

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

**Improving writing for ESOL students
stuck at Entry Level 3**

New College Durham – June 2022

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For further information regarding the Shaping Success Action Research programme and this project go to <https://ccpathways.co.uk/practitioner-research/otla-8/>.

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Improving writing for ESOL students stuck at Entry Level 3

New College Durham

SUMMARY

This project aimed to help students who were having difficulty progressing from Entry Level 3 (E3) to Level 1 (L1) due to weaker writing skills. We trialled different strategies to develop writing and liaised with Functional Skills (FS) tutors. We learnt having an intense focus on writing skills benefits overall language learning and confidence.

RATIONALE

We have a number of students who have plateaued at E3, hindering progress with the language they need in daily life. We sought to find ways to break down this barrier and empower them to be better writers, using a focus on writing systems. Initially, we focussed on how feedback informs writing, but after some interesting reading on a project working with children who struggle to read (Walter, Dockrell and Connelly, 2021) we broadened the scope to consider interventions at text, sentence and word level.



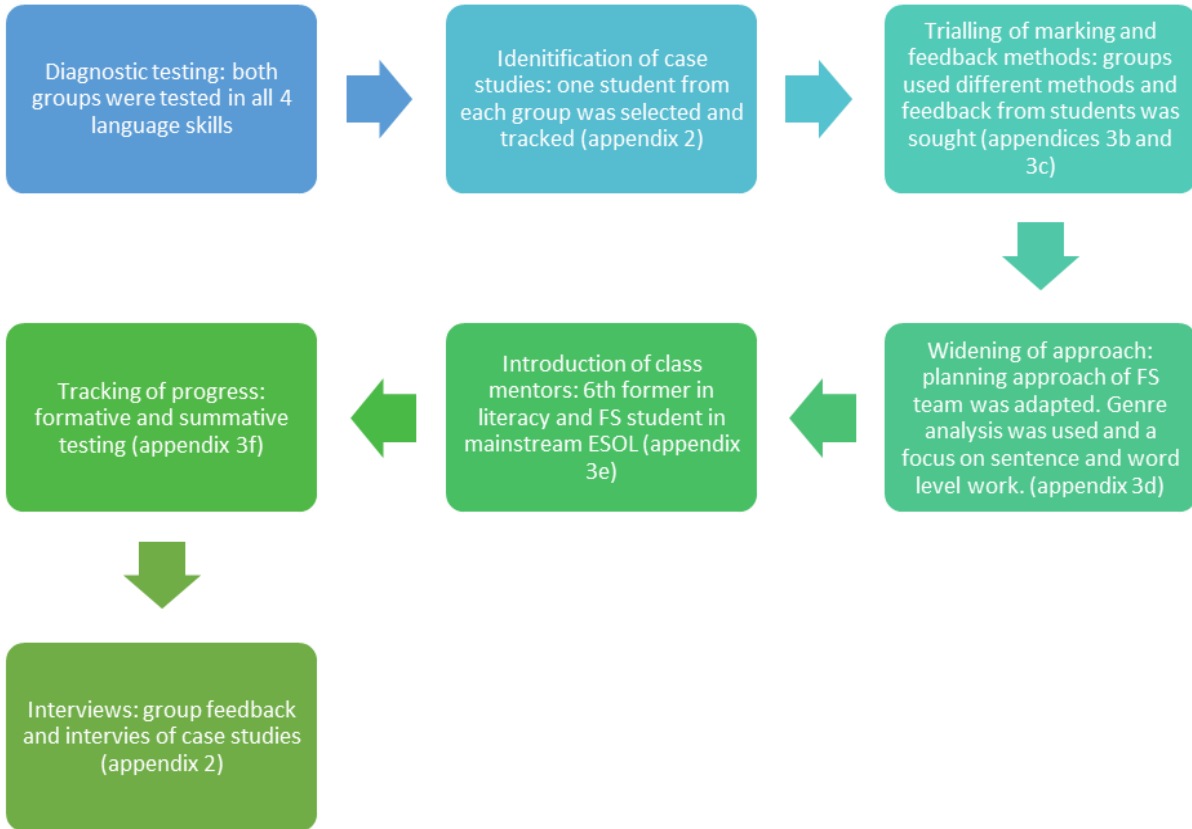
Other Contextual Information

Two ESOL tutors carried out research with one ESOL group each: the first was a group of students living in the UK for some time with highly effective verbal communication skills but weaker literacy skills and less accurate grammar (the literacy group); the second was a mixed group of ESOL students with a more EFL profile, many of whom hold professional qualifications from their own countries (mainstream ESOL). We liaised with tutors from the FS English team, and a key outcome from this was being able to recruit a mentor for each group: an adult FS student and a sixth form student.

