Outstanding Teaching, Learning and Assessment (OTLA) Action Research Project

Read More – Write Better: walking in a writer's shoes and understanding perspective

Macclesfield College – June 2022

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Read More – Write Better: walking in a writer's shoes and understanding perspective.

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SUMMARY

This project explored strategies to create classroom routines which encourage students' engagement with and their reading of non-fiction texts. Students' lack of reading experience is the elephant in the resit FE classroom. It quietly looms its head in all lessons – but what can we do about it? We focused on getting students to read more, to choose their reading material and to embed regular reading into every class. We found that embedding a reading routine into our lessons had a positive effect on our learners - helping lower their anxiety over reading non-fiction texts.

RATIONALE

The vast majority of our GCSE English language resit students don't read. We know this as they tell us (often with pride) that they don't read, alongside published research: the 2018 Taking Part Survey: Free Time Activities Focus Report found only 46% of 16–24-year-olds read in their free time. We also found that our learners lack experience in reading non-fiction texts, and these types of texts account for 50% of the qualification.

In the English Language examination students are expected to read over 1200 words. On average around 10% of these words are complex and the texts require a reading age of 15+. As less experienced readers, the reading and analysing of challenging texts required for GCSE is often off-putting for resit students. Having already missed the pass-mark, lots of students develop a dislike of reading and demonstrate low levels of resilience. This barrier is further compounded as current students have lost stamina and concentration due to COVID lockdowns. As Ofsted observed in their 2020 COVID-19 briefing '*some pupils' concentration or their mental and physical stamina have reduced. Some leaders said pupils were fatigued, 'disconnected' from learning or struggling to stay awake and alert.*' (Ofsted, 2020)

Other Contextual Information
Our action research took place in the English Department of our FE college. Macclesfield College is a provider of Further Education, Higher Education and skills training; serving the Cheshire East area and beyond. The project was led by two members of the English GCSE teaching team. We worked with two groups of resitting GCSE English Language learners, aged 16-19 from a range of main course subjects.

APPROACH

Learners at Macclesfield College have two 1.5-hour English lessons per week. We identified two groups and the key focus of the first session was to share the action research ideas and ascertain greater insights into student attitudes to 'reading for pleasure' and reading in leisure time. In introducing the project, we were transparent and open. We wanted students to feel a part of the action research project and this had a positive effect as the students felt a sense of importance and responsibility.

Once groups were identified, we began by asking students to complete a questionnaire (see Appendix 3). 100% of learners felt reading was good for them. However, 80% said they read for less than an hour per week, the other 20% said they read for less than 2 hours per week.

We collated a bank of short, bite-sized reading materials of approximately 300-400 words as we felt the length of extracts given in exams can overwhelm students. Our aim was to improve reading stamina and resilience. We asked students to identify a range of topics that would appeal to and inspire them. Topics suggested by participants provided a range of subjects: real crime, music, Formula One, mystery, teenage drama, 'my story', computing, space. These areas of interest were used when selecting extracts for reading. Eventually, we asked students to download and print an article on a topic of personal interest to develop their sense of ownership. (See Appendix 3 for some examples.)

Reading sessions were implemented as routine to provide regular mental exercise in reading. We tried to keep the 'routine' fixed so students came to expect it. These reading slots took place at the start of each lesson and lasted approximately 15 minutes. Students read the text together and completed a 'low stakes' discussion task. To enable a different 'head space' and move away from the familiar classroom set-up, we asked students to sit in circle or to turn inwards so we could see each other and create a different space. After some initial mild resistance to this change, students accepted this as a part of the 'routine'. This was designed to separate the reading from the main content of the lesson, creating a safe space for reading and discussion.

