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# All the school's a stage: Improving attainment through drama as pedagogy and reflective marking

Alexander Owens, Kuwait

# All the school's a stage: Improving attainment through drama as pedagogy and reflective marking

### School context

The International British School in Kuwait is experiencing rapid growth and boasts a diverse community of students and staff from around the world. Our student body primarily consists of Kuwaiti, Egyptian and Lebanese pupils, along with a total of 39 nationalities represented.

The school is dedicated to fostering academic excellence while providing a supportive and welcoming environment for its students. It has excellent facilities, such as a full-size swimming pool and a working theatre, and students are also encouraged to participate in a broad range of extracurricular activities. In the secondary department, the students follow both Cambridge and Edexcel courses.

As well as being part of British Schools in the Middle East (BSME), the school is currently in the process of attaining British Schools Overseas (BSO) accreditation as it develops.

### About the author



**Alex Owens** is a Teacher of Drama and English at the International British School in Kuwait. He holds a BA in Performing Arts from the University of Salford, an MA in Literature and Creative Writing and a PGCE from the University of Sheffield. His

master's thesis explores representations and perspectives of time in modern literature.

He enjoys creating and directing theatre and also acts in dramatic performances in Kuwait. He is an avid supporter of the arts and regularly seeks to improve his teaching through drama-based approaches.

### Key findings

- We observed a significant increase in student participation. This higher level of engagement could mean that students are feeling more confident in participating in activities such as these [drama activities]. Additionally, it highlights their improvements in written English and reading comprehension.
- Thirteen out of 20 students (65 per cent) mentioned that 'drama' was either a new skill they acquired this term or something they found enjoyable about school.
- From their responses, ten out of 20 students (50 per cent) demonstrated instances of self-reflection, either personally or academically. This aligns with our objectives of encouraging students to take greater responsibility for and feel a sense of ownership towards their education.



## Exploratory action research questions

1. **Why do I think there is underperformance with students in my school?**
2. **What do my students think about their own academic performance?**
3. **When and how often does this under-performance manifest in students' work?**

## Action research rationale

Following our initial baseline assessments in English, the data revealed that a number of students – particularly those for whom English is an additional language – face challenges in accessing the curriculum. This includes a significant portion of our student body, with Kuwaiti students representing approximately 44 per cent of the secondary department (72 out of 164). Factors such as varying levels of English proficiency and inconsistent attendance patterns may contribute to these challenges.

These findings reflect broader educational trends observed across Kuwait. A 2022 UNESCO national case study, spanning 64 pages, offers valuable insights into the socio-economic and cultural factors influencing educational outcomes, particularly among boys. This context helps us better understand the diverse learning needs within our school community.

While one of the aims of this research is to support students who may be experiencing difficulty, including many from our Kuwaiti cohort, the overarching goal is to enhance English attainment and academic achievement for all learners across the school.

Attainment in English has been chosen as the focus of this research because, aside from Arabic, French and Islamic lessons, all other subjects in our school are taught in English. We have observed that underperformance occurs across the curriculum due to many students struggling to access lesson content as second language learners. There is a noticeable disparity between levels of written and spoken English, as well as challenges with reading comprehension and group work tasks. It is therefore logical to assume that by enhancing students' comprehension of spoken and written English, we can improve attainment across the entire curriculum.

As a growing school, we are continually focusing on enhancing teaching and learning, enriching the curriculum and developing CPD (continuous professional development) programmes for staff.

My research aims to operate within these parameters as part of our ongoing commitment to the school and its students.

This research will explore the reasons behind students' underperformance in greater depth. Based on the findings, the programme seeks to do the following:

1. **Explore improvements for teaching and learning.**
2. **Create a CPD programme with the assistance of other staff members.**
3. **Create opportunities for curriculum enrichment.**

## Data collection tools

### Methodology

**My data collection tools will be divided into one tool per question and are as follows:**

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1. **What factors may contribute to academic challenges among students with diverse linguistic backgrounds?**

This question will be explored through a detailed analysis of Key Stage 3 students' performance in English. The data includes baseline assessment results that evaluate students' reading comprehension, fiction and non-fiction writing. These results are graded and assessed against the requirements of the national curriculum for Key Stage 3.

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2. **What do my students think about their own academic performance?**

In order to analyse this question in greater depth, I will create a short questionnaire for 25 students in Year 7. This way, I can gather and survey their thoughts and perspectives.

