple perspectives, identifying many factors involved in a situation, and generally sketching the larger picture that emerges" (Creswell, 2012, p. 39). The questions invited the teachers to explore the lesson's topic and structure, the methodology for selecting lesson texts, and to reflect on the lesson's key moments, surprises, and pedagogical tensions.

The student cohort involved in these case studies is representative of the broader national post-16 English re-sit population, consisting of students aged between 16 and 18. These individuals are typically enrolled in full-time study programmes with vocational pathways, such as plumbing or construction, where the continued study of English is a mandatory condition of funding. Crucially, these students present spiky profiles of prior attainment and disparate starting points. Within a single teaching group, students are often one, two, or three grades away from the gold standard grade 4 required for a good pass. Having faced a cycle of repeated failure in previous exam attempts, many of these students arrive with a lack of confidence and an entrenched belief that they are not good at English.

2.5. Analysis and Interpretation: Illuminating Teachers' Realities

The data generated from the semi-structured interviews is analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method is highly compatible with this research and its constructivist epistemology (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which rejects a single, objective truth and instead seeks to understand the "multiple realities" (1985) of practice. The flexibility of this approach allows us to move beyond a simple description of *what* teachers did, and instead focus on interpreting their rationales, reflections, and pedagogical thinking.

This analytical process directly aligns with the goal of 'exploring the participants' views of the situation being studied' (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 38). By generating themes from the narrative data, the researcher aims to identify the many factors involved and "sketch the larger picture that emerges" (Creswell, 2012, p. 39). The researcher's role in this is conceptualized as one of "educational criticism" (Eisner, 1991), interpreting and disclosing the qualities of the pedagogical experiences articulated by the teachers. The resulting insights are resultantly presented not as universal rules, but as what Bassey (1998) terms "fuzzy generalizations" (1988, p. XI), offering a 'best estimate of trustworthiness' (1998, p. 1) for other practitioners navigating similar contexts.

2.6. Ensuring Ethical Integrity

This research has been planned and designed with specific consideration towards ethics. Steps have been taken to provide institutional and individual anonymity and confidentiality throughout the research process. Liamputtong (2009) defines informed consent as the procedure to provide sufficient information to individuals to decide if they want to get involved in the study or not after being informed of the purpose of the research, research procedures, any potential risks and alternatives. Emails were initially sent to teachers providing information as to the purpose and design of the research, enquiring if they would like to be involved. This was then followed by a meeting with each teacher who declared an interest in which further information about the research was shared, including what their specific role would be. Teacher participants were provided with the right to withdraw from the research at any time.

Given the small number of cases presented here, in instances where personal stories, individual student groups and specific in class references might lead to identifying details, details have been altered or removed to protect anonymity and confidentiality. The BERA

Ethical Guidelines (BERA, 2025) have been used to inform the planning and design of this research.

3. Results

3.1. Case Study One: The Teacher as Cultural Curator

The teacher's core problem is not a lack of skills; it is a lack of connection. They feel their students are just "going through the motions", performing "*surface level work*" on texts that mean nothing to them. The teacher firmly believes in the principle that learning "*inside of college should be synonymous with the learning outside of college*". For them, the students' lives and their language have to be brought into the learning process. This lesson, focused on analyzing language, is the teacher's attempt to put that principle into practice. It is an approach they have developed that hinges on one crucial shift, where they let the students "*select the language*".

The process begins early in the year. After a standard session on language features, the teacher sets a simple in-class task: "go into their own worlds," primarily their music, and find examples of these devices. The teacher observes that this is not just about engagement. It allows them to "*get a bit of a scope of what the students listen to*".

From there, the teacher's role becomes one of curation, an act of "*educational criticism*." They are looking for texts with scope. This means two things. First, the text must be technically rich, "*laden with*" features and "*clever word play*" that can be related directly to the GCSE curriculum. But just as importantly, the teacher is looking for "*deeper meanings*", for "*values*", and for "*social meaning*". They want a text that can act as a "*springboard into a discussion*" about their lives, their "*social cultural environment*", or their past. One student brought in a song about personal loss, another a J. Cole song about personal change. This is the "*meaningful content*" that a past paper can never provide.

