Conclusion

As with any piece of research answering one question raises others! The questions raised by this research are of differing complexity. At a basic level are questions about the methods used, analysis of the data - could it have been done differently, was it rigorous enough, were our criteria appropriate, and, would the results have been different if we had used a larger sample?

At a deeper level it raises questions about the effectiveness of thinking skills and how we set about evaluating their effectiveness. The other major issue was that of originality and are we able to 'teach' this?

The findings suggest that the project was largely successful. The analysis of the effects of the literacy programme also highlighted areas I need to work on to enable further improvement. I plan to look for other opportunities to use the thinking skills developed during the literacy programme and to investigate how we might 'teach' originality.

Close analysis of students' work also indicated to us a need to focus on the handling of sophisticated language and complex sentences to support the less able students.

We have already used the close analysis of students work in lessons with students and this had the benefit of making them be objective, think critically about their own work and evaluate their own performance independently. This critical awareness reflected the 'higher order' thinking skills defined in Bloom's taxonomy. I believe as a result of this research that these skills need to be taught and we share this taxonomy with students offering them opportunities to apply the skills to their own work and to act as a 'critical friend' to their colleagues. I believe that the use of thinking skills allows teachers to be creative in the presentation and delivery of their subject. It offers an important way of reclaiming teaching skills that many of the objective-based initiatives have deprived us of.

Perhaps the greatest compliment of all was when a student in one class complained about the task she had been given. I asked her why she was grumbling, her response was, "I hate this lesson because I have to think!" This was further evidence of the effectiveness of our approach.

Suggestions for further reading

Philip Adey and Michael Shayer (1994) Really Raising standards, Cognitive Intervention and Academic Achievement. Routledge

Edward de Bono (1992) Teach Your Child To Think. Penguin

Mary Mason Breakthrough To Learning. Wigan & Leigh College
Book One Language Awareness
Book Two Reading For Learning
Book Three Writing For Learning

Author and contact details

Maggi Fisher, Kingsmead School, Southbury Road, Enfield, EN1 1YQ.

Tel. 020 8363 3037
Fax. 020 8366 3709

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Key Stage 4 literacy programme: is it improving written examination responses in English examinations?

Aims of the project

To investigate whether or not a specifically designed literacy programme for Key stage 4 students was having any impact on the quality of their written responses in English examinations.

Context

The research took place between 1999 and 2002 in a mixed comprehensive school. Altogether approximately 375 Key Stage 4 students in two successive cohorts followed a literacy programme devised and delivered by English subject staff. The first cohort who sat their exams in June 2000 did not experience the programme, the second cohort experienced one year and the third cohort experienced the whole two year programme. The effects of the programme were evaluated through GCSE examination results and a detailed analysis of the students written responses to two descriptive writing questions six months apart.

Summary of main findings

- GCSE results improved in the A - C range in English and in English Literature.
- GCSE results across the school improved in the A - C range.
- The close analysis of student work showed improvement in the quality of their responses: fewer technical errors, increased use of figurative language and better focus on the demands of the question.

Background

Despite the government drive on literacy through the introduction of the Literacy hour in primary schools and the introduction of the National Literacy Framework at Key Stage 3, there was no provision for such learning at Key Stage 4. As a department we were also aware that our students were not performing as well in the GCSE English examinations as we would have liked. We knew that many of our students had a very narrow reading experience and their writing lacked technical accuracy. I felt that a literacy programme geared towards Key Stage 4 might help. I was also looking for strategies that would engage students more 'actively' in their learning.

Kingsmead School is a mixed comprehensive school in the London Borough of Enfield and has 1344 students aged 11 to18. Enfield is a culturally diverse community and this is reflected in the school population. There are at least forty-seven languages spoken by students in the school, 519 students are on the EMAG register, 341 students on the SEN register and 232 students on our Gifted and Talented register.

Teaching processes and strategies

The devised literacy programme for Key Stage 4 students is organised in half-termly modules, focusing on spelling/vocabulary skills, reading skills and writing skills. Material for the lessons was drawn from across the curriculum and included elements of study skills. Many of the strategies and approaches involved thinking skills such as selection, categorising, sequencing, matching, reasoning, relevance, evaluation and appreciation. Learning activities centred on students using these thinking processes to complete tasks often negotiating the outcome with other students in pair or small group work. We were able to accommodate the teaching of our programme in an extra English lesson each week. The Key Stage 4 students were given four one-hour lessons a week, three to cover the GCSE English and English Literature syllabuses and one lesson a week which allows the delivery of the literacy programme. The extra literacy lessons were self-contained and no homework was set. The lessons were loosely structured on the literacy hour pattern with a starter activity, main body and plenary.

