

The teaching of reading in Years 6 & 7

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> Aim

To describe and evaluate methods used in the teaching of reading in a primary Year 6 Literacy Hour and a secondary Year 7 English lesson.

> Dimensions of this Case Study

The study was carried out in two schools in a suburb of Burton, a market town. Ryknild Primary School is in a middle class area with about 300 pupils on the roll. Paget High School is in the same suburb but serves a wider catchment area. There are 600 pupils on the roll with 25-30% receiving free school meals.

Two Y6 and 2 Y7 classes and their teachers took part in this study.

> Summary of Findings for this Case Study

- There was greater emphasis on the teaching of discrete skills of reading, heavily influenced by the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) Framework objectives in the Y6 lesson.
- There was greater emphasis on the interpretation of the text by the pupils in Y7, although text level reading skills also appeared to be being effectively taught.
- Teaching strategies used by teachers in Y6 and Y7 classes appeared to have been drawn from a common pool of strategies. There was a lot of overlap between the phases. Both centred on an understanding that reading at text level involves a complex interweaving of word, sentence and text level understanding and skills.
- Classroom observation showed clear evidence of continuity in the delivery of the English curriculum in Years 6 and 7, in some areas, e.g. teachers building on prior knowledge of the pupils; strategies such as questioning, modelling, illustrating, etc.; and teacher led discussion.
- Lack of continuity was observed in classroom organisation; focus of lessons; management of literacy teaching at the school level; and role of teacher in class.
- Classroom organisation proved to be important in involving all pupils.
- There is a need to explore further practical measures for encouraging continuity in the English curriculum between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3, particularly for pupils with limited ability to read.

Context

Much success at secondary school relies on competent use of reading skills at the text level, throughout the whole curriculum. Research into effective teaching of reading in primary schools tends to emphasise the teaching of phonics and text comprehension strategies (Hurry, 1996). Whereas research into the teaching strategies adopted by secondary English teachers shows an emphasis on the comprehension of texts and the pupils' attempts to represent information in ways which are meaningful to them (McIntyre and Copper, 1996).

This dichotomy is predictable, given the organisation of the secondary curriculum by subject and the emphasis on a literature based approach to English. However, some pupils entering secondary school have not gone beyond the level of decoding text and they are severely disadvantaged due to their limited ability to read.

The implementation of the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) in English primary schools in September 1999, made us think very hard about the nature of the teaching of reading in primary and secondary schools, in Y6 and Y7. The change in approach between the two phases on transfer could have serious implications for pupils' literacy, particularly for those pupils with limited ability to read.

Aims

Attention was focused on the teaching of reading in a Y6 Literacy Hour and a secondary English lesson in Y7 to discover the teaching strategies being used in practice and how much continuity there was between phases.

Furthermore, we were concerned to identify features of effective practice in one Key Stage that might be used to inform and improve practice in the other.

What is reading at text level?

Notions vary as to what constitutes reading at the text level. However, it has been recognised, in research and national policy documents, that reading development in schools comes about by effective instruction in:

- the systems and conventions that relate written language to spoken language; and
- the nature, structure and purpose of texts.

Successful reading is measured by the reader's ability to read and understand a text independently. It involves the mastery of a range of strategies, such as inferential, predictive and problem solving skills, as well as the application of the knowledge both of text structure and the real-world.

Research Strategy

Unstructured interviews were conducted with teachers, prior to classroom observations, to explore the context of teaching and learning.

Evidence was collected from classroom observations of 2 Y6 Literacy Hours and 2 Y7 English lessons, using audio and video recorders.

Using the data obtained from the observations, structured interviews were carried out to assess the teachers' views on the effectiveness of their methods in improving reading skills.

A checklist of text level reading skills, agreed in advance with the class teachers, was used to establish the pupils' knowledge and understanding of text before and after the classroom observations. Comparisons of the pre- and post-lesson checks of 25% of the pupils were used to gauge the effectiveness of the teaching methods. These were recorded as pupil profiles.

Teaching strategies were analysed in line with those outlined in the NLS Framework (DfEE, 1998).

Evidence of reading at text level

Lesson observations showed that reading at text level in both Y6 and Y7 lessons involved understanding of:

- character;
- plot;
- setting;
- atmosphere;
- narrator;
- craft of the writer;

- language of imagery;
- simile; and
- metaphor.

Skills necessary were:

- reading aloud with expression;
- skimming;
- scanning;
- interpretation;
- prediction; and
- sequencing.

Whilst the above skills were seen as text level skills they were dependent on integration of information at word, sentence and text level. Text level skills depended on information gained from word (graphemes) and sentence structures (grammar and punctuation) as well as text level structures (such as layout and organisation). The process was not merely a range of skills being applied in parallel but an interchange between the different levels of language.

At one point the Y6 teacher was examining the role of stage directions and then she discussed the impact of the past tense, in the interpretation of the text.