> *"... there's definitely an energy in the classroom that isn't there when I'm just sort of trudging through a classic sort of GCSE past paper text or something like that. There's an energy in the classroom [...] that the students are bringing an element of themselves to it. And it may not be their full selves yet."*
>
> *—Teacher One, on student responses to choosing their own texts to study in lesson*

The lesson itself is a deliberate scaffold, bridging the students' world with the exam's demands. It starts with a recall starter on language features. Then, the teacher models the analysis skill, but uses a "*safe*," traditional text—an account of the Titanic—to "*collectively as a group*" demonstrate how to analyze. Only then do they introduce the main text. The teacher makes this moment transparent: "*I say that this text has come from this student and thank you very much for bringing it in*". This validation is critical. The class then listens to the song—in this case, one by a rapper the teacher had never heard of, Rod Wave —while they annotate the printed lyrics. The main task is purely academic: a timed, 20-min, exam-style analysis question.

The result is a palpable shift in the classroom "*energy*". The learning becomes "*personal*". The biggest "*surprises*" are the students who are "*typically more disengaged*". The teacher has seen them do "*complete 180 turns*". It fosters a "*sense of responsibility and a sense of ownership*" and builds a deep "*trust*". The students feel "*truly involved*". The teacher's guiding belief is that this is not "*taking away*" from exam prep; it is the preparation. If they can analyze the language of Rod Wave, they can analyze the language of Charles Dickens. The skill is the same, and only the connection has changed.

3.2. Case Study Two: The Teacher as Textual Architect

The teacher's pedagogical challenge is a "*tricky topic*": teaching students to understand not just the meaning of a text, but its structure, and how it is consciously developed by a writer "*to affect the reader*." Previous attempts have been less effective, leading them to believe that finding a text that modeled this structural artistry in a "*nuanced, clever, [and] compelling way*" presented a hopeful and more positive opportunity for success.

This lesson is teacher-led, with the resource carefully chosen in advance, in this case a Bob Dylan song, "The Ballad of Hollis Brown." The process of identifying a suitable text offers support for this song for its narrative and structural richness. It tells a story of a family's hardship in 1930s South Dakota, but "*cleverly convey[s] this without evidently saying so.*" The text uses "*foreshadowing, [. . .] poetic imagery, and never kind of assert[s] itself to the reader,*" instead allowing students "*to make [their] own interpretation*." This ambiguity is key. The text is also selected for its rich *"social historical context"* (linking to John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*) and its semiotic potential, where the "*driving, drowning motif*" of the music "*enhances*" the written lyrics.

The lesson structure is described by the teacher as "*conventional*" but focused on the "*unfurling of [. . .] the text."* Students are provided the written lyrics and listen to the song to experience it as a whole. The teacher then "*teases out*" the historical context, asking questions to "*draw from the students"* their inferences about the characters' lives. The main lesson task is collaborative, with students in groups analyzing assigned parts of the text before "*working through the whole text as a group*" to build a collective interpretation.

> *"We are really working in the dark together collectively to understand how we can get out of the room [. . .] and following the light that we might see, and that kind of exploratory approach is so interesting to watch students undertake. [. . .] You know, my role is one of just kind of facilitation, in guiding to help students find their way and constantly be reiterating that there are no kind of correct readings of this and really any interpretation is valid provided it can be justified and well-attributed."*
>
> *—Teacher Two, on helping students build interpretations of a text*

The "*most compelling part*" of the lesson for the teacher is observing the "*dawning*" realization as students begin to understand the "*terrible fate*" of the characters, which is "*not immediately clear on first reading.*" This leads to a key moment where students begin to "*map their understanding . . . beyond the text*," connecting the song to "*Of Mice and Men*" and broader historical events. The teacher's role became one of "*facilitation*, [. . .] *guiding*" the "*exploratory approach*" and "*reiterating that there are no kind of correct readings.*"

While the teacher expresses no surprise that students "*don't care much for the music*" itself, the teacher noted that some subsequently speak to them about Bob Dylan and his music, showing a new "*appreciation*" for the artist and "*how language can tell a story.*" Although songs are not on the curriculum, the teacher argues the skills were "*very much applicable*" and the lesson acted as a "*scaffolding element*" for the complex analysis required for all exam texts.

3.3. Identifying Themes

The analysis of the two semi-structured interviews has been conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model of reflexive thematic analysis. This process involves familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, and a recursive process of theme development, review, and definition.