… creating a safe place for reading and discussion

We wanted to avoid any overt 'exam focus' and capture student responses and initial thoughts about texts. We used the same set of discussion questions for each text in order to reinforce the routine. These were deliberately informal and 'low-stakes'. Later in the project, more detailed conversations focussed on the writer's thoughts and feelings. What is happening? What is it about? What feelings are present? Post reading discussions were always open-ended but we did draw a link to writer's perspective but without the 'pressure' to write up analytical responses. After the first couple of discussions, it became apparent discussions were stifled by students' lack of discursive vocabulary, so we provided some key vocabulary and sentence starters to assist students in verbalising their opinions. The PowerPoint slide below was displayed during each discussion activity:

Discussion Questions

- **What is being written about here?**
- **What is the writer trying to get us to think about?**
- **What is the writer's opinion/message?**
- **What interests/stands out to you in this text?**

creates a sense of	**praises** those who	**supports**
makes the point that	**mocks** the idea that	**is of the opinion that**
emphasises the fact that	**feels**	**focuses on**
forces us to consider	**thinks**	**explores** the idea that
argues	**believes**	**questions**
criticises the way in which	**agrees** with the idea that	**encourages** us to think about
explores the issues of	**disagrees** with the idea that	

As the project developed, we did ask students to write some brief notes to record their initial response. Responses provided some useful and interesting insights, for example, a short extract from a letter from a 16yr old to a newspaper provided strong responses: *'I agree with her, adults need to realise that when we grow up we ARE going to change and NOT stay how we are now – when we are young.'* We ensured this was low stakes by not assessing the notes and gave students the option to keep their notes private.

Finally, we were able to exploit existing, strong links with curriculum areas across the college. This helped in the identification of subject specific texts for the routine reading slots e.g., Health and Social Care – mental health and well-being during lock-down learning was a topic many students felt invested in and reading around the topic was of interest.

OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

Teaching, Learning and Assessment

It took time to establish routines but as students came to expect it, they settled more quickly. Students began to enter the classroom and ask, '*What are we reading about today?'*. The routine gave students exposure to different types of non-fiction texts and discussion helped them respond more quickly and in more detail to questions about writer's viewpoint.

We trialled the routine at the beginning or at the end of the session. It quickly became clear; students were more engaged and focused when the activity was at the start of the lesson. At the

> I feel less worried about saying something.

end of the 90-minute lesson, students were less enthused about the task and contributed very little. At the start of the lesson, they were more motivated to take part in the activity. It also meant we were presenting reading and discussion to students as a valued and important activity, not something 'tacked on' at the end of a lesson.
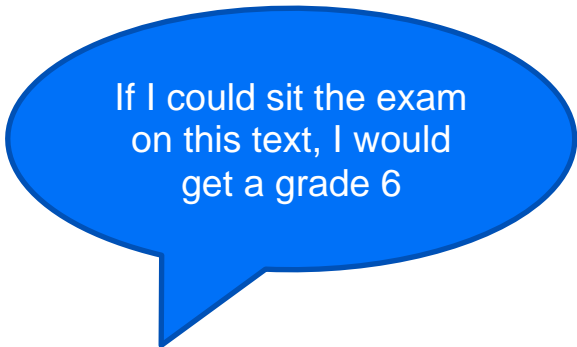
The 'low stakes' nature of the discussions encouraged greater confidence and participation from students. As the project progressed, students became more willing to share their thoughts and ideas and this filtered into main parts of lessons where students were more willing to offer their ideas. A student commented, *'I feel less worried about saying something.'*

The regularity of the task encouraged more reticent students to join in. Students were from a range of main courses and initially were not comfortable together but the routine helped to create a stronger group dynamic. As the project progressed, students began to discuss with less need for teacher facilitation.

Involving students with the project from the outset gave students a sense of ownership of their own learning and this empowered reticent and unconfident learners; *'I liked reading texts that I'd chosen'.* Allowing the students to choose texts showed us what students actually want to read about. This was often not what we expected and we noted that, on the whole, texts were rather light-hearted and positive in nature. This stood out to us because, as practitioners, we are often drawn to more gritty texts to share with students, often believing this will engage them more. It was interesting to note this preference for more uplifting texts and has made us think more deeply about the texts we use in class.

