

# My new TA is called 'Alexa'

Brooke House College, Leicestershire, has introduced 'Alexa' – the virtual personal assistant – to the classroom. As Principal Mike Oliver reports, staff and pupils have found it invaluable

The school, currently celebrating its 50th anniversary, has staff who are extremely adept at teaching not only Intensive English, for those with little or no English, but also for teaching all other subjects to students whose levels of speaking, writing and understanding English, are still developing.

Many strategies have been developed over the years for differentiating lessons with EAL [English as an additional language] students. Student planners with key words, glossaries of technical terms in certain subject areas as well as pupil-produced wall charts in classrooms all designed to aid the EAL students. In addition to these more common support mechanisms, the use of Teaching Assistants, also helps the mainstream teaching.

However, with technology moving on apace, classrooms now have access to more than just planners and glossaries. The advances in visualisers now means that a text can be scanned and read out, thus aiding pronunciation, and understanding of words within texts. There has been a marked improvement in English comprehension just by using a relatively inexpensive visualiser with the text reading function.

However, the big leap forward this academic year has been the introduction of 'Alexa': "Alexa, what

is the Mandarin for apple". "Alexa, show an image of the Hadron particle collider" and so on. Used as a teaching aid, Alexa is proving to be invaluable. Furthermore, by asking Alexa questions, it has cut out the need for pupils to use their own smart phones, which in the hands of today's teenagers can so easily and quickly change from a translating tool to accessing their latest social media page. This in turn has eliminated much of the disruptive aspect of Smart phones in classrooms.

Messages can be sent from Alexa directly to pupils' mobiles, tablets etc. However, we largely use its speaking function to help our EAL students and its search ability to place items on the screens in classrooms. Its speaking function is the aspect that has particularly opened up its use as a teaching tool for EAL students, but it does have other functions as well.

The beauty of what Brooke House College has done is that two simple and inexpensive devices have changed Intensive English teaching and EAL support hugely. Whilst some IT based solutions for schools cost many thousands of pounds in hardware and follow-on costs for licences thereafter, this solution is innovative, simple and cheap and has shown a genuine impact for students' outcomes.

## Mountaineering legend

Eltham College, Kent, has honoured old boy George Band (at the school 1937-47) for his remarkable climbing and mountaineering feats by naming a new indoor climbing wall after him.

The climbing wall, situated in the Eric Liddell Sports Centre, was funded through the generous support of the Eltham College Parents' Association in order to give students the opportunity to experience the thrill of scaling the heights in a safe and fun environment during games lessons, with opportunities for the more adventurous to join the Eltham College Climbing and Mountaineering society.

With different levels of difficulty within each climb, the new wall offers students a challenging and exciting progression route as they conquer each level. Each term the configuration of the hand holds on the wall will be altered so that there is always a new and exciting climb for students to attempt.

George Band (1929 –2011), who was Head Boy in his final year at Eltham College, is most famous for being the youngest member of the celebrated Hillary-Tensing team which conquered Mount Everest in 1953. George – pictured – was also the first person to climb Mount Kangchenjunga, the third highest mountain in the world.



## Sausage winners!

Holme Grange School, Berkshire, pupils were awarded second place in the Sausage Making Competition at the Stafford Winter Show.

A small group of pupils attended the Show to see the livestock being shown and take part in a sausage making competition run by the Junior Pig Club. The children watched a demonstration from the butcher on how to make good quality sausages using top quality meat and then went on to create their own unique recipe.

## First secondary "digital school"

Kelvinside Academy, Glasgow, has become the first senior school in the UK and Ireland to earn a prestigious Digital Schools Award.

Digital Schools Awards commended the school's ambitious and innovative approach to education, which has created a strong digital culture and solidified its reputation as a centre of modern learning and teaching.

The award promotes excellence in digital learning and teaching across the curriculum and aims to equip pupils with cutting-edge digital skills that can be transferred to the world of work.

The body, which initially recognised only primary schools, made Kelvinside Academy's junior school one of the first Digital Schools last year. Now the Awards have been rolled

out to secondary schools across Scotland, Northern Ireland and Ireland, with Kelvinside Academy again leading the way.

Rector Ian Munro said: "We are thrilled to have been recognised as the first ever Digital School in the UK and Ireland. It's a huge honour.

"At Kelvinside Academy, we have a desire to innovate across all areas of education, and we work hard to be as open-minded and curious as possible, so we can embrace new methods and technologies. This gives our pupils the tools to make an impact in an ever-changing, inter-connected world.

"Our head of eLearning Joanna Maclean has been instrumental to this success as she has been the driving force behind digitally enhanced learning at Kelvinside."

