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

Tools for teaching (and how to spell them) – exploring English in vocational contexts

Novus: HMP Liverpool – June 2022

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Novus – HMP Liverpool

SUMMARY

This project captured a range of reflections on the experience of teaching and learning English in the context of vocational training in prisons. It challenged tutors' assumptions about learners and led to clearer insights into and development of support for the needs of learners.

RATIONALE

Previous research for OTLA 7 showed that HMP Liverpool's body of learners has a desire for self-improvement but was not particularly engaged with Functional Skills learning. This project for OTLA 8 was intended to address how learner engagement and motivation could be captured and developed by strengthening links between English and vocational teaching. Instead of learning English as a separate topic, it was hoped that learners would find greater relevance by practising English directly in the context of vocational workshops therefore highlighting the importance of English to daily life and the workplace.

Other Contextual Information

Our action research was part of the Education and Training Foundation's OLTA 8 Programme. The research focused on the education department of HMP Liverpool with delivery provided by Novus. It took place in the vocational workshops, particularly joinery, and involved a group of 12 learners undertaking a Level 1 joinery qualification. The project lead, an English tutor, also worked closely with vocational tutors from a range of subjects including catering, industrial cleaning and joinery to ensure their views, feedback and attitudes towards the research could be accurately captured.

Initially, there were plans for more English tutors to be involved in the project, trialling activities using vocational topics and resources in their lessons to encourage greater collaboration between departments.

APPROACH

The approach to this project took the form of four main strands. Firstly, learners from the general vocational cohort were interviewed to establish their competence, comfort and opinions about the importance and relevance of English to their past and current life experiences. These took place over in-cell telephones which allowed learners space and privacy to be honest in their answers.

Data from the interviews (which showed a group of learners who generally appreciated the relevance of English skills to their lives inside and outside of prison) was then used to inform the planning of English teaching activities which were conducted in the joinery workshop towards the end of lessons. These included spelling words relevant to the joinery qualification (taken from workbooks) and texts a joiner might use at work (e.g., risk assessments). Learner reflections were

captured to record what they had learned and how they felt about the activities. The tutor also reflected on each activity.

In addition to teaching activities, detailed explorations of joinery learners' previous experience of English learning took place including at school, prison and elsewhere, how they would prefer to be taught, what has worked well in the past and what they would like to try in the future. Interviews were conducted with a range of learners including those who were less receptive to the changes in learning trialled by the project. Learners with contrasting views and experiences were selected to examine effective ways of teaching English to vocational learners.

Discussions were held with vocational tutors to find out their attitudes towards and confidence with English teaching and their opinions on the impact of CPD related to the research. This was to ensure any developments in teaching activities would be sustainable and easy to maintain in future.

OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

Teaching, Learning and Assessment
The impact of this project on teaching, learning and assessment can be seen in many ways. The first is improved relationships between vocational trainers and English teachers. Previously, the departments were noticeably separate both physically and collaboratively. Vocational trainers have been able to feel safe communicating their feelings toward English teaching: 'I don't think it would be fair on me or the learner to teach them something I'm not confident in myself' [Appendix 7].

This has enabled bespoke CPD intended to improve confidence and adaptations to lesson scheduling to allow better use of available teaching time. It is now normal for vocational trainers to discuss their planning with English tutors to check that English has been included effectively. This has led to a greater focus on embedding English in vocational training and increased knowledge about it. There is now a bank of English resources for tutors and trainers to use that are directly related to the vocational subjects being taught. They include the use and spelling of technical vocabulary and exploration of texts that are used when working within the industries the learners are getting their qualification for [Appendix 8].

There is also now a much better understanding of vocational learners' capabilities and attitudes towards English. There was a general assumption that learners chose vocational subjects because they were no good at or had no interest in learning English skills. While this may be true for some learners, the majority of those interviewed could clearly and articulately explain how English was relevant to their lives and how they used it before and while being in prison [Appendix 3]. Even if they said they preferred vocational subjects to English learning, and did not want to study it further, they could appreciate its importance. The learner contributing to Case Study Two who did not want to learn English said: 'You use it for everything, don't you? Even though you don't realise it, you are.' [Appendix 6]. This challenged vocational tutors' statements such as 'they would disengage' or 'I don't think they would be bothered' [Appendix 7] and led to the implementation of English drop-in sessions for vocational leaners who express a wish for this or who need to learn specifically identified skills.

