Research for Teachers

Inside the literacy hour

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- Overview
- Study
- Case studies
- Further reading
- Appraisal

A study of classroom practice

For this TLA research summary we looked at two reports from a study that investigated what happened when the literacy hour was implemented in small rural schools with mixed age classes. Teachers in single age classes will also find that there is much to interest them.

The two reports are:

Fisher, R., M. Lewis and B. Davis. *An investigation into the implementation of a literacy hour in small rural schools*. University of Plymouth: 2000.

Fisher, R. *Changing teacher practice: A report of changes in the practice of teachers in England following the introduction of a national literacy strategy*. University of Plymouth.

Back to top

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Overview

Why is the issue important?

The introduction of the daily literacy hour in 1998 (as part of the government's National Literacy Strategy) presented particular challenges to teachers in schools with mixed age classes. Teachers were expected to teach much of it at whole class level, within a clearly defined framework. Teaching objectives were prescribed for each year group at word, sentence and text level, which meant that in any whole class work, some children were being taught at an inappropriate level.

What did the research show?

Teachers varied in the way they implemented the literacy hour. The main variation was in their use of guided work, particularly guided writing. Guided writing was significantly related to progress in reading and writing. Where little input was given about the form and process of writing, there was limited evidence of progress. Improvement in pupils' literacy was also associated with teachers' high expectations and with coherence of their beliefs, but to a lesser extent than their use of guided writing. Using a limited range of texts led to greater than expected gains in reading progress, but not in writing.

How was this achieved?

Teachers whose pupils made good progress in writing used both whole class and group time to teach writing. They provided children with a range of types of writing and a purpose wherever possible, using explicit teaching to highlight aspects of the writing process and articulating what was good about a piece of writing. The most effective lessons in terms of pupils' engagement were those where teachers had very clear learning objectives and were conscious of how the teaching related to those objectives. In small schools, the most effective way of handling mixed age classes was to concentrate on fewer objectives and use differentiation to cover the range of year groups.

How was the research designed to be trustworthy?

The project was carried out during the school year 1998-99 to give a detailed picture of what was happening in classrooms in the first year of the National Literacy Strategy. The researchers collected six sources of data from twenty teachers in ten rural schools: semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, standardised reading tests, classroom observations, writing samples, planning documents. Twelve of the teachers were visited for one literacy hour one year later.

What are the implications?

The study showed the importance of teachers:

- explicitly discussing the process of writing with pupils and offering them support to scaffold the writing process, such as brainstorming ideas, generating word banks, creating story-boards and using writing frames to support children's own writing
- encouraging pupils to explore language usage and discover 'rules' for themselves (for instance, by noticing how verbs are used in recipes) than simply telling them the rule
- concentrating on a few objectives in depth and using differentiation to cover work for a range of year groups (and abilities) rather than trying to cover a variety of learning objectives in mixed age classes.

What do the case studies illustrate?

The case studies show how:

- one child's writing developed and the strategies the teacher used that prompted her development
- a teacher used a piece of computer software to support pupils' reading and writing skills
- pupils worked out the rule about omissive apostrophes for themselves through creating a multimedia presentation to teach other pupils about the correct use of apostrophes
- a teacher used PowerPoint to help pupils identify the appropriate common spelling patterns for vowel phonemes
- some teachers support bilingual pupils in the shared reading and writing parts of the Literacy Hour
- using writing frames helped to improve Year 5/6 boys' narrative writing and develop their independence.

Back to top

Study

What was so important about this project?

In September 1998, a daily literacy hour was introduced into most primary schools in England, as part of the government's National Literacy Strategy (NLS). Teachers were expected to teach for 100% of the literacy hour, much of it at whole class level. Within a clearly defined framework, teaching objectives were prescribed for each year group at word, sentence and text level. This presented particular challenges to teachers in schools having mixed age classes and meant that, according to the framework, in any whole class work some children were being taught at an

inappropriate level.

The overall aim of this project was to identify the problems, issues and possible solutions that arose from implementing a literacy hour within mixed age classes in small rural schools. As the project progressed, however, the authors realised that much of what they were seeing was relevant to all schools implementing the literacy hour.

What are the key features of the implementation strategy that seemed to make the difference?

The NLS provides a framework of pre-specified objectives for each term's teaching in word, sentence and text level work. The authors describe the literacy hour as involving explicit teaching for 100% of the time within the following structure:

- shared reading and writing with the whole class (15 minutes), concentrating on aspects of text selected from the framework of objectives, eg, looking at story settings
- structured grammar and phonic work with the whole class (15 minutes), eg, to search for, identify and classify a range of prepositions, usually using the text from the first part of the hour
- 20 minutes during which the teacher works with a group (or two groups in Key Stage 1) of children in a differentiated group of six to eight pupils, on guided reading or writing with the teacher and the rest of the class work independently, eg, practising skills covered earlier
- a 10-minute plenary with the whole class, reviewing what they have learnt.