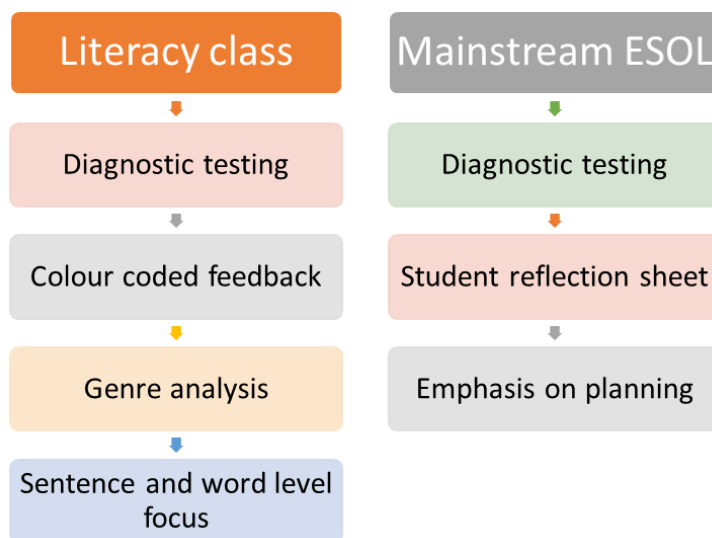


APPROACH

Here you can see the stages of our action research, as we explored how we can develop our practice in supporting Entry Level 3 students with their writing skills. At each stage of our research, the two ESOL tutors worked closely together, as well as with the FS English team. See Appendices 3b-d for examples of changes to our practice, and examples of student work.



The classes followed different approaches which provided us with opportunities for interesting professional discussion, as well as the chance to learn from each other whilst doing our research. The reason for this difference was to look at a range of strategies. Each tutor chose to do what they felt more comfortable with. This diagram shows the divergence of approach.



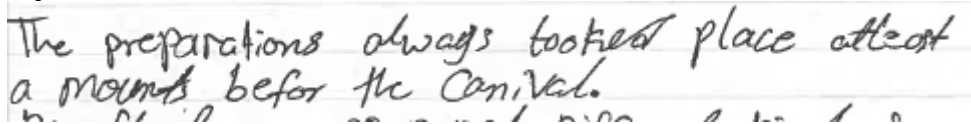
OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

Teaching, Learning and Assessment

Increased focus on writing has borne fruit in following areas:

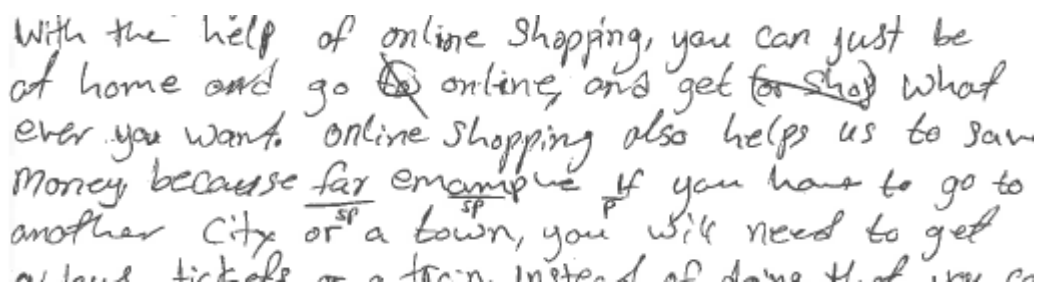
- Better writing skills. We found that writing was better planned and more coherent across both groups. There were noticeable improvements in the grammar and spelling of the students in the literacy group as can be seen by the examples below from early on in the course, and the February test.

Start of year



The preparations always tooked place atleast a month before the Carnival.