> I like reading texts that I'd chosen.
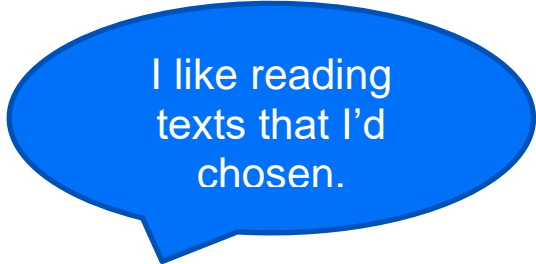
Finally, it was clear for some students, confidence in their own academic ability had increased. Reading of texts selected by themselves and therefore 'relatable', appeared to facilitate more engagement and connection. For example, when reading an article about Formula One, students easily picked out interesting aspects of language, When reading about Taylor Swift*, 'She can carve into something'*, they were easily able to explain how this linked to the writer's perspective. One student said after one of the routine reading activities, *'If I could sit the exam on this text I would get a grade 6!'*

> If I could sit the exam on this text, I would get a grade 6

Professional Development

Professional Standard	How our project outcomes demonstrate this standard
4. Be creative and innovative in selecting and adapting strategies to help learners to learn.	It created time to trial a range of strategies to introduce a reading routine for students. By asking for students' perspectives, we could evaluate students' experience and learning preferences and take these into account when categorising strategies. As the project progressed, we made modifications to improve students' experiences: displaying sentence starts to overcome students' verbal barriers; introducing more opinion pieces as it became clear students were struggling to relate to these.
13. Motivate and inspire learners to promote achievement and	Our project enabled students to become acquainted with, and used to reading, non-fiction texts. Low stakes, consistent questioning of each text developed a routine that enabled students to build their

|	
develop their skills to enable progression.	confidence when handling non-fiction texts. This greater confidence assisted students when studying Paper 2, enabling them to tackle the paper with greater confidence and more experiences of identifying viewpoints.
17. Enable learners to share responsibility for their own learning and assessment, setting goals that stretch and challenge.	Students were made aware of the project from the beginning. Engaging them in the project empowered students to try activities they would usually be uneasy with. Our project enabled students to select materials for the class to study. This gave the opportunity for learning to be relevant and gave students ownership of their own learning. Students were often challenging themselves with longer texts. As the project progressed, discussion developed and the levels of stretch and challenge increased through the quality of discussion.

Organisational Development

There were two Project Leads both from the English team – this helped facilitate greater collaboration and sharing of ideas within the English curriculum area. The action research model encouraged us to work collaboratively and demonstrate the strategies to the wider department. Having an 'active' action research project meant that we gave more time to reflecting on the activities together. As staff, we found we spent more time discussing learning and pedagogy, rather than the usual management/admin tasks. The project helped to develop links with curriculum areas and colleagues from other areas in the college by more direct and specific reaching out to departments such as Health and Social Care to ask for examples of non-fiction texts or current topics they are exploring with students.

By removing the exam focus and making more activities low risk, our project has initiated new thinking around student mind-set. As a result, we believe we can we create a greater sense of freedom and risk in our organisation to embed this approach elsewhere.

LEARNING FROM THIS PROJECT

'Finally, a reading activity that actually engages the students. I feel like I'm teaching reading constructively.'

Overall, the project had a number of successes. The introduction of reading routines created a low stakes environment which encouraged and supported students in sharing ideas and thoughts.

