

**Best Practice Research
Practice (B.P.R.S.)
“Thinking Skills” and Writing Report
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Theoretical Background

As a teacher and learner I am deeply aware of the cognitive function of written language and hold fast to the belief of the primacy of composition as a means for developing ideas. In working with KS3/4 pupils over many years I have found that progress in writing seems to occur in direct proportion to the extent to which the pupils own and frame their own writing. I agree with Wells that in order to develop/construct his/her “internal model of the world” pupils need to re-formulate ideas. Britton makes the distinction between the ideational (representational, referential, cognitive) and interpersonal (expressive – cognitive, social, evocative) functions of language. In my exploration of “Thinking Skills” strategies, integral to teaching styles which promote structure and fluency in writing. I have paid attention to the first of these functions. In designing my teaching strategies I have paid attention to work of linguists such as Widdowson, Vygotsky, Wells and Kress. Widdowson advocates the development of conceptual schemata as apparatus for encouraging development of cognitive constructs:

“Schemata, then can be defined as cognitive constructs or configurations of knowledge which we place over events so as to bring them into alignment with familiar patterns of experience and belief. They therefore serve as devices for categorizing and arranging information so that it can be interpreted and retained:

“There are two basic levels of language knowledge, the systemic and the schematic, and it is the second that serves as the main source of reference in language use” (Widdowson - 1983).

Vygotsky identifies the stages in the development of thought through oral, inner and written language and stresses the highly conscious nature of written language. “Written language demands conscious work because its relationship to inner speech is different to that of oral speech and presupposes its existence (the act of writing implying a translation from inner speech to maximally detailed written speech requires what might be called deliberate semantics – deliberate structuring of the needs of meaning”.

Vygotsky stresses the role that language plays in developing thought processes: “Learning to direct one’s own mental processes with the aid of words and signs is an integral part of the process of concept formation”.

Vygotsky observed that there is a striking discrepancy between the adolescent’s ability to form concepts and his/her ability to define them. Whilst remarking that this discrepancy also occurs in adult thinking, Vygotsky says, “This confirms the assumption that concepts evolve in ways differing from deliberate conscious elaboration of experience in logical terms”.

Kress's work on genre analysis builds on Widdowson's ideas about Schemata. Widdowson stated that in "the aim of genre analysis is to establish Schematic types of both on interpersonal and an ideational kind (routines, frames of reference, routines with frames of reference) and their typical textualization in English". Kress in "Learning to Write" (1982) crystallises these frames for us and through his discussion of linguistic patterning establishes the areas of knowledge about language which are most likely to make print in enhancing the written curriculum.

Kress's work in text-linguistics has helped established understanding about "linguistic patterning above the sentence level". His considerations of "the internal cohesion of texts, the topical connectedness of parts of texts, the development of thematic material, paragraphing, paraphrase and restatement have been of crucial significance to me in enabling me to see how to structure oral and written tasks so that pupils might be able to grasp and develop their own "linguist patterning above the sentence level".

Kress's assertion of the intimate connection between language and cognition and his emphasis on the empowering facility with which a "mastery of the genres" will endow the learner, have been guiding principals informing my Thinking Skills lessons. As Kress says "Differences of form facilitate qualitatively distinctive modes of thinking". In my work I have tried to offer pupils oral processes as routes towards their own writing framing in order that the language formulated might be their own and providing some foundations on which to build.

Aims of Research

My aims were as follows:

- To develop Thinking Skills strategies to teach Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 analytical and transactional writing more systematically.
- To investigate whether Thinking Skills strategise may have significant impact on Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 writing.

I have actually developed Thinking Skill resources/strategies for Key Stage 3 and 4 classes over this past year and previously but for the purposes of this report I shall concentrate on a Year 8 KS 3 class.

Methodology

Academic Year 2001-2

Class – Subject of Study - 32 Year 8 mixed gender English Set 3 out of 4 :

95% of whom started year with National Curriculum Level 4 in Writing Skills but 50% had reading age of 14+.

Methodology: Lesson Design

The class was taught 6 half-term National Curriculum modules, 4 of which contained components where writing tests were created using Thinking Skills strategies. The modules formed part of the usual National Curriculum Programmes of study and included the following strands: Narrative (Text: Holes' by Louis Sackur). Shakespeare (A

Midsummer Night's Dream) Newspaper Analysis & Creations (Non-Fiction) and Ballads (Pre 20th Century Poetry).

At the beginning of the Yr 8 course, I gathered writing samples for subsequent comparison. I found the samples to be poor in vocabulary content, weak in sentence structure generally inaccurate and lacking in paragraph organisation.

The course modules did not consist exclusively of Thinking Skills oral/writing strategies e.g. Drama, Media, ICT etc.).

The strategies employed were not discrete exercises but embedded in the overall unit design. The Thinking Skills activities made challenging demands on the pupil because my ultimate aim was to teach them how to set about beginning to draft extended analytical prose.