February



With the help of online shopping, you can just be at home and go @ online, and get (or shop) what ever you want. online shopping also helps us to save money because far example if you have to go to another city or ^{SP} a town, you will need to get airline tickets on a train. instead of drive that over on

- Better understanding and more accurate use of grammar in both spoken and written work (see Appendix 2 and example above)
- Increased confidence. Students have reported that they feel more confident since starting the course. This manifests itself in them taking the opportunity to speak to other students across college during college events, and seeking out opportunities to communicate with others.
- Students achieving goals outside college. Two of the students from the literacy class have found employment during the course. One stated that she would not have had the confidence to fill in the application form before starting the course.
- Improvements in learner performance. It is interesting that both approaches saw improvements in learner performance, although it is not possible to state categorically that one was more successful than the other.

Professional Development

Professional Standard	How our project outcomes demonstrate this standard
3. Inspire, motivate and raise aspirations of learners through enthusiasm and knowledge.	Our project gave us permission to focus more on writing skills, and by doing so, we were able to break down the barrier of fear that holds so many back from writing regularly. We were able to give students the space they needed to understand what was required of them and to plan thoroughly for the task ahead.
6. Build positive and collaborative relationships with colleagues and learners.	Our project enabled us to work with colleagues from the FS English team, to draw on their knowledge and share ideas across both teams. It has led to a closer working relationship going forward, where we will be sharing tips on working with non-native speakers.
14. Plan and deliver effective learning programmes for diverse groups or individuals in a safe and inclusive environment.	We emphasised to students at the start of the year that there were no assumptions about what they knew, and this helped them to go back to the basics of understanding what different parts of speech we have and how they fit together. The students in the literacy class in particular have been so supportive of one another, as they recognise that this is a journey they must all make, even though they have different starting points.

Organisational Development

Organisational developments included:

- Increased awareness across student body (mentors) of what ESOL is and who the students are.
- Increased working across departments (ESOL and FS). Staff and students are now more likely to work together.
- Future training for FS staff from ESOL staff. The curriculum manager for ESOL has been asked to work with FS tutors in the future to better support those working with non-native speakers and the language difficulties they may have.

LEARNING FROM THIS PROJECT

We learnt that there are no quick fixes to an entrenched problem such as poor writing skills. At the mid-way point, following progress tests, we were feeling disheartened that we could not see the big gains we had hoped for. But after speaking to the students, we realised that some of the gains were not visible in their writing as such, but those detailed above (confidence, communication, etc). Following on from that, we learnt to temper our own expectations, and recognise that even small steps forward can represent big gains. The fact that one student felt able to even fill in an application form, a task she had avoided for some time such as her reluctance to write, represents a huge step forward.

We also realised that teaching one skill in isolation is actually not possible. By focussing on writing, we were bringing in more focus on grammar, spelling, sentence structure, etc, all of which benefit language skills overall.

Finally, language improvement brings all sorts of benefits with it, including in the 'soft skills' of confidence and resilience.

We worked with the FS team and feel we all benefited from it. However, it would have been even better had they not been going through structural change at the same time, and therefore not able to devote as much time as hoped for to the project. Similarly, the stress of persistent and prolonged staff absence due to COVID-19 put a huge strain on the project lead who was not able to spend as much time as planned on the project at certain times.

REFERENCES

Walter, K., Dockrell, J., Connelly, V. (2021) A sentence-combining intervention for struggling writers: response to intervention Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11145-021-10135-8> (Accessed 12th December 2021).

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: The Project Team

Project Role	Name	Job Role	Contact
Project Lead	Bridget da Silva	Curriculum Manager for the English Language Centre	0191 375 4192/ Bridget.dasilva@newdur.ac.uk
Project Deputy	Sara Barbin	Lecturer	0191 375 4493/ Sara.barbin@newdur.ac.uk
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Research Group Lead	Rachel Oner	RGL	rachel.oner@btinternet.com

Appendix 2: Learner Case Studies

Learner 1

Name: Maryam. Nationality: Iranian. Class: Mainstream ESOL.

We asked Maryam to reflect on her experiences of the project, and in particular, whether an increased focus on writing has helped her to progress. These are her words, followed by examples of her work.

“When I started my English course, I was on the first steps of English skills. Writing was one of those skills. At first year sometimes we had to write about a subject as a homework. It was hard for me to write a good text. Gradually by moving forward in my course I learnt lots of things that helped me to improve my English skills.

Now my English skills are better than before and every day I learn new methods. One of that useful method is planning before writing which help me to be able to write a text with a good structure.