The key principle of the strategy is that pupils move from dependence on an adult (shared work), to interdependence (guided work), to independent working. The authors argue that since not all teachers have been aware of this aim, the literacy hour risks being seen as a series of short, decontextualised periods of instruction. The authors suggest that the key to success lies in the interaction between teacher and pupil and the way in which the teacher engages the pupils in their learning. They found that it was not enough simply to stimulate enjoyment or interest in the content of a text.

What were the main findings?
The authors argue that many of the issues arising from their research are as relevant to all schools implementing a literacy hour as to small schools with mixed age classes.

The authors found that teachers varied in the way they implemented the literacy hour and the main variation was in their use of guided work, particularly guided writing. In both key stages, guided work was carried out in only about 50% of sessions observed. In these sessions, the ratio of time spent on guided reading to guided writing was approximately 3:2.

They found that the use of guided writing was significantly related to progress in reading and writing.

Evidence from the follow up study indicated that, whereas teachers were able to change the format and structure of their literacy lessons, not all were able to change the underlying patterns of interaction with children. In other words, some teachers were continuing to teach as they had always taught, albeit in a differently structured lesson format.

What affected progress in writing?
408 writing samples were collected from the 51 target pupils over the eightmonth period of observation. These were analysed to identify pupils who had made good progress in writing, the areas of writing that had improved and the range of writing activities employed by the teacher. The following aspects of writing were considered:

- range
- evidence of planning

- drafting
- handwriting
- spelling
- punctuation
- syntax
- use of vocabulary
- evidence of personal voice.

Careful analysis of the classroom practice of teachers whose pupils had made good progress in writing showed that they used both whole class and group time to teach writing. They provided children with a range of types of writing and a purpose wherever possible, using explicit teaching to highlight aspects of the writing process and articulating what was good about a piece of writing.

Progress in both reading and writing was significantly linked to the use of guided writing.

Conversely, where little input was given about the form and process of writing there was limited evidence of progress in the target pupils' writing samples.

How did the pupils progress in reading?
The reading test results confirmed that performance and progress varied considerably between classes. Observational data and writing samples supported this.

Within each class, the standardised scores at the beginning and end of the research project showed that in general pupils, except those in Reception, had made progress in reading according to their age. However, the test was administered after an eight-month period and was therefore more difficult as it was intended for use after 12 months. Reception pupils completed the same test at the end as at the beginning and showed significant progress.

The authors point out that the few teachers who did not use a wide range of text types were more likely to have pupils who made good progress in reading - but not in writing. They do not propose any explanation.

How was the research project designed?
The project, on which the main report is based, was carried out during the school year 1998-99, the year that the literacy hour was introduced in primary schools in England. It was designed to yield qualitative and quantitative data to give a detailed picture of what was happening in classrooms in the first year of the NLS.

The researchers identified ten rural schools in a predominantly rural county whose national test results had demonstrated reasonable levels of literacy teaching and attainment, confirmed by LEA advisory staff. One Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 class from each school (n=20) and their teachers were selected to take part in the project. All were mixed age classes.

Six sources of data were collected:

- semi-structured interviews with the 20 teachers, concerning their literacy practices at the beginning and end of the year, were audiotaped, transcribed and analysed for common patterns
- questionnaires were completed by the teachers to discover their beliefs about literacy and literacy teaching at the start of the project
- standardised reading tests were used to measure the pupils' reading progress over eight months
- classroom observations of the literacy hour were carried out once a month in each class, ie, eight observations in each class, 160 observations. These and the observer's field notes were analysed for common patterns
- writing samples were collected on each visit from target pupils (one pupil in each year group in the class whose initial standardised reading score had been nearest to 100)
- planning documents from teachers were used as evidence of practice to reinforce impressions gained from observation

and interview.

In the follow-up study, 12 of the original teachers were visited for one literacy hour. This was audio-taped and observed by the same research assistant. The teachers were interviewed and completed a short questionnaire to find out their views 12 months on.

What were the other findings of the project?
The study supports findings from other studies (Sainsbury, et al, 1998; Ofsted, 1999) that the NLS can be effective in raising standards of literacy.

Improvement in pupils' literacy was associated with teachers' high expectations and with coherence of their beliefs, but to a lesser extent than their use of guided writing.

