

Developing the Writing Skills of Pupils for whom English is an Additional Language

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Aim

To identify how teachers can improve the narrative writing skills of Year 3 pupils for whom English is an additional language (EAL pupils).

Dimensions of this Case Study

This study examined the effects of a specific teaching programme on the writing development of thirty-two pupils in three Year 3 classes over a six month period and compared their performance to six control pupils who followed the usual Year 3 English programme of study. The research was carried out by the Year 3 Coordinator and the support teacher from the borough's service for pupils for whom English is an additional language. The three class teachers were involved in implementing the project.

Summary of Findings for this Case Study

- Overall most pupils for whom English is an additional language (EAL pupils) considerably improved their narrative writing skills as a result of the teaching strategies adopted for the project.
- The ability of EAL pupils to use figurative language in their narrative writing improved when following a structured programme of literature study. 23 out of 32 pupils who followed the programme attained the next National Curriculum level – Level 3, or the next element within Level 2 within the six month intervention period. (Level 3 is the average for a nine year old. Level 2 is broken down into 3 separate levels, 2A, 2B and 2C. 2A is the highest.)
- A teaching of 'key texts' enabled the EAL pupils to improve their use of grammar and punctuation.
- The quality of the teaching of narrative writing skills was improved when using a partnership teaching approach. The partnership involved Section 11 project staff and class teachers planning, delivering and evaluating the programme together.
- Through the emphasis on regular home/school contact the programme increased parental involvement in the pupils' learning about writing.
- Active parental involvement in the project promoted positive pupil attitudes and improved achievement.

Background

This study took place in three Year 3 classes of a large multicultural junior school with a roll of 368 pupils. 69% of the school's population is learning English as an additional language (EAL). The school has received support from the borough's service for pupils for whom English is an additional language – funded through Section 11 projects – for several years. This support has been mainly directed at pupils in the initial stages (Stages 1 and 2) of their English language acquisition – as defined by the London Borough of Hillingdon's guidelines based on Hilary Hester's stages. This project is concerned with developing strategies for raising the achievement of EAL pupils who have moved into the next stages of development (Stages 2 and 3) but are not yet fully competent in their oracy and literacy skills (Stage 4). It also examined the effectiveness of adopting a partnership teaching approach between class teachers and the EAL support teacher in meeting the needs of EAL pupils.

Teachers' Observations and Comments About EAL Pupils' Writing Performance at the Beginning of the Project

- Many Stage 2 and 3 learners of English as an additional language are confident and competent readers and are able to decode print very easily and effectively. However, their comprehension skills and understanding of texts may not always be accurate.
- They sometimes experience difficulties inferring meaning from a text if it is not made explicit in the writing.
- They often have difficulties understanding figurative language, eg. similes and metaphors.
- They seldom use figurative language in their own writing.
- Their writing often contains errors in grammar and punctuation- particularly in their use of tenses, articles, prepositions and pronouns.

"The pupils who are learning English as an additional language often experience difficulties understanding literary language"

Year 3 teacher

The Hypothesis

The organisation of the study was based on the theory that EAL pupils can develop their writing skills through a detailed and structured study of literature. The researchers put forward the hypothesis that a) a programme which included the use of 'key texts' would enable pupils to develop their narrative writing skills – in particular their use of figurative language and b) that the programme would also improve pupils' ability to use grammar and punctuation correctly. 'Key texts' is the term the researchers used for the texts they selected as good models for teaching figurative language. Some texts were chosen from a recommended list promoted by the borough's English Inspector and from a list published by the Centre for Language in Primary Education (CLPE).

Objectives

The project set out to investigate whether:

- a specific, structured programme of literature study could increase the ability of EAL learners to use figurative language in their writing;
- the focused use of 'key texts', tailored to enable exploration of the use of grammar and punctuation, could improve pupils' own use of grammar and punctuation;
- such a programme could enable the Year 3 pupils to make progress in writing within the National Curriculum in English;
- the programme could increase parental involvement in the pupils' learning about writing;
- active parental involvement would promote positive pupil attitudes and improved achievement;
- the quality of teaching would be improved when using a partnership teaching approach.

Selecting the Subjects and the Assessment of Their Writing

Thirty-eight pupils were selected from the three Year 3 classes. Thirty-two of these pupils followed the intervention programme. Six of the pupils followed the usual Year 3 English programme in order to provide a control group for comparison. Their end of Key Stage One writing test scores provided base-line data. The pupils carried out two unaided writing tests, at the beginning and at the end of the intervention period. This writing was assessed using the Key Stage One level descriptions and also against a story writing assessment tool focusing on:-

- purpose and audience;
- style;
- grammar and punctuation.

Data Collection

Data were collected from the following sources:

- end of Key Stage One test results;
- samples of pupils' unaided writing;
- parents' questionnaire;
- pupils' questionnaire;
- teachers' questionnaire;
- observations.