Since I practise planning in my writing, I found it easy to manage my thought before starting to write.

When I want to write an article at first step, I write down all important relative vocabulary and any necessary aspects of my subject which I want to have them in my writing.

After that I decide which part is better to be in the first section and which is good to be at the end. This help me to prevent forgetting anything that I want to write about.

After learning this method, I understood that I used to do planning before but not on the paper just, I was doing that in my thought.

Planning on the paper make me feel comfortable and I can focus on the other things that I need to consider them in my writing without concerning about missing the main points. Also, I try to include all the points of my subject in my writing that I have planned.

In my point of view, yes, planning is a very useful technique to improve your writing.”

1. My name is Maryam. I was born in Iran. I ~~have~~ got married three years ago with my love who lives in the UK.

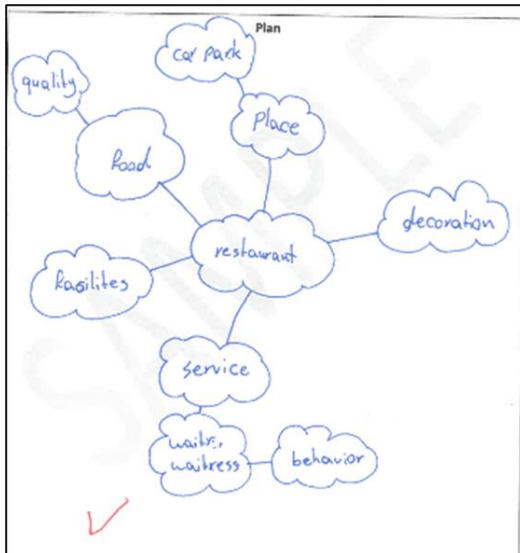
For this reason I migrated to the UK. I have been to the UK ^{prep} about one year. It was ^A new experience to live in a new ^{SP} country with ^{SP} different culture.

Since I came here I ^{aux} had many ^{prep} contact with English people in ~~the~~ various situations. On average I can say most of them are kind and helpful. I like to live here and I adapted myself ^{prep} with new conditions. I just dislike one thing, ^P that is the weather,

^{WD} all the time ^{is} rainy.

2. ^{1st} First day when I arrived, my husband had come to pick up ^{me} from the airport. Really I had ^{SP} two ^{CR} different feelings. ^{On one hand ...} One I was excited and ^{prep} the other I was confused. Every thing was new even the language that I needed to speak.

Summative test December 2021 – plan and draft



The Persian bite restaurant is one of the famous Iranian restaurants. It is placed at Front Street in Cluster 1e Street. Although it is in city center and busy place, but you can park your car in the carpark which is near to the restaurant.

They have decorated it with traditional things that it will be very interesting for who likes historical things. At the entrance, you will be welcomed with one of the waiters and they also will offer to you a place which you can decide to sit. After that you will be served on time.

About the food, I can say it is good totally. But sometimes it can be better. They have different kinds of persian foods and desserts. Also you can choose any kinds of drinks you want. If you would like to use the toilet there are two, one for men and one for women. They are very clean and tidy.

Learner 2

Name: Ebrima. Nationality: Gambian/Spanish. Class: ESOL Literacy

We interviewed Ebrima about his experiences of working on the project. [This is the interview](#) followed by examples of his work which show progression in the complexity of the language he feels comfortable writing now.

