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## LESSON STUDY RESEARCH REPORT

# Improving Writing: maximising progress through lesson study

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### Abstract

**Background:** The purpose of the study was to use a Lesson Study approach to collaboratively plan, teach, observe, and reflect on learning in order to maximize progress in writing among primary school students in Suffolk. The focus was on increasing the use of descriptive language and vocabulary, as well as boosting confidence and motivation, with a particular emphasis on praising pupils' attempts and encouraging others to admire their writing.

**Aims:** The main aim of the lesson study project was to improve the teaching of writing and the learning and progress of pupils by re-evaluating and improving teaching practice.

**Methods:** The participants in the lesson study project focused on improving their teaching of writing. Methods used included teacher demonstration, role-play, word generation, story frames differentiated according to ability, post-it note idea sharing, teacher demonstration of thought process, shared and independent writing, and use of praise and encouragement to boost confidence.

**Findings:** The lesson study project improved the writing skills of the three case pupils, with increased confidence, motivation, and use of descriptive language. The pupils enjoyed sharing their work and admiring each other's ideas, and the teacher improved her practice, focusing on aspects of writing and re-evaluating her own practice to improve the learning and progress of the pupils.

**Implications:** The findings of the lesson study project suggest that teaching writing should include a teacher demonstration stage, speaking and listening activities, and plenty of support during the planning stages. It also highlights the importance of consistency in approaches to using the APP grids and collecting evidence.

**Keywords:** lesson study; writing; descriptive language; primary education

## Context

As part of a school-led action research project, groups of primary schools across Suffolk identified priority areas to develop. Lowestoft Network identified writing as their priority area. With support from Suffolk's Learning and Improvement Service, it was decided to use a Lesson Study approach as a means of collaborative planning, teaching, observing & reflecting on learning in order to maximise progress. 34 teachers from eighteen Lowestoft Primary schools were involved in the project.

Carlton Colville has recently been extended to a through Primary School for 3-11 year olds, and relocated to a newly refurbished building, giving lots of exciting opportunities for providing a creative and flexible curriculum, both indoors and outside. It is a large school with 450 pupils and a 2-form entry, in a semi-rural setting on the outskirts of Lowestoft.

Our lesson study group had a range of experience and expertise across the Foundation Stage and KS1 including a sound knowledge of working with pupils with a variety of Special Needs. Three of the group had also previously worked as a TA and our teaching experience ranged from three to twenty years! LP is also an art teacher and was a great provider of creative ideas during the planning stage!

### Names and usual roles and contact details of LS group members

- A Tregear, Year 1 teacher/FS leader/KS1 leader at Carlton Colville Primary, delivered lessons in LS1
- C Thompson, R/Y1 teacher at Kessingland Primary, observer of JM
- L Parker, R/Y1 teacher, Art teacher at Elm Tree Primary, observer of BC
- L Garwood, Reception Teacher/FS leader at Elm Tree Primary, observer of HB

## Aims of the Lesson Study

Although writing is not an issue at our school, as it is firmly embedded in our flexible curriculum, there are always things that you can do to improve still further. Our aim for this series of research lessons was to extend the teaching sequence for writing as we felt that we sometimes expect too much of the children too soon and don't always give them enough preparation time before expecting them to produce a piece of writing. So we made sure that we included lots of talk, drama, role-play, teacher demonstration and sharing of ideas to excite and motivate the pupils before actually putting pen to paper.

We referred to Pie Corbett's work 'How to teach story writing at KS1' and used the first two of the three 'eyes', 'imitation' and 'innovation'.

We also wanted to improve the pupil's vocabulary and encourage the use of descriptive words in their writing.

### Our case pupils

**Pupil A:** a more able boy who is a fluent reader with a good vocabulary, however, his writing is behind his reading and he sometimes seems to lack motivation. Focus: We would like to challenge and motivate him to actively participate in lessons and have confidence in his own ideas, and also encourage him to use descriptive vocabulary and chain clauses together in his writing.

**Pupil B:** a girl of average ability but lacking motivation and possibly confidence. She works very slowly and her work is often poorly presented with lots of crossings out. She appears to be quite emotionally needy, attention seeking and to have low self-esteem. Focus: to increase confidence, remain focussed on the task and increase use of descriptive language in writing.

**Pupil C:** a lower attainer in reading and writing, although better at maths (possibly slightly dyslexic?). Very neat handwriting, generally enthusiastic but lacking confidence to have a go at independent writing. Focus: to increase confidence and to have a go at writing a simple sentence independently. Also to increase vocabulary and use of descriptive language.