Professional Development

Professional Standard	How our project outcomes demonstrate this standard
1. Reflect on what works best in your teaching and	By trialling English resources and capturing reflections from learners, the vocational department is now able to extend opportunities for

learning to meet the diverse needs of learners	those who have previously thought that 'academic' subjects were 'not for them'. The reflections given were sometimes bluntly honest which encouraged in-depth thinking around what might work better. It was then possible to teach English in different ways to meet the needs of more learners. Working with and adapting teaching approaches for those with ADHD and other neurodiversities gave tutors a greater insight into how to support English for a wider range of learners.
2. Evaluate and challenge your practice, values and beliefs.	Our project provided time and space for us to come together as a teaching team to challenge our assumptions about how learners deconstruct and build words. By engaging in research activity that asked for learners' perspectives, we were able to appreciate that through understanding learners existing spelling strategies, and building on these, greater progress was made than when we started from a position of learners as spelling novices.
10. Evaluate your practice with others and assess its impact on learning.	Discussion of the success and failure of teaching activities often took place between the vocational trainer and the English tutor. As a result of these discussions, it was possible to focus on details of the activities which posed particular challenges (e.g. the spelling of word endings) and how these could be addressed. The vocational tutor was often able to capture more detailed feedback in conversation with learners which led to changes in the delivery of future activities.
20. Contribute to organisational development and quality improvement through collaboration with others.	Links and working relationships between vocational and English departments have now been strengthened through discussion about and the gathering of ideas from tutors/trainers from a range of areas. There is a renewed focus on the embedding of English in vocational teaching and drop-in sessions for learners have been planned for vocational workshops.

Organisational Development

The main organisational change has been the development of English teaching alongside vocational training. Previously vocational trainers were expected to teach English to address mistakes made by learners, without being given appropriate training to do so. Vocational trainers now have a range of trialled resources to use and have been empowered to develop their own activities which teach English and vocational topics in parallel should this suit their cohort of learners [Appendix 8]. This was a result of listening to learners, vocational trainers and English tutors. Contributions to the development of English teaching were not limited to English tutors themselves: 'I have put together some theory lessons that are based on my Level 1 course that will include them doing written work.' [Appendix 6]. The professional standard of the building of positive and collaborative relationships with colleagues and learners was seen frequently throughout, with learners and vocational trainers giving insights that would not have been obvious to an English tutor planning alone [Appendix 4]. New perspectives were gained through detailed interviews with learners who had contrasting viewpoints [Appendices 1 and 6]. These led to the decision to set up English drop-in sessions for learners who want them or those identified by vocational trainers as needing to work on specific skills. These will be conducted by English teachers to cater for those learners who needed

4

confidence in their tutor's subject knowledge.

LEARNING FROM THIS PROJECT

Findings from this project can be seen to link to those of OTLA 6 where a focus on spelling within vocational prison workshops was explored. Common themes across both pieces of research include the 'how learners benefit from breaking words into syllables when learning spelling' and 'how improving the confidence of vocational trainers really helps if they are required to teach aspects of English'. 'Encouraging staff to try a different approach within their delivery, coupled with the introduction of a new concept, has led to their improved confidence and autonomy…' (OTLA 6 Project 10d Novus, 2020).

By recording reflections and feedback from learners and vocational trainers, it was possible to develop resources directly linking to work, enabling them to participate more confidently: 'It would need to be fun and interesting' and 'Integrate it more into joinery' [Appendix 6]. Trainers have been supported to think carefully about their approach to English and are now equipped to develop English resources to use alongside vocational teaching where appropriate. 'I asked the learners about [my English resources] and the majority would be keen to do them, so I would be confident in delivering it that way.' [Appendix 7]. This ensured the sustainability of learning from the project in conjunction with learner drop-in sessions.

This research would have been even better if its scope had not been restricted by physical limitations caused by environmental issues and Covid outbreaks which caused workshops and catering to be closed for many months. Despite gaining useful insights from activities that were trialled, more data could have been gathered if these were started sooner. However, as this change in direction led to detailed insights from learner interviews, it is possible that the information seen in the case studies might not have been gained otherwise.

