

CLASSROOM READING





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Classroom Reading

Improving the Effectiveness of Reading Across the Curriculum

This research project developed from a set of coaching observations undertaken with a focus on differentiation. (It began at the same time as the Advanced Bilingual Learners Case Study in this volume – see page 24 and the two will be parallel in their development.)

Reading was identified as a **key issue** preventing the students from fully engaging with the curriculum. As an English teacher, I became curious about how much of an issue this was across the curriculum as a whole, particularly in those subjects where reading was a primary source of information, yet not an explicitly taught skill. The primary focus was not on those students who were identified as having specific literacy difficulties, but on those who were reluctant to read or lacked confidence and how this impacted on learning.

Overview and Context of the Study

Confidence and speed in decoding text and inferring meaning are central skills in independent learning across many subjects in the curriculum. Yet observations and questionnaires revealed that many students in Years 9 and 10 start to lose confidence in their ability to evaluate and decode text independently, just at a time when this skill is becoming central to their success in examinations and coursework. Some of these students were Advanced Bilingual Learners and some were not.

- The research aimed to assess the **nature** of the students' difficulties and to establish an accessible range of strategies for both students and teachers, thus to ensure that reading allows the development and consolidation of effective learning, rather than being the barrier that students sometimes perceive it to be.
- Central to the outcomes were the comments and experiences of the students. It was their views, experiences and responses regarding how text was treated in the classroom that have given the suggested strategies and future development plans their real focus.
- The research has revealed that there is a great deal of good practice already taking place within lessons. It became obvious that this practice needs to be shared and that all teachers need to be trained in reading strategies – it needs to become a core skill for all. Cross departmental training will give access to these strategies to those who teach subjects that are not explicitly associated with literacy, and also to reinforce the belief that 'Every teacher is a teacher of English'.

Methods

The project has initially used a number of different methods to gather information and responses. These will be extended and developed to include more qualitative data as the strategies and training are implemented.

- Observations across a range of subjects, year groups and ability ranges focussing on how students are accessing texts within lessons and what teachers are doing to facilitate this process.
- Questionnaires to students asking them to comment on their experiences of reading in the classroom and its outcomes. These were supported by interviews.
- Discussions with classroom teachers about their confidence with using text in their lessons and what strategies they currently use for assisting students.

Concerns

- Students in Years 9 and 10 who are in the mid to lower ability ranges (Levels 4/5 and Grades C/D respectively) demonstrate a marked loss of confidence in their ability to monitor and solve reading difficulties. They also become less willing to admit to problems with reading.
- Non-English teachers are often unaware of how reading ages and SATs reading levels impact on students' abilities to take meaning from text, as opposed to their ability to simply read accurately. Too often this interpretation of decoding the text as revealing comprehension can be a major stumbling block when teachers are assessing why students are not progressing.
- The loss of enthusiasm and confidence in reading seems directly related to the perception that it always leads to a test in some capacity – from the simple 'Tell me about what you have read' to a more formal assessment. Therefore, the problem of presenting text and reading in such a way as to not be a barrier has become central.





Implementation

The key concern when undertaking the research was to attempt to gain a genuine picture of how students were approaching reading on a daily basis in their lessons. Formal lesson observations were completed but we also needed to have a 'key hole' look at what was going on in everyday normal lessons, when there was no observer present. We organised a flexible and informal atmosphere outside the classroom, where students' reflections and comments could be sought on the skills they were practising and how they perceived their practice of it.

The questionnaires and interviews revealed many interesting facts that would have been very hard to access otherwise. They also made it possible to track broader patterns of attitudes towards reading across year groups and ability ranges. The vast majority of students seemed to appreciate this opportunity to comment on their learning experiences and provided very insightful responses.

Teacher interviews were vital in gaining a perception of how staff felt about their classes' progress during lessons and how far this had been assisted or hindered by the reading strategies employed within the lesson. The interviews also revealed where staff felt that their own understanding of the reading process made it difficult for them to identify potential problems for students in the classroom.

Initially, the research will lead to improved focus on reading in staff CPD. In the long term it is hoped that it will allow the development of training for students in independent reading strategies that can be employed across the curriculum. These strategies will be developed in conjunction with students and will work as a tool-kit that they can apply whenever they are decoding text.