## First research lesson (RL1)

In this lesson we focussed on the first of Pie Corbett's three 'eyes': Imitation, in order to encourage the children to use descriptive vocabulary. We re-read and re-told the story of 'Handa's Surprise' with the children gradually joining in more and more. Next we acted out the story using props from a 'story sack'. Then the children had a go at pretending to be the animals in the story whilst the teacher asked questions such as 'What colour are you?' 'How big are you?' 'What are you like?' 'How do you feel?' to encourage the generation of descriptive vocabulary. The TA pretended to be on safari with binoculars and collected words in the 'Super-duper Secret Whizzy Word Book'! (for the 'Big Reveal' later!) We then repeated the activity with the children pretending to be the fruit in the story. After that we came back together as a class and revealed the words collected by the TA (children were excited to see whether their word was included!). The words were collected on a flip chart, added to and saved for next week. We talked about changing the setting of the story to England and the children were challenged to think of some British animals and fruit, and write their ideas on post-it notes to be saved for next week.

The lesson appeared to go very well, with all pupils engaged and motivated in the role-play and word generation.

The post lesson discussion revealed some interesting insights into the pupils' learning: CP1 was observed sucking his thumb a lot and copying a friend most of the time. He seemed reluctant (unwilling or unable?) to put forward his own ideas. We wondered whether he was lacking confidence in his own ideas, or whether he was just content to take the easy option. We thought we might try pairing him with a different, less dominant child next time. He struggled to answer questions without his friend in the post lesson interview. CP2 tended to watch others carefully for reassurance before feeling able to join in. However, she gradually became more confident with each successive animal and had some interesting ideas; 'I can see above the school' (as a giraffe), and explored the whole classroom as an antelope with 'twisty' horns! She did seem to prefer talking to an adult more than the other children. During the post-it note stage she was observed squabbling with a friend over a pencil, stabbing her in the arm, and then copying her ideas! She was very chatty in the post lesson interview and appeared to have really enjoyed the lesson, 'It was fun. I like it when Mrs T. asks us to do things – pretending to be something. The fruit was the best bit.' CP3 really enjoyed the retelling and acting out of the story. He was also actively engaged in the animal/fruit role-play, although he did like to watch others first before having a go himself. He had lots of good ideas, 'I can swing through the

trees!' (as a monkey). When writing post-its, he needed reassurance and encouragement to have a go at sounding out words. He said he found the writing a bit tricky, 'I can only write one sentence.'

## Second research lesson (RL2)

In lesson 2 we wanted the children to become more confident with the story structure and further extend their use of descriptive vocabulary in their own story plan for a story like 'Handas' Surprise' set in England. So we began by acting out the story again before writing their own story plan in a story frame differentiated according to ability. They were able to refer to the lists of English animals and fruit that we compiled last lesson. We had a break during the planning stage when they were able to look at each other's work to pick up some good ideas and write them on a post-it note to use in their own plan. The children really enjoyed this, and we tried to ensure that the less-confident children's work was admired by their friends! The lesson ended with a teacher demonstration of how to write a story using one of the story plans.

Again the post lesson discussion and interviews revealed some interesting insights: CP1 copied his friend at first, but then became more independent and started to use some of his own ideas. He demonstrated very good spelling knowledge! There was less thumb-sucking this time and he appeared more engaged in the session especially when he was chosen to take part in the acting out of the story, although there wasn't much eye contact with others. He was also more forthcoming in the post lesson interview and came up with some very thoughtful answers: 'I liked thinking about changing the story and doing whizzy words and looking at different people's words'. CP2 was away for this session. CP3 responded in a similar fashion to last time – he was very engaged during the re-telling and acting out of the story, but asked to go to the toilet as soon as it was time to start writing! He had lots of good ideas but struggled to get them down on paper independently. We decided that we needed to ensure that his ideas were admired by the other children in order to increase his confidence. He really enjoyed looking at other people's ideas and was keen to use them in his own story plan. By the end of the lesson, all children were eagerly looking forward to writing their own 'Surprise' stories!

## Third research lesson (RL3)

In this lesson we wanted the pupils to use their story plan from the previous lesson and make a start on their 'Surprise' stories set in England. We used the 'teacher demonstration' method to show the thought process behind the story writing, and also involved the children in some 'shared' writing, before starting the 'independent' writing. The children used their story plans and also had pictures and word banks on their tables to support them. We gave the children the opportunity to look at each other's work during the lesson, and again jot down any interesting or useful ideas on a post-it note for future reference, as this had proved to be such a success during lesson 2!