Students
developed more of
a 'can try'
attitude…
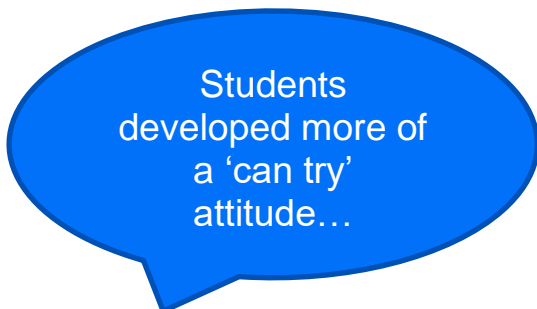
Student participation in group discussion increased and better group dynamics developed. Students developed more of a 'can try' attitude when faced with reading non-fiction texts. Students who at the outset had been overloaded and abandoned the reading of texts were more prepared to read and discuss a text. When studying paper 2 in their main lessons, students were less fearful of attempting Q4 – which focuses on viewpoints. They were also less intimidated by reading pairs of non-fiction texts.

Students' ability to identify writers' viewpoints improved and their understanding of multiple

perspectives increased. This was evident when compared to other groups who had not experienced the reading routine of the project groups.

We want to roll out this strategy to the whole GCSE resit cohort in the next academic year and further develop it to include reading fiction writing. We would also seek to develop using student text choices further as this was the area that produced a lot of students' buy-in.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: The Project Team

Project Role	Name	Job Role	Contact
Project Lead	Rowan Davies	Lecturer in English	Rowan.davies@macclesfield.ac.uk
Project Lead	Rachael Hope	Lecturer in English	Rachael.hope@macclesfield.ac.uk
Mentor	Sue Southwood	Mentor	suesouthwood@mail.com
Research Group Lead	Bob Read	RGL	bobread945@gmail.com

Appendix 2: Learner Case Studies

Student A

GCSE Grade on Entry: 3

Target Grade: 4

Aspirational Target Grade: 5

Main course curriculum area: IT

<u>Pre Project</u>

A started his college course 4 weeks later than other students. In class he was quiet and didn't contribute to class discussion. He was a very reluctant reader and vocal about his complaints when asked to read a text; 'You want me to read that?', 'Can you read it to us?', 'It's easier if you read it. I can't understand it if I read it.'. He was often concerned about whether there would be large texts to read in class, asking 'Are we reading today?' regularly at the beginning of lessons.

<u>Project</u>

The initial questionnaire showed A didn't read outside of college and would rather watch Netflix/ play video games than read. He was proud of never reading a book, despite thinking that reading was good for you. Initially, when the project was shared with students, he displayed a lack of trust in the project: 'Is this just some experiment?'. In initial discussions A remained quiet, he had little to offer discussion other than 'I don't know' or 'I agree with ___' when prompted. It was decided A would be a good student to target with the selection of his own article to look at with the class. Despite believing it wouldn't be used, A selected a text on cars. His text was used as the first student selection for the project. Once A realised this was a serious project, he began to buy in. He offered his opinions for the first time. After this, A began to join in with discussions without prompting. His confidence grew when discussing writers' viewpoints.

<u>Post Project</u>

A's confidence with tackling a non-fiction text increased. He was 'less worried' to be presented with a text to read in class. He was more engaged in class discussions.

Student B

GCSE Grade on Entry: 3

Target Grade: 4   Aspirational Target Grade: 5

Main course curriculum area: Heath and Social Care

A relatively confident student who was able to share her opinions and perspective. She read occasionally but not often. She was honest and vocal e.g. 'I get bored very easily and it (reading) makes my head hurt' and 'there are many more exciting things I want to do.' She read on a Kindle as she found this easier but preferred to watch films as they were easier to understand than the written form e.g. 'A lot of the words go over the top of my head.'

She struggled to focus for long periods of time and always struggled to read a full exam text in one

sitting. She regularly asked to leave the room to go to the toilet; this would often be used as an excuse for a 15-minute break.

<u>Project</u>

The initial questionnaire showed that B did read occasionally outside of college and particularly liked to read blogs about 'true crime'. B was a confident when sharing her own perspective and thoughts about 'writer's perspective.' This had a positive impact on other, less engaged members of the group. Her choice of text to share with the group was powerful blog/social media post written by a mother about her daughter. B lead the post-reading discussion without prompting. When another student needed further clarification, B moved seats to be nearer and offered help and explanations.