A typical lesson begins with some kind of word-based activity, matching specialised words with their definitions for example, or unravelling anagrams of terms that relate to the module. Having gone through the answers to the initial activity the lesson develops by presenting the main teaching point of the lesson in a longer activity that can be worked on individually, in pairs or small groups. It could be a problem-solving exercise where students have to negotiate their way to a practical conclusion using the information they have been presented with, for example being given a graph and a number of statements with information on them. Matching these to the graph requires selection of relevant information, evaluation of evidence to place them on the graph in a logical way and appreciation of the whole graph to ensure it is an accurate representation of the information. The techniques mentioned can be applied to subject material from across the curriculum.

In the plenary we take feedback, summarise the learning points or discuss the possible uses of what they have learnt.

The last module incorporated a review of all the skills covered and revision guidance, making the focus very exam-orientated.

By presenting the lessons in a self-contained format which students can work through at their own pace and using the booklets for revision they feel they have more 'ownership' of the learning. Group work and talk are also essential for many of the activities to be successful, sometimes there is no 'right' answer and students enjoy the exploration of possible outcomes.

The aim of the study skills activities is for the students learn more about the kind of learner they are and how they can use this knowledge to support them. In one of the lessons we explain Bloom's taxonomy of thinking skills and explain the difference between lower and higher order thinking skills. Students then have an opportunity to see how this is embodied in the kind of questions they will encounter in examinations. It can also be related to examination grade criteria so students can see what they have to demonstrate to achieve that next grade up!

As the programme was such a new venture feedback from staff and students was used to improve the materials and their presentation.

All of these factors have helped us to engage students positively with this programme and it is now firmly embedded in the curriculum. The programme now runs to a series of eleven booklets all of which contain seven or eight lessons, revision tips and reminders. We are continuing to develop these resources.

Findings

The examination results across the three years show improvement both within the department and across the school. GCSE results improved in the A - C range from 34% to 43% and from 38% to 50% in English Literature. GCSE results across the school improved in the A - C range from 36.15% - 44.64%. The increases occurred across many subjects and were gradual although the improvement was most noticeable in the 2002 results.

A closer analysis of the written responses revealed some specific features that had improved. The more able students had improved their language skills in terms of creativity as well as technical accuracy.

The more able students showed a decrease in the number of words used, the number of polysyllabic words used and the number of sentences used in their writing suggesting they were being more efficient with their use of language. The mixed ability group increased their score in all three areas suggesting that they were engaging more readily with the task.

The more able students improved their scores for sentence length, spelling and punctuation but the mixed ability group did not. The mixed ability group increased their use of polysyllabic words suggesting they were not secure in their spelling and punctuation of those words. Interestingly both groups showed an improvement in the number of grammar/syntax errors made and the use made of figurative language.

The writing of the more able group demonstrated greater originality while the writing of the mixed ability group showed no difference. This suggested that originality was a quality demonstrated by more able students and made us question whether we could intervene to 'teach' students to be more creative.

Finally, the writing of the more able group showed no change in the use of description while the less able group increased their use of description suggesting they were responding more appropriately to the task.

Research methods

A record was kept of the GCSE results for all the students involved in the study, from before the start of the programme to when the third cohort had completed both years of the programme. In addition, a detailed analysis was made of samples of writing from a sub-set of the students. These were the written responses to two descriptive writing questions, one completed in November 2001 and the other completed in May 2002. The work was completed under exam conditions.

The Key Stage 4 English groups were organised in half-year blocks (5 groups to a block). Within each block one group was an 'express' group, consisting of students identified as being able, motivated and committed. The other four groups were 'parallel' groups and had students of varying ability. These groups tend to be smaller (around 24 as opposed to 30 in the express groups).

A sample of students was chosen from the cohort that had experienced the whole programme. Eight students (four boys and four girls) were randomly chosen from an express group and six students (three boys and three girls) were randomly chosen from a parallel group - approximately 25% of each group.

Ten features were examined:

1. Number of words in response.
2. Number of polysyllabic words in response.
3. Number of sentences in response.
4. Range of sentence length.
5. Number of spelling errors.
6. Number of punctuation errors.
7. Number of grammar/syntax errors.
8. Was figurative language used in the response?
9. Did the response show originality?
10. Was description used rather than statement?

The first seven focused on specific areas of technical accuracy and reflected the work covered in the programme. The last three focused on the quality of the response to the specific task of writing descriptively. When carrying out the analysis seven features were expressed numerically. To keep all the data on a numerical basis, we decided to apply the following system to criteria 8, 9 and 10: a 'yes' counted as 1 and a 'no' counted as 0. The mean findings were then calculated for each of the criterion.

The analysis was carried out by a colleague and myself so there was always an objective balance and a clear monitoring of the procedure going on. It also gave us the opportunity to discuss queries and see if our chosen criteria were working to provide us with results that could be analysed.