Research methods

Data were collected from all pupils through questionnaires throughout the two year period, plus an analysis of their writing, (class work, homework and coursework), focusing on average sentence length and verb accuracy. The analysis was carried out with a colleague to ensure reliability. A selection of pupils (a range of ability) was interviewed by trainee teachers towards the end of Year 11. They reviewed a piece of writing, and this provided evidence of pupil confidence, strategies being used to check work and whether these strategies were being successful. Unfortunately, there are consistency issues with these interviews due to interviewers moving from the defined line of questioning. A sub-set of three students who continued to AS Level were also involved in a "think-aloud" task, where they back-translated a piece of writing carried out at the end of Year 11, as a means of checking. The students were chosen as being the highest, middle and lowest scorers of writing at GCSE (but all gained at least a grade B in writing). An analysis of these transcripts is currently being undertaken and will provide evidence of the strategies the students have adopted and internalised.

Conclusion

The introduction of strategy training has impacted greatly upon my teaching. My impression is that pupils enjoy the autonomy it leads to, and also the choices they can make about using the strategies. There is an issue of time - the time required to develop the strategies is time away from curriculum content and this must be justified. I consider it to have been time well invested and have started to adapt some of the strategies for pupils at Key Stage 3. Greater autonomy in skill development will provide pupils with the necessary skills to ensure content will never be lacking. The experience I have gained from this project continues to make me more aware of the ways in which the pupils in my classes work best when writing in French. Issues of motivation must never be sidelined and it is essential to accept, as a teacher, that not all pupils will adopt all strategies and for the teacher to not take this personally or force the strategies on pupils, but to remain reassured that most pupils are adopting a range of learner strategies and are exercising their metacognitive processes.

Suggestions for further reading

Cohen (1988: 4) defines learning strategies as "learning processes which are consciously selected by the learner. The element of choice is important here because this is what gives a strategy its special character". He then continues by dividing these into cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Cognitive strategies are those which deal with the language itself and include "identification, grouping, retention and storage" of the language. Metacognitive strategies cover the decision-making and evaluative processes involved in language learning: "pre-assessment, pre-planning, on-line planning and evaluation and post-evaluation".

Weaver and Cohen (in Cohen, 1988: 66) discuss the effectiveness of explicitly including strategy training in a language course: "Our point of view is that learning will be facilitated if students are explicitly trained to become aware of and proficient in the use of a broad range of strategies that can be utilized throughout the language learning process." Learners are being given the opportunity to "learn how to learn" and to "learn how to use."

Oxford (1990: 8) describes learner strategies as "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations". The use of the word "actions" here would suggest the decisions being taken by the learner in the language learning process, and this would certainly fit with Cohen's separation of the cognitive and metacognitive strategies.

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Developing Learning Strategies in Writing French at Key Stage 4

Aims of the Project

The overall aim of the research was to develop specific strategies to support pupils in their written French work at KS4. This was addressed through exploration of the following research questions:

- what attitudes do pupils have towards writing in French?
- does training in strategies to support their writing help develop pupil confidence?
- is the success of this training dependent on ability? and
- does increased independence at KS4 lead to greater uptake and retention at KS5?

Context

This project took place over a two year period (2001-2003), following two classes through their GCSE French course. The project took place in one school, a very large (2000+) mixed comprehensive in a small town/rural area of Oxfordshire. The researcher worked with two classes throughout the project and in the first year of the project, the classes of two colleagues were used for control and comparison purposes.

Summary of main findings

- Most pupils did adopt at least one new strategy during their GCSE course and displayed greater awareness of strategy use.
- High ability pupils were able to produce original, creative pieces of writing by the end of the GCSE course, with a high level of accuracy;
- Many frustrations, highlighted by pupils at the beginning of the course, were later overcome by a significant number of pupils;
- Uptake and retention at 16+ was higher than ever before, with no pupil leaving the course (at least after one term, at time of writing); and
- Most pupils perceived writing to be the least important skill in learning French and this did not change during the two years.