As the reading routine became established, B readily engaged in informal 'chats' about her reading habits. 'You would be proud of me, Rowan, I actually bought a book!'

<u>Post Project</u>

B is reading (and writing) with more confidence. She says 'It helps me zone out and relax. I am also more interested to find out about other people and their lives.' and 'I can understand some of the words more and I don't panic as much. I am still nervous but I think I will be able to write more myself more in the exam.'

Appendix 3: Learning materials

Initial learner questionnaire:

For the majority of students who read it was done only as a requirement of their college course.

Learners offered a range of reasons for 'not reading':

I struggle to focus, my work and social life is more important, it makes my head hurt, there are too many words that start to swim around, I don't enjoy it, it, my generation doesn't read books.

A third of students said they had read online blogs about topics that interest them such as: crime, body positivity, mental health, cars and online gaming, space, computing.

Reading

Name (optional): _____   Date: _____

1) Do you think reading is good for you?   Yes ☐   No ☐

2) Would you rather read: non-fiction (true) ☐   or: fiction (made up)? ☐

3) How much do you read on average each week?
   0 mins ☐   1 hour ☐   2-3 hours ☐   4+ hours ☐

4) Is this reading? For pleasure ☐   For study/work ☐   Both ☐

5) If you do not read ...why not? _____
   _____

6) What stops you reading? What are the barriers?
   _____

7) What would need to change for you to increase the time you spend reading?
   _____

8) Do you read blogs on social media sites? Yes No What kind of topics do the writers write about?
   _____

9) When you read, do you like silence? Noise? Music? TV?
   _____

10) What happens when you read? Do you ever laugh? Cry? Become part of the world of the book, imagining people and places in your head? Get bored?
   _____

11) What is the best thing you have ever read? What was it that you liked about it?
   _____

12) What topics would you like to read more about?
   _____

Example of short text to read with students:

Source: Report on notorious Birmingham gang, the Peaky Blinders

Coventry Evening Telegraph – Wednesday 30 December 1896

That undesirable class of youths generally known as "Peaky blinders" have been again making things lively in Birmingham. The wonder is that they have not long been exterminated by the police; for they constitute a danger to all classes of citizens and scorn to stop at no deed of violence when they once start off on one of their brutal excursions. Yet two months' imprisonment is about the average sentence which Birmingham magistrates inflict on these ruffians. Little wonder that they continue their wild career – smashing up policemen, knocking down inoffensive old people, hitting and striking everywhere. Here is a little list of their doings yesterday in the neighbourhood of Ladywood: attempting to blackmail passers by in the streets, demanding tobacco from a young clerk, and chasing him because he refused, seriously injuring the manager of the works at which this clerk worked. It would appear that the manager met the gang with a horsewhip when he saw the manner in which the clerk was being treated. The result was an attack on both the clerk and his superior. Buckled belts and knives were so freely used that the manager had to be conveyed to a hospital. It seems amazing that lads who have in the past committed many an assault as serious as this should be still able to go about in gangs. No arrests had been made up to last night.

Appendix 4: Participants and Stakeholders

No of learners?	**20**	No of staff?	**2**
No of organisations?	**1**	No of employers/ stakeholders?	**0**

Appendix 5: Research/ Evaluation Approach

Participant/observer (e.g. practitioner reflective accounts, logs)	**X**	**Interview/survey** (e.g. polls, questionnaires, learner interviews)	**X**
Observation of practice (in person, video, observation notes)	**X**	**Document analysis** (e.g. learner work, session plans, annotated resources, policies)	
Custom test/assessment (of knowledge, skill, attitude, participation) for your 'intervention'		**High-stakes learner assessment** (e.g. A Level results, End Point Assessment, BTECs	
Before/after assessment (e.g. measures of progress or change in attainment, participation)		**Comparative trial** (e.g. comparing participants' outcomes against a 'control' group	
Other (specify):	Action Research		

Thankyou

https://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/prep/