This project challenged the assumption that vocational learners have little appreciation of the relevance of English. Even the least receptive of learners could articulate the importance of using English for work and daily life. It highlighted the need for tutors to contextualise the teaching of English to maximise its meaning, impact and use for the learner and for vocational trainers to have tools to teach English (if they need them) in addition to the tools of their trade.

REFERENCES

Claire Collins Consultancy (2022) Empowering Vocational Tutors to Develop a Phonics-Based Approach to Functional English [online] Available at: https://ccpathways.co.uk/practitioner-research/otla-6/project-10/10d/ Accessed: 14.03.2022.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: The Project Team

Project Role	Name	Job Role	Contact
Project Lead	Esther Kelly	Hub Manager	ekelly@novus.ac.uk
Project Deputy	Eddie Ashton	Hub Manager	tashton@novus.ac.uk
Project Team	Andy Gaskell	Trainer	agaskell@novus.ac.uk
Project Team	Matty Morrison	Trainer	mmorrison@novus.ac.uk
Project Team	Colin Bennett	Trainer	cbennett@novus.ac.uk
Mentor	Lesley Littlewood	Mentor	Leslittlewood@msn.com
Research Group Lead	Gail Lydon	Research Group Lead	gaillydon@me.com

Appendix 2: Learner Case Studies

The two learner case studies had contrasting initial attitudes to participating in English activities in the joinery workshops. In addition to analysing their responses to class activities, the case studies were asked to give feedback on English tasks trialled in their cells while the joinery workshops were closed. A range of activities were provided: some obviously designed to teach English and others that were comprehension tasks about information about vocational topics.

The first learner was very open to trialling the workshop activities. During these, he was engaged and interested with his reflections directly relating to the topic covered.

Break up Wods   Reciprocating Jaw
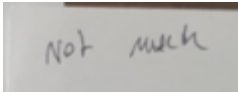
At one point, he 'tested' the English tutor by making a deliberate error. This may have been to check the tutor's knowledge to be confident he was being taught correctly. This echoes a theme within the research where some learners are concerned that vocational tutors are only qualified to teach their own subject and would rather learn from a trained English tutor.

He was keen to try the in-cell tasks and stated he enjoyed doing them because they helped him learn more about things 'he didn't know he needed to know' for both joinery and English. He was able to give relevant answers for the most part, leaving some questions blank when he did not understand them.

He stated that he preferred the comprehension task because he felt he was learning more about joinery than focussing on English although he understood the need for having both English and joinery skills.

Which pack looked the most appealing at first glance?
Health and Safety ppe to learn more Pack 3. about Safety gear to wear.
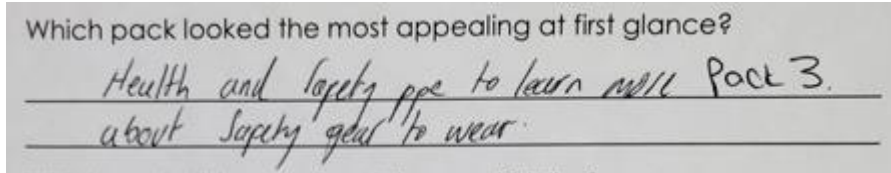
The second case study was openly hostile to trialling workshop English activities. Whilst he attended the first session, he did not engage and stated clearly it was not relevant to him. He wrote a reflection on his learning, but it was not positive or detailed.
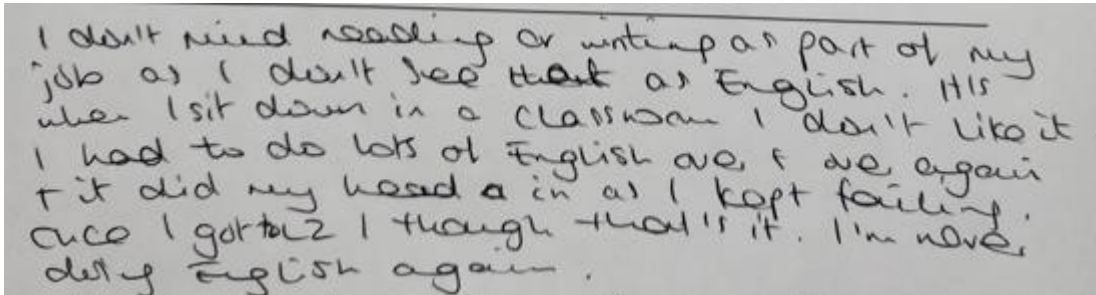

He refused to join any further sessions.