Despite the key difference in the approach both teachers took, with Teacher One using student-led text selection and Teacher Two using teacher-led selection, a reflexive reading

of the transcripts reveals three core themes that unite both teachers' attempts to enact an arts-based, aesthetic pedagogy.

3.4. Text Choice as a Basis for Artistry

Both teachers spoke about how they dedicated significant pedagogical judgement to the selection of the lesson's core text. This curation was central to both lessons, though the way in which this was approached in the context of both lessons differed.

For Teacher One, curation meant "*let[ting] the students select the language*" and then vetting their submissions. This process first saw a vetting for "appropriateness" (e.g., finding "clean versions" of the rap songs that some students had selected), and secondly vetting for aesthetics. They actively looked for texts with "*scope*" and "*a lot of clever word play*," rejecting a "*standard text*" in favour of "*meaningful content*" that had "*deeper meanings*" or "*social meaning*." By curating from the students' "*own worlds*," they could select a text that served as a "*springboard into a discussion.*"

For Teacher Two, curation was a more solitary, "*teacher-led*" act that was influenced by their experience of the challenging task of teaching structural analysis. They intentionally selected a text that resonated with them, Bob Dylan's "*The Ballad of Hollis Brown*", because they judged it to be "*nuanced, clever, [and] compelling.*" Their criteria were explicitly aesthetic and structural. The text had to *"cleverly convey"* its meaning "*without evidently saying so*," using "*foreshadowing*" and a "*brilliant kind of poetic imagery.*"

In both cases, the text was not an arbitrary choice. The teachers' artistry was in their ability to identify and select a text with the precise aesthetic, structural, and social "scope" necessary to facilitate the intended learning.

3.5. Students as Active Interpreters

Both teachers described the central aesthetic experience of their lesson as a cognitive and emotional shift in the student, moving them from passively receiving information to actively constructing meaning.

Teacher One's student-led approach achieved a similar shift, but rooted it in personal validation. They described the "*palpable energy in the classroom*," which they attributed "*to the fact that it's personal. The learning is personal.*" By using a student's own text, the lesson validated their "*language matters*" and "*means something*." This personal connection developed what the teacher saw as genuine motivation and engagement, especially for "*typically more disengaged*" students, who showed "*complete 180 turns*" and a desire to "*push their . . . point across.*" The "*surprise*" here for this teacher was the extent to which this "sense of responsibility and a sense of ownership" could transform the classroom dynamic, building a "*trust*" that is "*essential.*"

Teacher Two, in their teacher-led lesson, explicitly designed for this. They described the *"key part"* of the lesson as the *"unfurling of the text,"* which they facilitated through collaborative group work. The "*most compelling part*" was watching it *"dawning on them"* as students collectively realized the fate of the characters in the song, a fate *"not immediately clear on first reading."* This *"exploratory approach"* positioned the teacher as a *"facilitator"* and students as co-interpreters, *"working in the dark together collectively to understand."* This process was generative, as students began to *"map their understanding . . . beyond the text"* to other contexts.

3.6. Navigating Curriculum Tension

Both teachers faced the central tension of this research by using non-traditional texts, in this case songs, that are not explicitly on the GCSE English Language curriculum. However, both teachers independently arrived at the same robust justification, articulating a clear and

confident reconciliation of the aesthetic with the skills, knowledge and qualities located in the GCSE English curriculum.

Teacher One, using student-selected rap music, met this tension more directly. They reframed the question of "*risk*," arguing that the real risk is using "*classic GCSE text*" *that fails to engage.* They argued that their approach builds "*confidence*" in the core skill. The "*beauty*" of the lesson is that *"essentially if they can analyze the language of Rod Wave, they can analyze the language of . . . Charles Dickens or whoever it may be. There's no difference . . . analyzing the language is the same skill."* This shared belief that the aesthetic text is not a detour from the curriculum but a more effective and "*applicable*" path to mastering its skills was a common finding across both cases.

Teacher Two, whose chosen text was a folk song, was "kind of at ease about the whole syllabus." They argued that while songs are not on the curriculum, the "skills that students need to develop . . . can be quite comfortably situated with these kinds of text." They framed the Dylan song as a "scaffolding element" for the topic of structural analysis, stating it was suitable preparation for the "larger . . . non-fiction or fiction text" they would be required to respond to in an exam.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study represent a modest attempt to shine a light on the under-explored issue of how GCSE English might be taught in FAVE settings through approaches that resonate with the artistic and aesthetic possibilities that the study of language affords.