The pupils' writing performances were analysed by comparing their assessment scores. Descriptive statistical methods were used to analyse the questionnaire responses.

The Intervention Programme

The programme was devised by the researcher (the Year 3 Coordinator) and the co-researcher (the EAL support teacher). It included a detailed study of 'key texts'. Texts were selected to provide models and examples of particular narrative writing skills. For example, *The Boy Who Cried Wolf* by Tony Ross supported the teaching of story planning and writing for an audience, *The Whales' Song* by Dyan Sheldon and Gary Blythe was used to teach descriptive writing and the use of adjectives, and *The Lighthouse Keeper's Picnic* by Ronda and David Armitage facilitated the teaching of the use of speech in stories.

The texts were also used to teach grammar and punctuation. This was achieved through shared reading and discussion about particular aspects of grammar and punctuation. For example, the teachers drew pupils' attention to the way that authors used full-stops, speech marks, paragraphs, adverbs, verbs etc. The emphasis was on verbal interaction between teachers, pupils and texts. Pupils were not required to do grammar and punctuation exercises. They were encouraged to use the texts as models for their own writing.

Pupils were required to carry out weekly writing tasks at home and at school. Parents were kept informed of their children's progress and the homework tasks by a weekly home/school record sheet. Parents also attended formal and informal meetings. Pupils were taught in a range of contexts:

- one teacher/small group from one class;
- two teachers/ all Year 3 project children;
- two teachers/project group and other pupils;
- one teacher conferencing with individual pupils.

The Findings

Pupils' Use of Figurative Language

At the beginning of the project none of the pupils used figurative language in their writing. At the end of the project twenty-five out of the thirty-two pupils following the programme used figurative language appropriately in their unaided writing. This compares with only one out of the six control pupils.

The texts provided models for the use of figurative language. For example, *Slinky Malinki* by Lynley Dodd enabled the pupils to gain an understanding of the use of alliteration. They were then able to incorporate this writing skill into their own writing. Onomatopoeia, similes, personification, and rhetorical questions were taught in the same way – through exploring examples in texts.

"My stories are much more interesting now. I like making up similes and trying to use alliteration"

Year 3 pupil

Pupils' Use of Grammar and Punctuation

The analysis of the pupils' writing showed that the programme was very successful in developing pupils' use of grammar and punctuation. Many EAL pupils display grammatical errors, in particular in their use of tenses, pronouns, articles and prepositions. These errors can indicate the stage a learner is at along the developmental route to acquiring English. By comparison to the control group pupils the project pupils' use of grammar and punctuation improved significantly.

Progress in the English National Curriculum Attainments

Over the intervention period:

- twenty-three pupils improved their level, some from a Level 2C to Level 3;
- nine pupils' levels remained the same.

For the control group:

- two pupils' levels improved;
- three pupils' levels remained the same;
- one pupil's level went down.

The progress in the pupils' National Curriculum attainments was achieved because the study of texts promoted the effective use of the characteristics of narrative writing. The pupils were also better at using grammar and punctuation correctly.

Parental Involvement in Pupils' Learning About Writing and the Promotion of Positive Pupil Attitudes

The programme, with its emphasis on weekly home/school contact, increased parents' involvement in the pupils' learning about writing. Many parents supported their children with the homework tasks. The effects of parental involvement upon pupils' progress were analysed by using a scoring system to indicate the level of parental response through the home/school recording arrangement and attendance at meetings. The categories were:

- inconsistent in commenting and returning sheets to school (1);
- sheets returned with few comments on occasions (2);

- regular ongoing dialogue between home and school (3).

Those pupils who made the most significant improvements in their National Curriculum Attainments had parents who maintained regular communication with the teachers.

The Effects of a Partnership teaching Approach for Supporting EAL Pupils

The teachers' questionnaire indicated that the partnership teaching approach between the EAL teacher and the Year 3 class teachers improved the quality of the planning and the teaching. The process of assessing the pupils' work was more thorough and efficient. Less experienced staff gained a great deal from working alongside experienced teacher colleagues and having opportunities to observe others' teaching styles and pupils' responses.

"This work has improved my son's writing ability"

Parent of Year 3 child

Implications For School Improvement

This study highlighted the need to:

- identify 'key texts' for use in the teaching of narrative writing skills in all year groups;
- develop the school's English resource base and expand the existing selection of books for group or guided reading purposes;
- draw up termly plans for the teaching of narrative writing and homework activities for all year groups;
- examine how the project can be incorporated into the literacy hour;
- provide training for staff in the approaches used for delivering the programme;
- build upon existing home/school liaison to support pupils' writing and extend it to other families;
- increase the awareness of staff of the parents' skills in English and how parents can best support their children;
- plan opportunities for partnership teaching with the EAL support staff and school staff.

Further Reading

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