He was, however, happy to discuss his experiences learning English and explained these were negative and he felt his ADHD made it difficult to sit to read and write and preferred to be more active. He stated that he learns 'by being shown what to do rather than read about it'.

He saw the relevance of English to everyday life and would read or write if it was necessary for a job he was doing. He had achieved Level 2 English in another prison, but this wasn't a quick or easy process.

(Tutor notes from spoken interview)

He agreed to review the in-cell English activities and was very honest when asked for feedback and saying they didn't interest him. He didn't attempt any task. He found the vocational comprehension interesting to read but didn't want to write any responses.

The case studies have prompted interesting thoughts about how to cater for learners who have different mindsets when approaching English learning. How far should we try to persuade a learner who has decided that English is not for them, especially when they have explained their reasoning? How can we cater for those learners who want to learn without alienating those who don't?

Appendix 3: Initial attitudes to English learning

A collation of data gained from interviews with the general cohort of vocational learners in the prison. This gives information about attitudes towards learning English and the appreciation of the relevance English skills have on prisoners' lives.

Initial Attitudes to English Learning
10 responses

Publish analytics
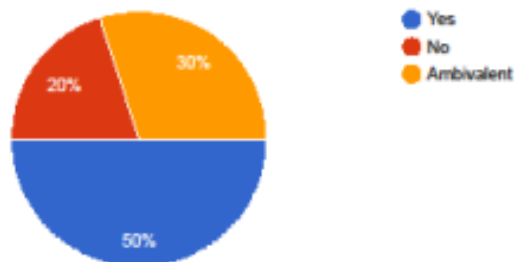
Have you done any English courses while in prison?
10 responses

● Yes
● No

70%

30%
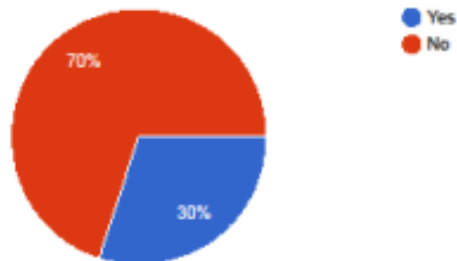
Did you enjoy English at school?
10 responses