CP1 concentrated well during the first section of the lesson and did what he was asked to do, (write title and author's name). However, during the next teacher demonstration he became distracted and then asked to go to the toilet when it was time to begin writing the first page. He was then chatting a lot and was slow to get on with his writing. But when reminded that children would be looking at his work in a minute to get some good ideas, he decided that he had better get on and

was able to quickly finish a page! In the post lesson interview, he said that the lesson was 'awesome' (his standard response!) and that he had talked a lot and done well. CP2 had been absent for previous lesson, so didn't have a story plan but was focussed during the teacher demonstration. After arguing with her neighbour, she finally wrote her name but not the title of the book. Once again, she was focussed during the teacher demonstration, but distracted and distracting upon returning to her table. She argued with others about which was the sharpest pencil and snapped the top off a pencil! She asked her neighbour questions and tried to physically remove her hand so that she could copy her! She then slowly got on with her writing, sounding out words and re-reading her sentences to help her work out what to write next. 'I've got a new idea!' She was thrilled when someone admired her work during the post-it stage! During the interview she said that she enjoyed looking at other people's work, that she could use more 'whizzy' words to improve her writing and that she had learned about the school rules and doing her best!

CP3 was absent for this lesson.

We decided that the three lessons had worked well as a sequence, and the gradual build up to writing had benefitted all pupils and enabled them all to achieve something that they could be proud of. We talked about possibly sitting the easily distractable pupils on a table together, thus allowing the vast majority to get on with their work!

## Impact on pupil learning and progress

The case study pupils have all made good progress with their writing and have moved up at least one sub-level in a term. However, they may well have made this progress anyway, and it is difficult to say that this is as a direct result of the lesson study programme. At the very least, I hope that it has helped to make the children's writing experience more pleasurable! They especially seem to enjoy sharing their work and I was very encouraged recently when a child in my class asked, "Please can we do that post-it thing when we look at each other's work to get ideas?"! They are also getting better at evaluating each other's work, "The thing I liked about your book was the front cover and the title was exciting!" and evaluating their own work, "I've got neat writing – yes, it's getting neater!"

**Pupil 1** now has more confidence in his own ability as a writer as doesn't feel the need to rely on his friend so much. He is also writing more imaginatively and using some descriptive language, 'They went through a portal. It was swirly. It span and span and span. They popped out of the portal. Everyone was dizzy. There was a chocolate ground. "Dig in" said Joe.'

**Pupil 2** still needs support to remain on task but her writing is gradually becoming more detailed and she is starting to use some descriptive language, 'K fell down down into a big bin.' We will continue to praise her attempts and encourage others to admire her writing to boost her confidence.

**Pupil 3** is receiving extra support to help him write the sounds that he hears in words and this is having a positive effect. He is now confident enough to write simple sentences independently, 'I went to a big crsw (castle). In the crsw there was a mod sac.'

## Impact on practice and future teaching

Participating in the lesson study project has helped me to re-focus on many aspects of the teaching of writing and re-evaluate and improve my own practice. This, in turn, has hopefully

improved the learning and progress of the pupils. We have thought a lot about the teaching sequence for writing and about how important it is to work through all the stages without rushing or missing any out! We found that some of us were missing out the 'teacher demonstration' stage or confusing it with the 'shared writing' stage, but we ensured that we included this in the lessons and found that it really helped the pupils to understand the thought processes of a 'writer' and gave the less confident pupils an idea of how to get started. We also ensured that we had a speaking and listening focus in the lead up to writing with lots of drama and role-play, and then gave the children plenty of support during the planning stages.

It has also been useful to have the opportunity to compare approaches to using the APP grids and talk about how we collect evidence and level the children. This has highlighted some inconsistencies in different schools' approaches and has helped us to address these.

### Impact on departmental and school approaches to teaching, learning and CPD

I am planning to feedback to the rest of the school on my lesson study experience at a staff meeting in the near future and recommend it as something that we could try within our school. We will then have to discuss whether or not the school wants to do this, and how to make it manageable. The biggest problem is likely to be the amount of release time that is needed.

### Personal reflections

On the whole, the lesson study experience has been an interesting one, although it has had its not been without its problems. These included one of the schools having an Ofsted inspection in the middle of a cycle!!! We were also very concerned about the impact on our own classes of spending so much time out of the classroom. However, we all felt that it was beneficial in helping us to re-vamp and improve our practice in the teaching of writing, and helped to make our teaching more exciting and stimulating. This in turn helped to improve the children's learning and progress. We enjoyed planning together and found that the ideas just flowed! It was great to have the chance to visit other schools several times and get to know some of the children and pick up new ideas. Having three other professionals in the classroom didn't feel at all threatening as we had all worked together on the planning and so had a collective responsibility for the lesson. It was actually very supportive having other teachers there, (especially when TAs were absent! - which was often the case, for a variety of reasons) and the children also enjoyed and benefited from having the extra adults around. "Are you going to come and look at my work? **Please** come and look at my work!!!"

It was fantastic to have such detailed feedback on individual pupils, as when you are teaching a class of thirty, it is very hard to see how every pupil is responding, and this really helps you to cater more effectively for their needs.

### References

Corbett, P. (2003) How to teach Story Writing at Key Stage 1 (Routledge, London)

## About Camtree

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