Diagnostic assessment September 2021

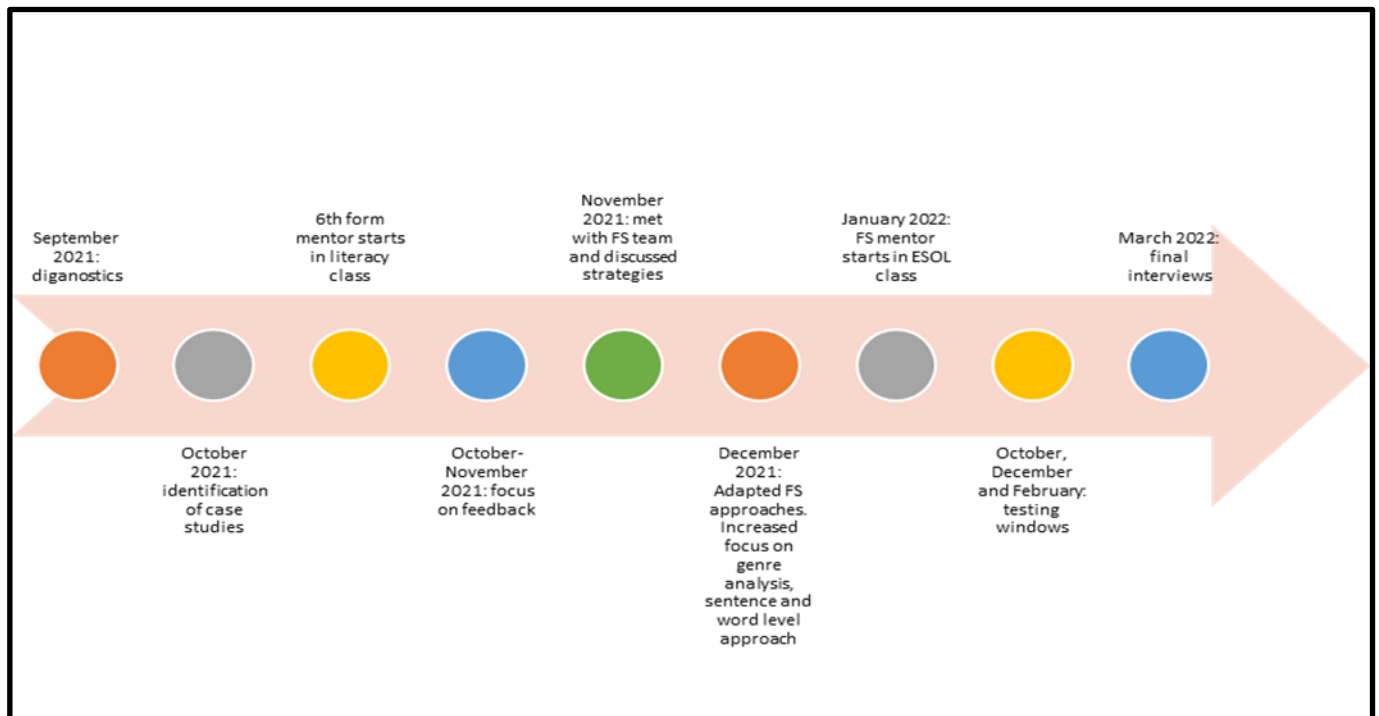
I came there at night. But on the way Compassing
I meet some few nice people. the when very kind
to me. So of that night I to had dinner with my
family and watched movie together.
I don't know how long I am going to stay there
because I am living with my family. So when ever
they promise I think I am going to move with
them. But to be honesty I will love to live
here because I like the comic, and I have
lot of friends so it won't be easy for me to
live them like that.

Summative test December 2021

I enjoyed it because after the one month
where we finished to the fasting we are
able to eat normal. And after the kosher end
all the muslims over the world always had a party.
So my uncle had to buy a cow, later we killed
it and give it to the women to cook it,
Friends and family, will come around all over the
world to with different kind of food, which
they made in their homes. And I loved
seeing friends which I haven't seen for ages,
and so we get the chance to see each other,
we were all happy and we really enjoyed
the moment, and had to eat different kind
of food to eat.

Appendix 3: Additional Information

Appendix 3a – Project timeline



Appendix 3b – Marking and feedback

In the literacy class, we trialled a more visual way of marking, using a colour code for each type of error and asking students to self-correct their work. Students reported that they found the visual approach easier to follow, could quickly spot their mistakes, and were able to correct them more easily.

Introduction

Some people agree to put old people in a care homes. It is not fair. - this is your opinion - should it be here or in the body of the writing or the conclusion?
It is more common in developed countries.

Agree

They do not have enough time to take care of them.
They need a lot of care.
Older people find it hard to tolerate. - to tolerate what?

Disagree

They become emotionally drained.
They lose their self-confidence.
They become depressed and sad. Good points

Conclusion

Recap
Give your opinion

In developed countries, we see every day that many people take their parents to care homes on the pretext that they are old and can no longer take care of them and they are very proud of what they do, but it is really fair that because they are old. Are they worn out and sent to a care homes?

On one hand, those who agree with this have various excuses, including: They do not have enough time to take care of their parents and say we have to work hard to make money. In addition, Older people need a lot of care because they can not do their work alone. Finally, it becomes very difficult to tolerate the elderly because they make excuses and become restless and stubborn like a child and want all the attention to be on them.