Through highly structured but hopefully not constraining oral stages, pupils were encouraged develop their capacities for logical reasoning. They were shown how to employ critical thinking through collaborative learning and drawn along a path towards independent learning.

Methodology:- Thinking Skills Strategies: Resource Creation.

In each module, texts were selected and in each case complete texts were presented initially to encourage cognitive grasp of the overall structure.

However, for the purposes of setting up structured talk leading towards writing, planning and drafting, I selected in each module a particular text focus e.g. a pair of scenes for comparison, a thematic strand for exploration or a conceptual area for analysis. I then usually created a question rather like a research question. I sought to create each time a question which would be both easy to understand yet require a searching answer. I then created sets of statements surrounding the question. The statements (20-40 on average) would vary in depth and relevance to answering the question. I took pains to create some statements which were essentially concept-based. I then created a second bank of quotations from the text if this seemed necessary (i.e. if pupils might find this difficult to do themselves). The quotations were chosen for their value in supporting statements leading towards argument creation.

I had both these banks laminated in different colours which eased their handling and offered kinaesthetic learning appeal.

Methodology : Thinking Skills Lesson Design

Texts as mentioned already were first taught in the usual way using a variety of teaching styles.

Thinking Skill lessons were structured so that a class was organised in groups with roles assigned and defined. A typical set of roles comprised: chairperson, statement keeper, secretary, spokesperson. Roles were rotated as tasks developed over a series of lessons. Pupils were asked to address the question, sort, group and order the statements and add quotations. These activities demanded sequential stages of talk but allowed for elaboration. Oral lessons included note taking and then gave way to drafting lessons.

Methodology : Research Methodology

Included: Lesson Observation
Pupil Interviews
Pupil learning logs
Teacher learning log
Dialogue with colleagues also training materials/methods
Written portfolios
External moderation of portfolios

Results

Lesson observations:

- Lessons were sometimes inevitably noisy, but undoubtedly in a lively positive way. Pupils sometimes only partially understood roles.
- Pupils either followed procedures well and talk developed productively or failed to grasp sequence of activities and were held up.
- Intervention by teacher or by some pupil's helped increase levels of productive talk.
- Sometimes only secretary had statements noted for future reference.
- Pupils' feedback presentation varied in level of effectiveness.
- Whole class discussion following group activities was invariably richer than usual.

Pupil interviews:

- By and large pupils found lessons beneficial to drafting writing. They also for the most part enjoyed the lessons although some found them too challenging at times.

Pupils learning logs:

- Many pupils reported that they found they listened more and saw the point of listening (despite the noise!)
- Pupils said lessons helped their capacity to plan and write.
- Pupils reported gains in self-confidence.
- Some pupils admitted that they didn't contribute much.
- Some pupils complained that they had to think too much!
- Many pupils were proud of their finished drafts.
- Pupils claimed that the lessons helped them to sort out their ideas.

- Pupils said that it helped their co-operative skills
- Many pupils talked about how the lessons helped them break information down so that they could make sense of it
- Pupils said lessons aided their concentration
- Pupils said that lessons helped expand their vocabulary
- Pupils said they had learned to appreciate ideas of others more
- Pupils said they had found that it was more productive if only one person spoke at a time
- Some pupils said that they felt lessons were about making your brain work.

Teacher Viewpoint from Logs/Dialogue

- Lessons enjoyable, structured, deemed productive. Objectives very clear to pupils – lessons produced more organised, fluent and interesting writing.
- Resource creation was initially very time consuming
- Pupils capacity to think in evidence in the quality of the group and whole class discussion often discussion was at a very high level i.e. well in excess of original National Curriculum written level.

Written Portfolios

- Over the course of the academic year there was marked progress in pupils' writing. National Curriculum levels were raised as follows
25% of level 4 – 4+
50% of level 4 – 5
25% of level 4 – 6

These improvements in writing performance occurred against a background of stray reading and oral abilities that nevertheless seemed reasonably marked over the course of one year. The levels were externally corroborated by the Cambridge University Faculty English Director.

Findings

- The introduction of Thinking Skills classes in the way described seems to be an effective means of raising writing standards and of developing the critical faculty.
- Gains were made in speaking and listening skills but this was not monitored systematically due to the difficulty of tracking 32 speakers on a regular basis.
- Pupils gained confidence in themselves as thinkers, students and writers.
- Development of critical writing skill and general fluency could be perhaps at the expense of creative writing.
- Teacher talk/pupil talk dominated lessons/ perhaps that be at the expense of pupils' individual reading.

Questions for the future.

- Is there a need to define speaking roles and rotate them?
- Is there a need to vary a range of written tasks and make them genre – specific?
- Is there a need to ensure a greater balance in the classroom using English modes of study i.e. speaking and listening, reading and writing?
- How should Thinking Skills lessons of the type described be set against lessons involving other teaching styles?
- What would be the role of ICT in these types of lessons?
- How do we ensure progression through the curriculum strands through genres?

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