The findings illuminate ways in which teachers can negotiate a powerful reconciliation between the perceived binary of aesthetic, arts-based teaching and the instrumentalist demands of the GCSE English curriculum. Earlier in this paper, this is framed as a conflict between the "art of personal being" (DES, 1975) and the "art of technical doing" (DfE, 2014). The teachers in this research did not see this as a conflict. Rather, they demonstrated how to use the former to achieve the latter. Both cases successfully reframed arts-based materials (songs) not as a detour from the curriculum, but as a scaffolding element and a more effective, applicable path to mastering the curriculum-centric, technical skills of language analysis.

A key finding was the teachers' shared rejection of a "rule bound formula" (Marshall, 2011). Both independently arrived at the same justification that saw the skills they were teaching as transferable. As Teacher One stated, *"if they can analyze the language of Rod Wave, they can analyze the language of . . . Charles Dickens . . . analyzing the language is the same skill"*. This is pedagogically significant. It suggests that the "repertoire" of skills Marshall (2011) describes, comprising interpretation, artistry, and technique, can be built using texts from the students' own worlds as from traditional GCSE English set texts.

This directly challenges the "narrowed diet" of education described by Hunter (2024). What these case studies represent are small-scale attempts at FAVE English teachers restoring the "broader civic, social and humanistic purposes" of English as the very means to achieve the exam-focused, "technical" ends. The curation of texts is central to this. Both teachers, acting as "educational critics" (Eisner, 1991), sought texts with scope, rich context, and social meaning. For Teacher One, this meant curating from the students' culture to foster personal connection. For Teacher Two, it meant curating for the students, selecting a text rich in social historical context and poetic imagery. In both cases, the act of artistry began with the teacher's selection, aligning with Eisner's (2002) definition of artistry as "hav[ing] an idea worth expressing" and the "technical skills . . . to work effectively" with the material. This act might be regarded as a form of educational connoisseurship (Barone & Eisner, 2012) in which teachers go beyond simple observation to distinguish the nuances,

rich complexities and possibilities of educational situations, environments, and in this instance, textual choice.

Eisner's (1979) critique of pre-specified, behavioural objectives, which hamper the emergent, unpredictable possibilities of learning more broadly, are worthy of further consideration here in view of the findings. The teachers talking about their role as one of facilitation in an exploratory approach where students were "working in the dark together collectively" to find meaning speak to the unfolding, divergent and unexpected nature of classroom interactions, even in lessons that are thoroughly planned for specific purposes and objectives. Instances where lessons appear at first glance to be lacking specific aims and objectives might be considered a shortcoming, but in these cases have been recognized and regarded as a strength. Further to Eisner's (1979) concerns of objectives hampering possible learning opportunities, Dunne (1993) speaks to the "lure of technique" that occurs by positioning practices such as educational acts involving real-world human interaction as problems that can be solved by defining clear goals and then applying universal theories, rules or procedures to achieve them. Dunne (1993) observes this way of technical rationalist thinking is inherently flawed because "... our condition is one over which one cannot exercise the kind of mastery that craftspersons exercise over their material" (Dunne, 1993, p. 14). Eisner's (1979) critique stemmed from concerns that these approaches would dampen the realization of artistic and aesthetic principles in the educational environment, and what this research tentatively suggests is that these concerns can be addressed when teachers approach the teaching of English with their students as collaborative meaning co-interpreters with a legitimate voice in making sense of art.

Marshall (2011) talks of how being good at English is about judgement, noting that, "... people who are good at English judge or assess almost everything" (Marshall, 2011, p. 11). This is a crucial ambition for teachers of English to hold for their students, to help them develop a discerning eye for what they consider to be good uses of language, so that they can themselves better understand the world and deploy language skillfully and meaningfully themselves for an untold number of purposes and means. The challenge to this, as we have already noted, is that the subject of English is given material form through the construct of grades. In FAVE settings, where students are re-sitting English having not achieved the gold standard required grade, many students arrive with a deeply entrenched view that they are not good at English, that they have no sense of a legitimate voice in making sense of a text, and that the way they use language is unremarkable or incorrect. What this research suggests as a counter to this is that by providing a *'sense of responsibility and sense of ownership to students'* trust can be built, which in turn can lead to an energy and vitality in students in the study of English. These possibilities are the broader purposes of education that the instrumentalist model marginalizes but which this aesthetic approach can produce.