● Yes
● No
● Ambivalent

30%

20%

50%

Appendix 4: Learner Reflections on Activities

Photographs of a selection of learners' immediate responses to activities trialled in the workshop. These give data about what the men learnt during the activities.
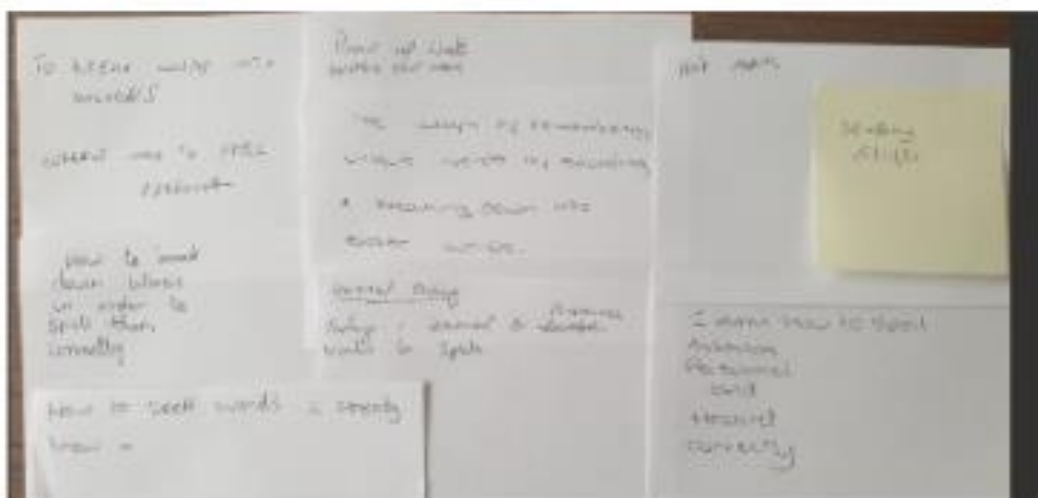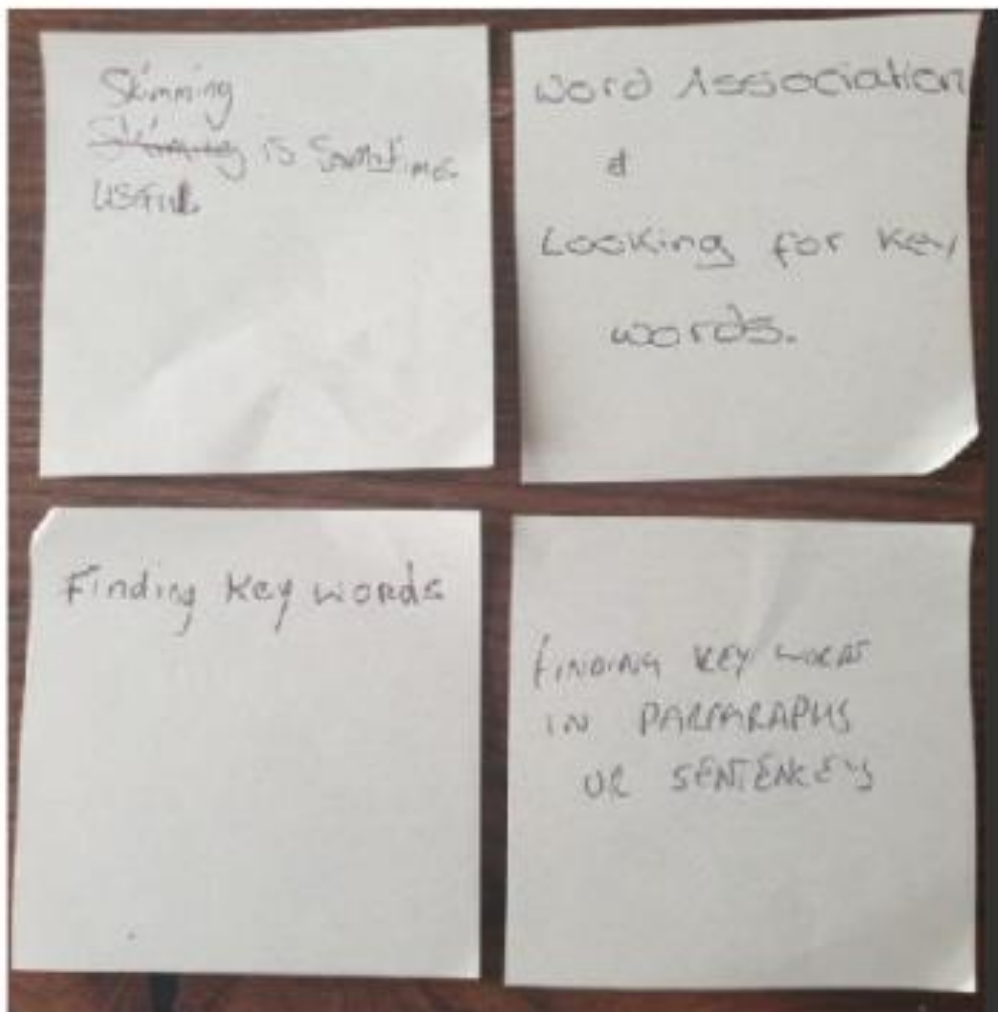
Appendix 5: Tutor's Reflections on Activities

A selection of reflections made by the tutor following activity trials detailing learner behaviour, attitudes, misconceptions, common errors and other incidents of note.

Behaviour and Attitudes:

This section shows the development of behaviour and engagement levels from learners as the activities progressed. Allowing learners to 'drop in' to the sessions when they felt they were relevant to them improved levels of engagement.