Evidence from teacher interviews and confirmed by lesson observations showed the following activities:

Year 6

- reading text aloud or silently;
- comprehension of components of the text, e.g. role of narrator;
- understanding the influence of writer's choice of language and syntax on text interpretation;
- personal response to and interpretation of the text;
- scanning for specific information or language in the text.

Year 7

- reading text aloud or silently;
- comprehension of components of the text, e.g. role of narrator and choice of method for expressing this role;

- understanding the influence of writer's choice of language, syntax and imagery on text interpretation and e.g. in the expression of atmosphere;
- personal response to and interpretation of the text; and
- scanning for specific information, language in the text or literary structures such as rhyme schemes that influence the interpretation of the text.

Y6 Linguistic/Literary focus vs. Y7 Literary focus

A greater emphasis on the teaching of grammar and technical aspects of the reading process at the text level was observed in the Y6 lessons. There was evidence of the teaching of verb tenses and discussion of the use of a narrator in the text.

The Y6 lesson objectives and content highlighted a discrete approach to planning, within the constraints of the NLS framework, in relation to the text structure and language of the text. For example, the lesson objective was:

To identify within narrative passages from the text (The Secret Garden) which parts could be acted out and which parts needed a narrator.

In Y7 there appeared to be a concentration on the study of literature with no evidence of a linguistic focus. Open-ended objectives came from the text downwards. The lesson objective was:

To read and understand a pre-20th century text (in this case a poem) and to begin to appreciate the language and structure of poetry.

The Y7 teacher focused closely on the pupils' responses and the lesson developed from there, rather than being skills-based. For example, at one point in the lesson the teacher seized and expanded on a point made by one of the pupils about the narrator of the poem.

It was not clear whether the approach adopted by the teachers was related to the choice of text. To establish comparison between the activities undertaken, each teacher was asked how they would have approached the text used by their colleague. The ideas generated by both teachers were broadly similar and centred on exploration of the text by reading aloud, character study, examination of language and focus on the narrator.

Choice of teaching strategies

Figure 1 shows that a diverse range of strategies was used by the teachers in Y6 and Y7.

Strategy	Y6	Y7
Questioning	20%	23%
Directing	14%	11%
Explanation	11%	14%
Guided exploration	6%	14%
Illustrating	8%	6%
Listening/ responding	–	6%
Praising	6%	6%
Evaluating	6%	–
Expanding	14%	6%

Fig. 1. Strategies used in one lesson in Y6 and Y7

Other strategies, used to a lesser extent included recapping and modelling in Y6 and summarising, modelling, investigating ideas and humour in Y7.

The teacher-instigated strategies were directing, recapping, demonstrating, modelling and scaffolding.

There seemed to be a sub-routine of strategies, particularly in Y6, related to teacher questioning. This involved evaluating, summarising, praising and expanding and was contingent on the pupils' responses.

Teacher interviews

Teachers in Y6 encouraged pupils to read the text aloud. This had led to a dramatic improvement in this skill. The group reading approach had given the teacher the opportunity to hear each pupil read in the course of the week. Pupils supported each other with unknown words.

The preferred style of the Y7 teacher was to read aloud to the pupils, enabling them to appreciate the atmosphere of the text and prevent it being overshadowed by unfamiliar vocabulary.

In both classes pupils were expected to follow the text.

In Y7, a top set, the pupils sat in pairs to allow discussion of text between partners and build confidence. There was no teacher-led group time in Y7. The teacher moved around the room. Classroom observation showed that a few pupils tended to dominate the analysis of the text during discussion.

Pupils in Y6 were set in ability groups, as required by the NLS framework. The teacher worked with a different group each day. Classroom observation showed that pupils in the selected group were systematically involved in the teacher-led discussion and appeared to have understood the topic. Their understanding was confirmed in the post-lesson interviews.

A major difference between the teachers in Y6 and Y7 was the way they perceived their roles as teachers of reading within the school.

Y6 teachers had the backdrop of the NLS which had had a direct impact on literacy teaching. They worked collaboratively to identify objectives from the NLS and plan activities to meet them. Primary schools had clear pupil attainment targets for literacy and Literacy Governors, with responsibility for ensuring that the school achieved them.

Teachers in Y7 planned their lessons within a framework of the school's development plan, but there were no guidelines, structures and targets comparable with those of the NLS. The English department in the secondary school planned for KS3 and KS4 in line with National Curriculum guidelines and to meet GCSE course requirements.

Implications

It seems vital to ensure that the lack of continuity in approach to the teaching of reading at text level, does not restrict the progress of pupils as they pass from Y6 to Y7.

The need for cross-phase liaison has been addressed at this school by the setting up of a project with the primary schools to run through the summer holidays. Some aspects of this will be planned and delivered as a team and hopefully will lead to greater curriculum continuity across the key stages. Such a project is being considered as an area for future research.

Further reading

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