One other hand, When we take them away from home and take them to an unfamiliar place like a care homes, the feeling of homelessness and loneliness pervades their whole being and they lose their spirit, the feeling of emptiness and uselessness and the expectation that one day it is very unfortunate that they can only see their children day in and day out. I should add that they lose their self-confidence and think that no one likes them and they are useless. This causes them to become depressed and sad, and if they have Alzheimer's, it intensifies.

- wrong word
- meaning not clear
- punctuation
- word order
- grammar
- spelling

In conclusion

I personally think, putting elderly people in a care home is a very bad and ugly thing. We need to think about how much our parents worked hard for us when we were children, and now that they need our love and attention, we should not let them go and break their hearts. We can hire a nurse for the same cost we want to pay for a care home to take care of them. If we do not have enough time, and also if we have siblings to take care of them on a shift or daily basis. We believe that the good prayers of our parents always support our lives, so let us preserve the diamond of our lives.

You make some excellent points. You have used your plan well to keep a good structure.

Things to think about:

- Some of your sentences are too long and we lose the point you are making. Look at where you can break them.
- Capital letters / lower case letters.
- Can you look for other words/phrases to replace those in yellow.

Can you make your changes and send back to me please.



Appendix 3c – Mainstream ESOL class approach

In the mainstream ESOL class, students were asked to use a personal writing checklist. Students were asked to identify particular sub skills of writing to focus on, which they would record on this sheet. They were also asked to reflect on their performance in a task to help them move forward. Whilst this was useful to an extent, it was found to be too vague and not all students had the language skills to use it as it had been intended, so it was discontinued.

Appendix 3d – Different approaches

At this point, we decided to focus more on the process of writing rather than just the feedback being given.

Below are some extracts from the schemes of learning showing some of the different approaches we started to take.

 **Personal Writing Checklist** 

Student name _____

1.	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>
2.	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>
3.	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>
4.	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>
5.	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>
6.	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>

What would you like to change in your writing next time?

ESOL Literacy class

<p>MON PM BRIDGET</p>	<p>ESOL Activities 3a and b Spelling test Intro to spelling rules, e.g. single and double consonants / present continuous / short vowel sounds Set test.</p>	<p>Warmer: game of who am I? to introduce theme of politics and politicians. Students individually predict their answers to the interview with a politician question. Group feedback. British values: discussion of the democratic process in the UK, who can be a politician etc. Example of Nadim Zahawi (Kurdish Iraqi now education minister) Read and check – match questions and answers. Spelling strategies work introduced to whole class. Try out strategies. Individually work through double the final consonant worksheets. H/W: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. read worksheet 3B and match headings and paragraphs 2. read through all work done in class and find examples of the final consonant being doubled before a suffix. 3. Learn the following for a spelling test next week: politician, parliament, election, constituency, opposition, government, issues, environment, independence, campaign, excelled, committed, happened. </p>
<p>WED ALISON</p>	<p>Intro to formal and informal writing. Writing a formal letter Share class aims Write pen portrait for ILP Diagnostic feedback Study skills: Checking and redrafting your own work / using the marking code End of sentence punctuation</p>	<p>AM Warmer: Kahoot on capital letters Kahoot! Add the capital letters to the letter: BBC Skillswise worksheet: adding basic punctuation Remind learners about Schoology / homework</p>

In the literacy class, we built in work on spelling, grammar and punctuation alongside a genre analysis approach, using our own materials and work from publications such as Writing Works (Spiegel and Sunderland 1999).

ESOL mainstream

Monday Revision – Unit 5a, 4a, resources – grammar 2nd 3rd conditional plus vocab – feelings, weather. Revision material for 3a – narrative tenses – reading exercises. (Oxford edition 4 materials)

Wednesday Revision of wishes and regrets. Ss make sentences about Storm Arwen.

Skills workshop-Ss match formal and informal language then complete a [gapfill](#).

T to go over types of plans and discuss why we need to plan. T to talk about the process of writing.

T to go over format of articles and read a sample article about Captain Tom. Whole group to plan an article about a new shopping centre.

Proofreading-Ss read the complaint letter and correct the mistakes. Then t to go over the format of complaint letters. Whole group to plan a letter of complaint to the council.

