



An investigation into the independent learning skills used by male students at English Language A Level

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Aims of the project

A group of very able boys in a particular cohort appeared to struggle with AS/A level English Language despite good performances at GCSE level. This study specifically aimed to:

- investigate the factors that limit boys' performance at English Language A level
- identify strategies that can improve their independent learning and motivation

Dimensions of the study

I carried out the study at my school, King Edward VI Upper School, in Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk. It involved two Year 12 classes taking their AS exams in Summer 2008 and one Year 12 class sitting their AS exams in Summer 2009.

Summary of main findings

The main findings of the study were that:

- boys were better motivated when they were offered a choice about what they worked on – boys realised that they should put more effort into their schoolwork but found this difficult to do if the topic was not interesting to them
- teachers' use of probing questions helped students work out the next stages of their learning more effectively
- boys' group working became more collaborative
- boys appreciated having clear guidelines and deadlines for completion of separate sections of a larger task – their

motivation was better when the tasks were short or were broken into short chunks

Background and context

Traditionally we have found that boys find it difficult to produce high quality independent work. As a subject team we have put a greater emphasis on the use of investigations as a method for students to gain knowledge about English Language. The project described in this summary started during the transition period that Year 12 students undertake from AS to A2 courses. This falls in June and July when the students return from completing their AS exams. I designed two Bridging Projects which would specifically extend and develop independent learning skills (see below). I ensured that the projects were directly connected to the skills that would be needed in Year 13. In fact, some of the work would be preparatory for the Year 13 course. I structured the students' work groups so that specific male students should end up taking a leading role within the group. One Bridging Project had a group presentation as its outcome and the other had an individual presentation as its outcome.

Teaching processes and strategies

The independent study Bridging Projects

The Bridging Coursework Project asked students to provide an outline of an investigation that they might like to develop into Year 13. Students had to choose from the general topics of language and power, and language and gender. As a class we generated 'success criteria' for the project outcomes. The aim was for each student to present a hypothesis, a method, data and possible conclusion to smaller groups and each group then chose the best one for presenting to the whole class. The class voted on which presentations best fitted the success criteria.

For the Bridging Editorial Project, students were asked to create their own collection of texts which could be used as an anthology in pre-release materials for an exam. I chose the groupings and they used the *Thinking Actively in a Social Context* (TASC) model designed by Belle Wallace (see below) to generate their planning and thinking on the tasks. I encouraged them to come up with diverse topics. For each topic the students were required to find ten different texts and use these to create a cohesive anthology that could act as pre-release material for an exam paper. In addition the students had to compose two typical questions that might be found on such an exam paper. Students also had to write a model answer for one of the questions. They presented their products to the whole class as group projects.

Encouraging independent working

I used new teaching methods to engage the Year 12 students. For example, I used the TASC model to generate group discussions and organisation of roles within the group. Each member of the group took on a specific role, such as, captain; supporter; questioner. They had to give a one-minute talk about why they should be the person to take on the role before the activity started.

TASC is an active thinking approach which is designed to help students develop the skills necessary for them to become independent and able learners. Students can use the TASC 'problem-solving wheel' as a guide to help them solve problems. TASC activities are arranged in a wheel divided into eight areas each of which focuses on an aspect of students' independent learning:

- gather/organise
- identify
- generate
- decide
- implement
- evaluate
- communicate
- learn from the experience



TASC helps students develop personalised learning as it encourages them to make decisions themselves.

I used a 'Where you will be in 5 years time?' activity created by Matt Gray to help motivate the students (taken from *The Big Book of Independent Thinking* edited by Ian Gilbert). I asked my Year 12 students, after they had returned to school following their AS exams, to imagine they had had their results and were five years in the future. The activity used a number of questions designed to stimulate students' thinking such as: *Which three places in the world could you be working in? Which three things can you do now that you couldn't five years ago? Which three things did you do before sitting you're A-Levels that changed your life?*

Peer assessment

When students presented their work to each other, those watching used coloured cups to indicate their understanding of ideas discussed in the individual presentations. Each student had a copy of the 'success criteria' in front of them as they took it in turn to talk to the group. Each member of the group indicated their understanding of the talk by changing their cups from green to yellow or red or vice versa. The 'success criteria' ranged from having a self-belief that the topic was an interesting one to bringing in a visual stimulus to help the audience find it more interesting. This became a basis for peer assessment as students generated their own 'success criteria' for completion of the tasks.

The findings

The main findings were:

- the students were better motivated when they felt they were given more opportunity to choose what they worked on

- the students engaged more with what they were doing when given an introduction which included an outline of the purpose of the activity, prompts which helped them generate 'success criteria' and teachers' use of probing questions to help them work out the next stages of their learning



- observations showed that students tended to work independently in groups rather than working as a group to solve a task
- the students preferred to work in groups of their choice although their discussion in groups was initially argumentative rather than constructive and explorative – it helped when I organised roles within the groups. This helped in securing their compliance with the ideas and encouraged them to think about the development of the activity
- students appreciated having clear guidelines and deadlines for completion of separate sections of a larger task as this enabled them to concentrate on shorter chunks
- students found it difficult to ask for help initially but they did learn to ask each other for help and so generate ideas as a group

Research methods

I used a number of methods to collect data including:

- group interviews with four boys
- observations of two of the four AS male students working in groups
- teacher records of the boys' level of participation and the outcomes of the final tasks for the Bridging Projects

Conclusion

The study shows that male students with good GCSE grades do not automatically possess independent learning skills even at AS level. They need to have independent learning skills either modelled or explicitly taught to them and the opportunity to practice these skills.

The type of task set is also important. One possible way forward is to design tasks that give the learners greater control over their own learning. Some ways of doing this could include designing tasks that can be broken down into smaller steps that involve self-monitoring.

Teachers also need to ensure that students are fully aware of the relevance and reasons for the various tasks in A Level teaching

and learning. This should include putting in place clear guidelines and deadlines for completion of tasks and modeling the quality of outcomes that are expected.

Suggestions for further reading

Alexander, R.J. (2008) *Towards Dialogic Teaching: rethinking classroom talk*, 4th edition, 60 pp, York: Dialogos. (First edition 2004).

Gilbert, I. (2002) *Essential Motivation in the Classroom*. Routledge Falmer.

Gilbert, I. ed (2006) *The Big Book of Independent Learning*. Crown House Publishing.

Kagan, S (1994) *Cooperative Learning*. (Kagan)

Dylan Wiliams website for further information about AFL, available at: www.dylanwiliam.net

Belle Wallace, *Thinking Actively in a Social Context* (TASC), available at: www.nace.co.uk



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