The introduction to this paper noted the orthodoxy of contextualizing English for vocational students (e.g., plumbers writing risk assessments) often located in FAVE settings. This research and its findings challenges this orthodoxy. Teacher One was teaching vocational students, yet they engaged them with music lyrics about "*social change*" and "*personal loss*". This suggests that meaningful is not always and exclusively synonymous with "vocational". It is argued instead that it is synonymous with personal, cultural, and social. This approach respects students as whole human beings with "lives outside of college", not just as vocational students that require language for narrowed and instrumental purposes. With this said there is, of course, enormous merit in students learning the language of their subject and vocation, and exploring and experimenting with language in familiar contexts. What educators should appreciate, however, is that a narrowed diet is not a nourishing one. As Coffield (2008) reminds us, "Electricians have souls too" (Coffield, 2008, p. 43).

While these findings are not statistically representative of all FE teachers, they serve as exemplary cases of how the repertoire-based vision of progression can be enacted in a high-stakes environment. They illustrate a specific pedagogical strategy, text curation as artistry, that offers a credible alternative to the narrowed diet of vocational contextualization. The relevance lies in providing a 'best estimate of trustworthiness' (Bassey, 1998) for practitioners seeking to move beyond technical doing without sacrificing exam readiness. This study argues that the creative use of language is not a separate goal from curricular success, but the primary vehicle for achieving it. By using arts-based materials, the teachers did not ignore the curriculum. Instead, they scaffolded the required technical skills (analysis and structure) through a medium that provided the personal connection necessary for these specific learners to engage.

The primary limitation of this research is its constructivist design. These findings are "multiple realities" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), not universal proofs. We have "thick descriptions" of the teachers' perceptions of these lessons, but we do not have data from the students themselves, nor do we have causal evidence of exam success. Teacher One hopes their students will "get grade fours", but this is not a measured outcome. This was not the purpose of the research, however.

This research presents two grounded, authentic accounts of an English curriculum reimagined, realized through the practice of two teachers and their experiences with consideration of how art-based and aesthetic principles can be realized in the teaching of English. The teachers and their experiences demonstrate that an arts-based, aesthetic pedagogy is not a risk but a vital strategy. It is a way to build student confidence, foster responsibility, and, crucially, teach the required skills with a meaningfulness that "*trudging through a . . . classic sort of GCSE past paper text*" may never achieve. While debates around the suitability and viability of GCSE English in FAVE settings continue, what this research shows is, regardless the qualification requirements in English for post-16 learners, teachers embracing artistic and aesthetic principles in their curriculum design and pedagogy can help foster and sustain vital and meaningful experiences for young people in the learning of English.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Sunderland (protocol code 034184, 1 June 2025).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author due to respect for the participants privacy.

Acknowledgments: I wish to thank the College for their support, and my colleagues for taking part in this study.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

References

All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Schools. (2023). *Towards a fairer, more useful and fit-for-purpose way to assess children and young people in the 21st century*. Available online: https://schoolsappg.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/NEU3155_APPG_report_v2_compressed.pdf (accessed on 26 May 2025).

Armstrong, F., & Moore, M. (2004). *Action research for inclusive education: Changing places, changing practices, changing minds*. Routledge.

Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL). (2021). *Review of post-16 qualifications at level 3 in England: Second stage. ASCL response*. Available online: https://www.ascl.org.uk/Our-view/Consultation-responses/Review-of-post-16-qualifications-at-level-3-in-Eng (accessed on 30 July 2025).

Barone, T., & Eisner, E. W. (2012). *Arts based research*. SAGE Publications.

Bassey, M. (1998, August 27–30). *Fuzzy generalisations: An approach to building educational theory*. British Educational Research Association Annual Conference, Belfast, UK.

Biesta, G. J. J. (2010). *Good education in an age of measurement: Ethics, politics, democracy*. Routledge.