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### 3. When and how often does this underperformance manifest in students' work?

Over the next few weeks, I aim to conduct short, recorded interviews with three staff members. Using this data collection method, I aim to explore and interpret the thoughts and attitudes of staff and leadership at our school.

In total, the data collection will include participation from 25 students and four teachers. Consent for the research will be secured using a letter and a form for participating parents (of students) and staff to sign.

## Data analysis for the exploration stage

### Key findings from exploration

- While underperformance in English seems to improve as students progress through Key Stage 3, it's important to note that the number of our cohort decreases significantly between Year 7 and Year 9.
- Out of the 25 students invited to participate in the student questionnaire, 11 either did not return the form or had their parents decline participation. This limitation may bias the findings, as the data is insufficient to accurately represent students' perspectives. In the future, I recommend either increasing the sample size, allowing more time to collect forms, or both.
- In general, the students' surveyed reported positive experiences in school and also presented favourable opinions about their teachers. Students also stated their favourite subjects are ones that involve physical activity and team-based activities such as Drama and PE.
- Students also reported wanting to achieve high grades as a primary target for the academic year.
- Teachers surveyed reported that some students, particularly those from households where English is not the primary language, may require additional support and motivation during lessons. Language barriers, especially limited exposure to English outside of school, were identified as a contributing factor to these challenges. Staff also noted that differences in home language environments can affect how easily students engage with English-based tasks. These observations highlight the importance of developing inclusive strategies that support learners in a primarily English-speaking academic setting.
- Despite teachers' awareness of underperformance, many did not identify specific areas where it manifests, aside from summative assessments.

## Action Research

### Action plan

#### Curriculum enrichment

I plan to adapt parts of the curriculum to develop strategies that will support underperforming students. This will include creating drama activities to enhance their English speaking and writing skills. We will implement these activities in Science, English and French classes. The activities will cover a range of tasks, such as role playing 'real life' scenarios in English, writing in role and hot seating. Teachers will record these activities to assess students' initial responses and identify areas for improvement in planning and delivery. This process should take about one month. The short-term targets are to improve spoken and written English among the target group of Year 7 students.

#### Marking policy update

I will advocate for updating the school's marking policy to ensure students receive appropriate feedback on their use of English across the curriculum. To do this, I have written a new marking policy for English and will submit it to the Head of Secondary for review.

The goal of the new marking policy is to make it easier for staff to spot errors in English that manifest in students' work. To do this, the updated policy will address different ability levels, emphasising SPAG (spelling, punctuation and grammar) for lower abilities and focusing on content, vocabulary and ideas for middle and higher abilities. This will take around a month to action and implement. The short-term targets are to improve students' written ability in English across the whole school, but for the purposes of this research, I will focus on the target group of Year 7 students. This will be monitored throughout the academic year and reviewed after the students complete their term three assessments. I will also record progress through the use of student questionnaires that have been purposely structured to evaluate improvements in reading comprehension between term one and term two of the academic year.



## Action plan evaluation tools

### 1. Recording of initial drama-based activities during lessons

Teachers will be creating short videos in order to assess the initial reception of the activities they have planned. At a later date, we will be using the videos to discuss how well the activities went and to address issues staff may have faced during the delivery. We will also use them to discuss the next steps in developing and delivering the activities. We will also be addressing how to follow up the activities with student reflection and consolidation of knowledge.

### 2. Student questionnaire on progress

Students will be given a short questionnaire to complete. This will focus on how they feel that they have progressed throughout the year. It will also question them on their experience of school and their attitudes towards education. This questionnaire can then be compared with the one they completed at the start of the research. The questionnaires have been purposely structured to identify any improvements in reading comprehension. For this questionnaire, I have included a more challenging level of vocabulary and sentence structure.

### 3. Short interviews with staff

These interviews will address the impact of the updated marking policy and capture staff's attitudes and feelings towards it. The interviews will also explore how they feel that the new drama activities have gone and what, if any, impact they have had on student attainment.

**'My first time doing it [drama] and it's so fun.'**

Written response to the questionnaire from a Year 7 student

## Data analysis and conclusions

### Action plan implementation

The action plan was implemented effectively. We have witnessed some improvement across Year 7 in terms of reading comprehension, speaking and writing. However, how much of this we can attribute to the effectiveness of the programme rather than the natural progression of our students is still unclear.