Background

In 2001, with the first examinations in 2003, the changes to the specifications for GCSE French provided new challenges for teachers and pupils, notably in the area of written coursework. Pupils can now produce a draft of every piece of writing they submit for coursework and the teacher can comment upon this, using only the sheet provided by the examining body, by ticking the relevant boxes. This will then guide the pupils to the areas which need checking before writing the final version. At least one of these final versions has to be produced in controlled conditions, with only a dictionary and no access to the draft. In order for this process to be successful, the pupils need to understand the advice being given to them and also how to go about making changes to their work. This has necessitated a re-evaluation of the way in which writing is taught, at least in the school involved in the project.

Having previously been involved in a research project focusing on the effectiveness of learner strategies in writing in KS4 French (Macaro, 2001), I felt undertaking a similar project, over a longer period of time, would enable me to re-evaluate my own teaching in this area in addition to focusing on the learning experiences of the pupils. The goal was to devise strategies which would, over a period of time, allow them to become more autonomous and creative in their writing and confident evaluators of their own work.

Four classes were used in the project, three mixed ability and one high ability. The strategies were used with the high ability class and one of the mixed ability classes, with the remaining mixed ability classes acting as control groups. The control group for the high ability class was the mixed ability classes which had the largest number of pupils achieving at an above average level. It was therefore as close a comparison group as possible to the top set. The control group for mixed ability class was another, similar mixed ability class: both have a good spread of ability, with students likely to gain A to E grades at GCSE.

I had no control over the selection of pupils for the groups. Decisions about ability are based upon Key Stage 3 teacher assessments. Most pupils have been learning French since Year 7, with a few having started in Year 9. The pupils have two sixty-five minute lessons of French a week. During the year there was no discussion of my project with colleagues in order to avoid any possible "contamination" issues.

Teaching processes and strategies

I had been able to observe the introduction and development of several strategies during the previous project I had been involved in. This enabled me to reflect upon those strategies and also upon the comments made by the pupils involved and as a result of this, I made decisions about how I would further develop some of those strategies. It is also important to note that the original project took place over a relatively short period of time whereas I had two academic years for this project. The strategies developed over the course of the second project were:

• Brainstorming

• Back-translation (translating back into English)

• Acting upon feedback

• Tense and verb checking

• Self-evaluation

• Use of the resources available to support these strategies

The strategies of brainstorming, back-translation and tense and verb checking were introduced explicitly to the pupils and regularly practised, through a "drip-feed" process at the beginning of the lesson, usually when the register was being taken. Acting upon feedback and self-evaluation were developed, as appropriate, at the end of a piece of writing (class work and homework). Using the resources available to support these strategies spanned most areas, giving pupils instruction and practice in using bilingual dictionaries and verb tables. The use of ICT also played a major role in developing the strategies. Below is a description of two of these strategies, brainstorming and tense and verb checking, with a variety of pupil responses given to a questionnaire at the end of Year 10.

Brainstorming

The aim was for the pupils to consider brainstorming as an essential part of their planning, prior to writing. The brainstorm was to be completed in French and pupils were encouraged to write complete phrases, not simply lots of nouns, verbs or adjectives. It was essential that the brainstorm only included French they already knew. This could be from materials currently being used in class or from their long term memory. By encouraging pupils to use language familiar to them the teacher ensured they were starting a piece of writing from a confident base. Allowing pupils to formulate phrases which include new language at the brainstorming stage lead pupils to abandoning, to an extent, the language readily available to them and this increased the chances of them making unnecessary errors in their writing. Dictionaries were not allowed at this stage, but pupils were asked to make a note in English on the back of their brainstorm of words they wished to look up at a later stage. Once the brainstorm was complete the pupils could then move on to their writing. The fear of the blank page had effectively been removed for most pupils at this point as they then had many things to write about. The brainstorm was then handed in with the writing so that feedback could be provided and suggestions given for future pieces of writing.

In order to develop their confidence, the culture of brainstorming became a much more integral part of lessons. This could be individually, in pairs, in groups or as a whole class, depending on the situation, and sometimes also in English, in order to develop a certain group of words, such as linking words, which could then be looked up in the dictionary. If this type of brainstorm had been conducted in French I would have simply become a talking dictionary and the pupils would not have been actively involved in their learning.