Board of Education. (1921). *The teaching of English in England: Being the report of the departmental committee appointed by the president of the board of education to inquire into the position of English in the educational system of England*. HMSO.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(1), 77–101. [CrossRef]

British Educational Research Association (BERA). (2025). *Ethical guidelines for educational research* (4th ed.). BERA. Available online: https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-fifth-edition-2024-online (accessed on 25 June 2025).

Coffield, F. (2008). *Just suppose teaching and learning became the first priority*. Learning and Skills Network.

Creswell, J. (2012). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. SAGE Publications.

Department for Education (DfE). (2014). *National curriculum in England: Framework for key stages 1 to 4*. Department for Education.

Department for Education (DfE). (2024). *A level and other 16 to 18 results, Academic year 2022/23*. Available online: https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/a-level-and-other-16-to-18-results/2022-23 (accessed on 13 June 2025).

Department for Education (DfE). (2025a). *16 to 19 funding: Maths and English condition of funding*. Available online: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/16-to-19-funding-maths-and-english-condition-of-funding/2025-to-2026-academic-year-16-to-19-funding-maths-and-english-condition-of-funding (accessed on 26 June 2025).

Department for Education (DfE). (2025b). *Curriculum and assessment review: Interim report*. Available online: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6821d69eced319d02c9060e3/Curriculum_and_Assessment_Review_interim_report.pdf (accessed on 24 June 2025).

Department of Education and Science (DES). (1975). *A language for life: Report of the committee of enquiry appointed by the secretary of state for education and science under the chairmanship of Sir Alan Bullock FBA*. HMSO.

Dörnyei, Z. (2007). *Research methods in applied linguistics: Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methodologies*. Oxford University Press.

Dunne, J. (1993). *Back to the rough ground: Practical judgement and the lure of technique*. Notre Dame Press.

Education and Training Foundation CPD for English Teachers and Trainers (ETF). (2025). *Education and training foundation*. Available online: https://www.et-foundation.co.uk/professional-development/maths-and-english/english-cpd/ (accessed on 12 August 2025).

Education Policy Institute (EPI). (2024a). *Long-run changes in school leaving rules and outcomes across the UK*. Available online: https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/long-run-changes-in-school-leaving-rules-and-outcomes-across-the-uk/ (accessed on 30 September 2025).

Education Policy Institute (EPI). (2024b, January 31). *Blog: Time for a resit reset?* Available online: https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/blog-time-for-a-resit-reset/ (accessed on 2 June 2025).

Eisner, E. W. (1979). *The educational imagination: On the design and evaluation of school programs*. Macmillan.

Eisner, E. W. (1991). *The enlightened eye: Qualitative inquiry and the enhancement of educational practice*. Macmillan.

Eisner, E. W. (1994). *Cognition and curriculum reconsidered* (2nd ed.). Teachers College Press.

Eisner, E. W. (2002). *The arts and the creation of mind*. Yale University Press.

English Association. (2025). *The future of English: Response to the curriculum and assessment review*. The English Association. Available online: https://englishassociation.ac.uk/ (accessed on 31 October 2025).

Haselgrove, K. (2023, June 30). *GCSE English language resit teacher training in further education: A responsive reform* [Lecture]. University of Bedfordshire.

Hunter, L. (2024). *Caught in the grip of a clockwork universe: Jazz hands, razzamatazz and the lure of techné in formative assessment in GCSE resit English* [Ph.D. thesis, The University of Sunderland]. Available online: https://sure.sunderland.ac.uk/id/eprint/18671/ (accessed on 22 June 2025).

Liamputtong, P. (2009). *Qualitative research methods* (3rd ed.). Oxford University Press.

Lincoln, Y., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage.

Marshall, B. (2011). *Testing English: Formative and summative approaches to English assessment*. Continuum.

McNiff, J., & Lomax, P. (2004). *You and your action research project*. Routledge.

Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. Jossey-Bass.

Pearson. (2021). *The future of qualifications and assessment for 14–19 year olds*. Available online: https://uvac.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Future-of-Assessment_final-1.pdf (accessed on 1 August 2025).

Rethinking Assessment. (2024). *Blueprint for assessment change*. Available online: https://rethinkingassessment.com/ (accessed on 1 August 2025).
Wittgenstein, L. (1922). *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* (C. K. Ogden, Trans.). Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co.