Staff have been active in learning new drama approaches to implement into their lessons. Many that contributed to the research have actively researched their own methods and implemented them into their

classrooms. From the recordings that staff took of the students taking part in the activities, it is clear that students seem to be enjoying the participation, while improving their spoken and written English.

### An example of one of the activities

A role play of Julius Caesar where one student was encouraged to take on the role of 'conspirators', and the rest of the students, who were playing Brutus, Cassius and Anthony, had to figure out who that person was. Students then had to write a reflective diary while in role to talk about their experience.

By doing this, students are invited to consider character intention and subtext, two crucial factors in analysing Shakespeare.

A staff member then said 'this [the drama activity] also translated into their writing when they [the students] were asked to produce their own monologue from a character's perspective'.

However, staff also noted that one of the challenges that occurred when delivering these activities was 'getting students to participate'. This is an important statement for me to think about when designing the activities in future. Staff also commented that 'reflection tasks' after an activity and 'the frequency' that we conduct them would both improve the consolidation of the knowledge that students gain from participating.

### Key findings

We observed a significant increase in student participation in our latest questionnaire. While only 14 students completed the first survey, this time we received responses from 20 students. This higher level of engagement could mean that students are feeling more confident in participating in activities such as these. Additionally, it highlights their improvements in written English and reading comprehension. I intentionally made the questions more challenging than the initial questionnaire by using more advanced vocabulary and sentence structures.

Another noteworthy point is that 13 out of 20 students (65 per cent) mentioned that 'drama' was either a new skill they acquired this term or something they found enjoyable about school. Eight out of 20 students (40 per cent) also reported that their confidence has improved. One student remarked 'My first time doing it [drama] and it's so fun', demonstrating that students seem to enjoy the additions to the curriculum.

From their responses, ten out of 20 students (50 per cent) demonstrated instances of self-reflection, either personally or academically. The emergence of self-reflection has also occurred during lessons, with one student sharing 'I sometimes feel like I am in the story'. This aligns with our objectives of encouraging students to take greater responsibility for and feel a sense of ownership towards their education.

## Future actions

**Conclusions of this Action Research and their impact on your setting and the learning that could be transmitted to others, particularly in a global context. Possible enhancements in the school development cycle.**

- **Further investigate the reasons for retention issues with our Kuwaiti students between Year 7 and Year 9.**
- **Revisit the marking policy and find a way to engage and include parents by making it more accessible.**
- **Ensure that all students, regardless of ability, can access our marking policy.**
- **Review the effects of the updated policy at the end of the school year.**
- **Update the drama activities and ensure that ‘reluctant’ students are included.**
- **Deepen staff understanding of drama as pedagogy and its place within the curriculum.**

## Conclusions

While we have made significant progress in developing various areas of the curriculum and updating our marking policy, staff have suggested several ways to further enhance both the effectiveness of the marking policy and the delivery of our curriculum enrichment activities.

From the perspective of the staff I interviewed and worked closely with, the most notable improvement has been in the confidence levels of students participating in drama and drama-based pedagogy this academic year. As second language learners, using imagination and ‘play’ to enhance their written and spoken English has also had an unexpected positive social effect.

Although the updated curriculum’s impact on written and spoken English in formal assessments remains unclear due to the small sample size and low frequency of activities, short-term improvements in students’ work have been evidenced by their responses to the questionnaire. This suggests that the research has positively influenced academic performance in students’ written English. Students who completed the questionnaire also seemed more reflective and critically aware in their responses when compared with their initial survey results.

The suggestion to make marking ‘more accessible for parents’ is intriguing, as it could contribute to our goal of improving academic attainment. Some staff have also expressed that the new policy has not changed how they identify issues with students’ work.

It is also too early to determine the overall effect of the new marking policy on grades and results. It is also difficult to judge the impact it has had on students’ written English because the policy is a recent development in the school. We anticipate being able to explore some of the effects in greater depth after the final exams in May. However, we believe that the overall effect will become more noticeable with time and frequent revision to the policy.

Moving forward, the school plans to assess the impact of the research based on our exam results in May. Following this evaluation, I aim to expand the programme into our primary department. Additionally, I intend to present the research findings in a talk to the entire school.

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