Impact on Learning – Students and Teachers

Students

Students' responses to reading in the classroom are central to the development of further training for both staff and students. Their comments and insights have proved to be great resource in identifying key areas of difficulty. They also revealed quite starkly the links between understanding and poor behaviour.

Key focuses were

- Accessing core texts in RE, Science, History and MFL
- Building confidence in addressing problems in their own comprehension
- Decline in their motivation to read from Year 8 to Years 9 and 10
- Identifying teacher strategies that have direct impact on student confidence
- Effect of appearance of texts on comprehension

Students gave responses relating to their experiences with difficult texts:

*I get angry and frustrated
and then I give up.*

*Sometimes teachers talk
like we are adults.*

*We feel that there is
no point anymore.*

I feel neglected.

I feel un-understandable.

Teachers

The input of teacher reflections on their own confidence when using texts in the classroom provided invaluable information about how students' needs could be better met. Conversely, the many examples of good practice encountered will help develop a framework for training to be available to all teachers in order to ensure consistency across the curriculum.

Key focuses arising

- The need to build confidence in less experienced teachers when using text in the classroom. Examples of good practice should be re-enforced as standard whenever text is being used in the classroom.
- The purposes of these approaches should be explicitly explained in order to ensure consistency in their practice.
- Explanation of the practical interpretation of data such as reading ages and SATs reading levels for non-English teachers.
- Helping teachers identify what exactly they wanted the students to do/access/process as a result of reading during lessons and ensuring that their strategies promote this.



What has been Learned

The primary finding of the observations and questionnaires was the huge impact difficulties with reading had on the self-esteem of students and their attitude to teaching and learning as a whole. One student commented that the most helpful thing a teacher could do was to 'read to me' and the thing that made text more difficult to understand was when the teacher 'read to people that understand.' The comments provide a poignant insight into the isolation that is felt when text is used in the classroom and students are not given the time and strategies to access the meaning.



Observations of different practice across the curriculum clearly developed our understanding of the most effective strategies teachers used to enable students to become secure in working with the more challenging texts that are used in Years 9, 10 and 11. In particular, when the emphasis was placed on structured student focused interpretation, the increase in engagement and confidence was marked. In contrast, reading which relied wholly on teacher interpretation, or more commonly, was treated as a chore to be completed as quickly as possible, produced an experience of frustration and self-doubt.

Making students the focus of the reading process and allowing them to find meaning for themselves whilst supported by teacher input meant that students gained confidence and felt more able to approach problematic texts. Equally, their mistakes seemed less important as they were part of a process of investigation. Where reading became a cause for difficulty or resentment it was often, ironically, due to over explanation or a sense that meaning lay with the teacher and therefore required her/his input in order to be released.

The appearance of the text was also a key issue in accessing its meaning, in particular for less confident readers. Often dismissed as an extra / cosmetic concern, it had a real impact on how students engaged with the text even before starting to read.

Key findings

- Texts need to be chosen or adapted in terms of appearance to allow for clear distinction of text and annotation, in particular for students in the competent but less confident ability ranges.
- At the point when reading is done within the lesson, the text must be made central and adequate time given to its interpretation.
- All teachers need to be aware of and confident in basic reading strategies to apply to a range of reading situations.
- Students need to be made explicitly aware of the reading strategies they can employ independently when texts are challenging.
- Teachers need to be trained in the interpretation of reading data to ensure they have a practical awareness of its implications for learning and lesson planning.



Next Steps

The next steps are likely to be the most challenging and interesting part of the process as they will require careful planning and monitoring in order to have the desired impact. However, the impact could potentially be very wide ranging for this broad and complex group of students. Clearly, staff training will play a part, but ensuring this is consistently applied with a view to improving attitudes and effectiveness for reading both inside and outside the classroom will require an internalisation by students of the support offered in lessons. It is hoped that by explicitly engaging students in the process of reading and how they gain meaning it will enable them to monitor and address their own difficulties with a sense of confidence rather than defeat, thereby producing the independent learners we want them to become.

- Focused staff training on reading strategies and interpretation of reading data.
- Development of student training in reading strategies for independent reading – to be constructed in conjunction with students themselves.
- Engagement of students in the design of resources using text – with explanation of the purpose of layout choices for teachers.