15/11

Mixed reaction
are v negative
others saying they had GCSES / degrees
So didn't need it
one saying he only does practical
stuff
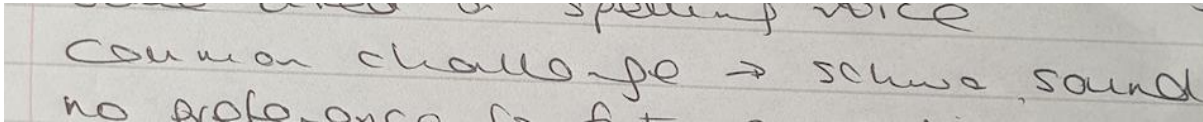
much better engagement

learners looked twice to see
if ctd see they put things
in wrong place
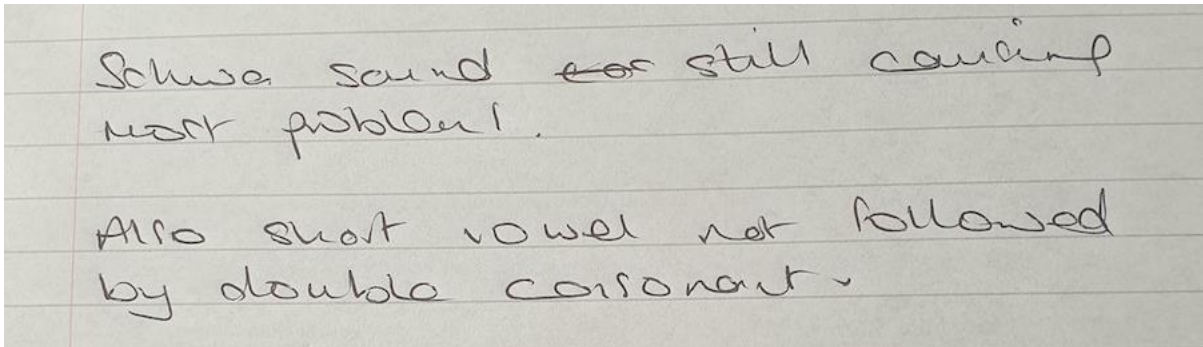
5 learners - 2 did not participate

Good learner level of engagement

Misconceptions and Common Errors:

The most common spelling errors learners made were with schwa sounds in words. Learners often struggled to select the correct spelling from a range of options.
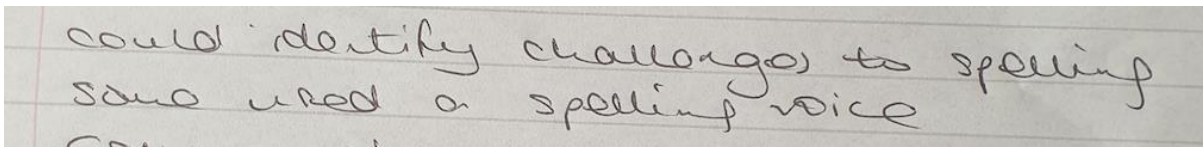
> ... ... spelling voice
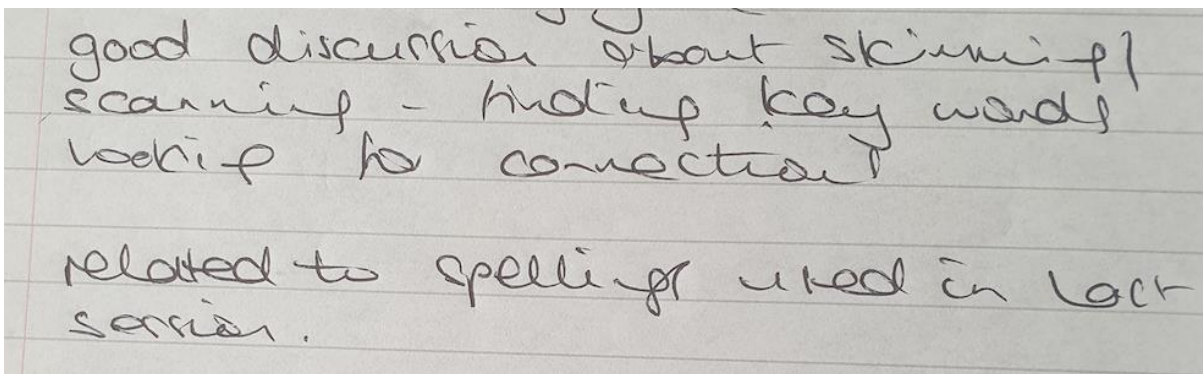> Common challenge → schwa sound
> no ... ...