Appendix 3e – Interview with a Sixth Form mentor

I interviewed Olivia Shaw, a 6th former who is working as a mentor in the ESOL Literacy class, to see what she had got out of the experience. These are her answers:

1. What subjects are you studying at A level?

I am studying History, Politics and English Literature at A Level.

2. What are you planning to do when you finish your A levels?

After I finish my A Levels I want to go to university, I would like to become a teacher.

3. Why did you want to come and work with the ESOL class?

I wanted to work with the ESOL classes to add to my work experience and gain knowledge of educating people on a first hand basis. Experience in literacy and teaching is very valuable to me as I would like to be a teacher, Alison has taught me so much about engaging and helping a class learn new material and revise previous topics.

4. What do you enjoy about working with the ESOL class?

I enjoy seeing the class every week, they are all lovely people who genuinely want to learn, I enjoy seeing the class progress and benefiting them on their journey towards fluency. I feel very proud when I see the students pick up skills and they are all genuinely pleased to have me there, at least I hope. It is really fulfilling and is a good use of my time.

5. Have you seen an improvement in the learners' work since you started the class? If so, in what area?

I have seen a big improvement in conversation and in grammar, the spelling lists are growing increasingly advanced for some students and all of them work very hard.

6. Are there any activities or feedback that you have been involved in that you think have had a positive impact on the learners?

I help students with their grammar and spelling, I enjoy working one on one with the students. Group work is also good, as is reading things aloud.

Activities that they may benefit from is maybe roleplay activities, perhaps using words from specific topics to engineer varied conversation.

Appendix 3f: Trackers with learner marks

This is the tracker for the ESOL literacy class for term 1 and term 2, showing clear progress across all skill areas. This was reassuring as it can be hard to gauge overall progress in the middle of carrying out research, but when there is an opportunity to stand back and look at the whole picture, progress can really be seen. The students' names have been removed.

Term 1: students 1 - 5.

Diagnostic writing	Diagnostic Reading	Diagnostic Speaking and Listening (informally assessed)	OCTOBER WRITING PROGRESS 20.10.2021 Add punctuation to a paragraph, write a formal letter	OCTOBER READING PROGRESS 20.10.2021 Cambridge Sample B E2 Cambridge Sample B Level 1 NLT E	Speaking and listening not assessed as focus on R+W. To be assessed in Dec.	DECEMBER SPEAKING AND LISTENING PROGRESS Presentation on topic of their choice 08.12.2021	DECEMBER READING PROGRESS 08.12.2021 Cambridge Sample F E3 Cambridge Sample F L1 NLT Sample F	DECEMBER WRITING PROGRESS 08.12.2021 article about a special occasion / report on college computer facilities
E3	E3	E3	E3 62%	L1 65%		L1 60%	L1 65%	E3 64%
E2	E2	E2	E2 50%	E2 60%		E2 70%	E2 58%	E2 57%
L1	E3	L1	E3 64%	E3 69%		L1 68%	E3 79%	E3 64%
L1	E3	L1	Authorised absence			L1 70%	E3 46%	E3 66%
L1	L2	L1	E3 66%	L1 73%		L1 68%	L1 83%	E3 72%
December Progress Tests as diagnostics						E3 70%	E3 71%	E3 60%

Term 2: students 1 - 5 are the same as in term 1. Student 6 joined at the end of term 1, and student 7 joined in term 2.

FEBRUARY Speaking and listening 16.02.22 Talk about an event in the past / discussion online learning	FEBRUARY Reading 16.02.2022 E2 Practice paper 1 (Hidden paper) E3 Practice paper 7 L1 Sample paper 6 All Trinity	FEBRUARY Writing 16.02.2022 Pros and cons of online shopping and writing about first day at college
E3 73%	L1 73%	E3 70%
E2 73%	E2 79%	E2 57%
L1 80%	E3 68%	E3 72%
L1 80%	E2 75%	E3 74%
L1 70%	L1 80%	E3 80%
E3 73%	E3 44%	E3 72%
E3 63%	E2 83%	E2 67%

Marks are RAG rated using the departmental mark scheme as follows: red is 50% or below; amber is between 51-69%; green is 70% and above. As this is a multi-level class, the level they were assessed at has been written in too.

Appendix 4: Participants and Stakeholders

No of learners?	30	No of staff?	46
No of organisations?	1	No of employers/ stakeholders?	1

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)	X
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

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