Tense and verb checking

The GCSE assessment criteria place a far greater emphasis on accuracy of verbs and tenses than before and to gain a high grade, mastery of these is essential. To help pupils become more aware of the importance of ensuring they were including verbs in their writing, several possible techniques were introduced: underlining all verbs to show they had been checked and colouring in verbs in different colours to show they were aware of having used different tenses and the correct number of verbs (i.e. two verbs for perfect tense). This strategy was introduced, as a whole class activity initially, and then with pupils working collaboratively, with texts which were being used for reading activities, before asking pupils to apply the strategy to their own work. The pupils would be asked to identify the verb(s) in the sentence and then the tense. This involved developing other strategies at the same time, for example, using clues in the text to help identify the tense being used.

I wanted to provide some scaffolding to help pupils consolidate the activities we do in class to further develop the tense and verb checking strategies. I was also mindful of not making the strategy training paper-heavy, as I felt, reflecting on the previous project I was involved in, some of the pupils found the amount of paperwork quite daunting. I therefore created a checking sheet for the pupils which provided prompts for all the strategies we were developing, with a main focus on tense and verb checking. The sheet served as a reminder of strategies and also encouraged the pupils to access their self-evaluation strategies.

Findings

At the time of writing, it is not possible to provide a statistical analysis of the results of the project. However, evidence from questionnaires and an examination of pupil writing over two years does provide evidence that the strategies were helpful for most pupils. By comparing work and questionnaire responses it is possible to ascertain whether the pupil comments were valid, and for the majority, they were. It was possible to tell from work whether pupils had made changes or checked their writing, by the inclusion of new words, underlining/colour coding of verbs, gender changes and inclusion of auxiliaries in the perfect tense.

An assessment carried out by all four classes at the beginning of Year 10, and then again at the beginning of year 11, allowed me to rank the classes, based on their average sentence length and verb accuracy. The high ability class was ranked first at both assessments and the mixed ability class receiving the strategy training moved from 4th to 2nd place between years 10 and 11. The mixed-ability class were writing longer pieces of French and including more verbs in their writing, but still showing a fairly high level of inaccuracy. It is important to note that the two control classes also did show progress in these areas, but to a lesser degree.

A comparison of the GCSE results of the two experimental classes was made, specifically of the speaking and writing results as these are the two skills which require language to be produced by the pupils. In the mixed ability group only five pupils gained a writing grade at GCSE which was lower than their speaking grade, and ten scored a higher grade. This was very encouraging. In the high ability group the results were surprisingly different: only two pupils gained a higher grade for writing than speaking. However, because 23 out of 31 pupils did gain an A or A* for their speaking exam, it was very difficult or even impossible for them to exceed that grade in their writing exam! The overall standard was therefore very high in both exams for this group. When compared to the control groups, a similar trend was found, with the more able pupils less likely to beat their high speaking grade with their writing grade. This was not necessarily a poor reflection of their writing skills.

Uptake at AS Level has been greater this year, and 9 out of 14 pupils were involved in the strategy training last year. Three of the remaining five pupils came from different schools. Confidence which is normally the main reason a pupil decides to drop French at AS Level has not been an issue this year. Of course this can not all be attributed to the strategy training, but this can take some credit for contributing to the increased uptake. As part of the AS course the students have individual tutorials and they are able to articulate the strategies they use to learn French. This now extends beyond writing, and they are willing to try out new ideas in areas they wish to develop further. Their awareness of learner strategies has certainly been raised.

Here are some of the pupils' thoughts on the tense and verb checking strategy, both positive and negative:

'It's hard to use'

'You know your sentences make sense'

'More aware of verbs'

'It helps me to improve my self-checking'

'Verbs are tricky and need lots of checking'

'Got a bit confusing'

'This helped me check my sentence structure'

A questionnaire at the end of the year also provided some interesting comments about the brainstorm activities. The following are examples of different views expressed by pupils:

'I had a base for writing'

'Useful, but it doesn't help with sentences'

'Gives you ideas'

'Easier than thinking of ideas when translating'

'Helps to get all my ideas down'

'I didn't find it that useful but it helped me structure my sentences easily'

'It gave me a list of ideas to start'

'This helps me memorise key words/phrases'