> Schwa sound ... still causing
> most problem.

> Also short vowel not followed
> by double consonant.

Learner Successes:
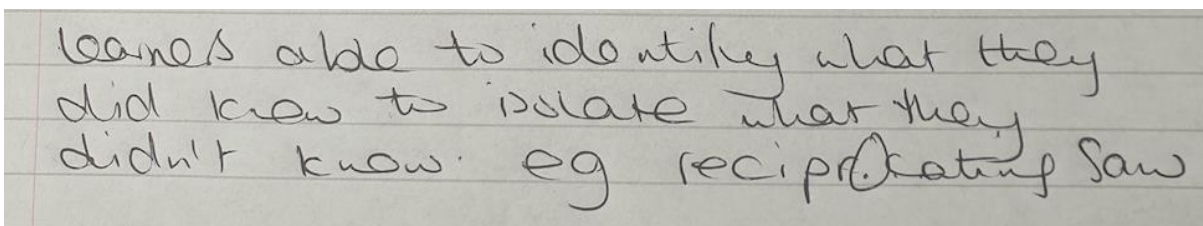
Learners were generally good at identifying strategies to help them use English accurately e.g. spelling voice, selecting the correct reading skill. They could also make links with previous learning.

> could identify challenges to spelling
> some used a spelling voice

> good discussion about skimming/
> scanning - finding key words
> looking for connection

> related to spelling used in last
> session.

> learners able to identify what they
> did know to isolate what they
> didn't know. eg reciprocating saw

Appendix 6: Joinery Learners' Interview Responses

A collation of responses made to more in-depth interviews with joinery learners on their previous experiences of English education and current attitudes towards it.

Attitudes to English
5 responses

Publish analytics

Why did you choose joinery?
5 responses

It's the only job I was allowed to do. I was knocked back for the kitchens and cleaning. I've got ADHD and need to keep busy.

It's an active course that gets me out of my cell. I need to stay occupied for mental health reasons.

I never did it at school and it was interesting and new.

I want to have skills for a career and also to be able to do up my campervan.

It would help me get a job in that sort of field.

When do you currently use English skills?
5 responses

You use it for everything don't you? Even though you don't realise it, you are.

Writing letters and filling in forms.

Most of the time: talking, writing letters to people and changing how your language depending on who you're speaking/writing to.

Every day when you read letters or the paper.

All the time. I read papers a lot. I used the internet a lot when I was out.

Appendix 7: Trainer Discussions

A summary of vocational trainers' discussion about their confidence levels and attitudes towards embedding English teaching in their delivery.

How confident do you feel identifying errors in spelling, punctuation and grammar in your learners' work?

3 responses

I am very confident in spotting issues, though there can be that many it takes a long time to do. Novus have put a high emphasis on addressing spag but it takes a long time compared to delivering the vocational subject versus guided learning hours.

I am quite confident about spellings although my grammar is getting better by doing the work packs and all the paperwork that goes with teaching, I don't think that it would be fair on me or the learner to teach them something I'm not confident in myself.

Very confident.

How confident do you feel correcting and giving feedback on how to improve your learners' spelling, punctuation and grammar.

3 responses

I have no issues giving supportive feedback though often learners don't take the feedback on board and continue with same errors throughout the course.

Not very confident. I don't think learners would be bothered if they have missed a capital letter or full stop at all. I think if they want to learn English, they would have enrolled for that course.

Confident.

Appendix 8: Resource Padlet

A link to the Padlet of resources put together as result of the project:
https://padlet.com/c_collins2/OTLA8_NOVUS

The original Padlet can be found here: https://padlet.com/ekelly126/miishl5bshv6m3w8

Appendix 9: Participants and Stakeholders

No of learners?	20	No of staff?	8
No of organisations?	2	No of employers/ stakeholders?	2

Appendix 10: 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)	X
Custom test/assessment (of knowledge, skill, attitude, participation) for your 'intervention'	X	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)	X	Comparative trial (e.g. comparing participants' outcomes against a 'control' group	
Other (specify):	Action Research.		

Thankyou

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