What else do we know about the literacy hour?
Evaluation of the National Literacy Project - Cohort 1 1996-1998
Sainsbury, M. et al.
National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), 1998

The National Literacy Project introduced a literacy hour as the main means of teaching literacy in participating schools. This evaluation identified features of schools in which implementation was most successful. These were:

- committed headteachers
- clearly defined roles and responsibilities
- recognition of the need for demonstration lessons, monitoring and feedback.

Effective teaching in the literacy hour was characterised by:

- consistency
- clear structure
- high quality interaction
- good pace, underpinned through planning.

The National Literacy Strategy: the third year
Evaluation by HMI
Ofsted, 2001

The government's most recent report on the implementation of the NLS showed that the literacy hour was being used largely in its original form in most classrooms. When teachers did use it flexibly, they most commonly reversed the order of the first two elements of the hour.

The quality of shared reading continued to be high, with teachers using work on shared texts to create links between the teaching of reading and writing. However, teachers needed to emphasise development of pupils' comprehension, by teaching skills such as inference and deduction.

Shared writing was found to be most successful when teachers balanced questioning with instruction, explanation and demonstration. The improvement in standards of writing at the end of Key Stage 2 reflects the sharper focus on the teaching of writing and the effects of training.

Independent work was found to be satisfactory when the teacher linked it to the whole class shared activity and planned tasks to develop pupils' reading or writing skills.

The plenary session had not improved since the NLS was introduced. There was still too little understanding of its purpose for assessment, feedback, consolidation and the linking of the lesson to the next literacy hour or

another subject.

The follow up study - how had teachers' practice changed?
The follow up study showed that after two years of implementation the literacy hour was being delivered in terms of the time divisions of the lesson but in some cases teachers had not changed their practice in any fundamental way.

The author considered three of the features of practice that had been observed in successful classrooms and that are a key feature of the NLS:

- use of objectives
- shared and guided work
- subject knowledge.

She investigated these in terms of change in teacher practice because of the NLS. She argues that these features are different aspects of each other and that they point to the importance of the teacher having a clear vision for their teaching.

The most effective lessons in terms of pupils' engagement were those where teacher had very clear learning objectives and was conscious of how the teaching related to those objectives. In other words, when the teacher seemed to understand the educational principles underpinning the literacy hour and was not preoccupied with organisational and procedural aspects. However, in the authors' view, teachers' preoccupations with the latter aspects were not surprising as they reflected the emphasis in the early training materials and initial documentation.

What were the teaching strategies, outcomes and operational issues of mixed age teaching?
End of year interviews and classroom observations of classes in which pupils were judged to have made good progress indicated that the following teaching strategies were useful in managing the NLS in small schools:

- having high expectations of the whole class
- maintaining a focus on dealing with objectives in depth, rather than covering material for different year groups more thinly
- using a variety of texts to cater for all abilities and interests, with appropriate support/extension
- using targeted and focused questions.

In other words, it was worth concentrating on fewer objectives and using differentiation to cover the range of year groups.

Contrary to initial expectations, there was no measurable difference in reading progress between the oldest or youngest year groups in a two, three or four year group class (as measured by change in standardised reading scores).

Although teachers were concerned that younger pupils might be left behind, the authors report encouraging examples of younger pupils experimenting with aspects of literacy that older pupils had been working on.

Question for teachers:

Do teachers in mixed age classes have high expectations, particularly of younger pupils?

Teachers with two year groups in the class did not find implementation of the literacy hour a problem. There were mixed opinions among teachers with three or four year groups in the class about the extent to which the introduction of the NLS had exacerbated the existing difficulties of planning for a wide range of ability and finding texts to suit the broad range.

Generally, these teachers found:

- the NLS easier to implement than expected
- pupils enjoyed the wide range of books read in shared text sessions
- pupils' critical vocabulary had increased
- pupils had become more focused and responded well to routines.

How did the teachers implement the literacy hour?

The first thing the researchers discovered was that the extent to which teachers followed the literacy hour format varied from class to class.

Classroom observations were recorded at seven predetermined points coinciding with the literacy hour structure. Of the 20 classes observed, seven teachers did a complete literacy hour on every visit and a further five did so on seven of the eight visits. This reflected what teachers reported to be their normal practice.

In both Key Stages, guided work was carried out in only about 50% sessions observed. In these sessions, the ratio of time spent on guided reading to guided writing was approximately 3:2.

This lack of time spent on guided writing in particular is consistent with current national concerns about the limited progress being made in children's writing compared to reading. Interestingly, the most recent findings of Ofsted (2001) show improvements in children's writing at the end of Key Stage 2, following increased time spent on guided writing and additional training.

What did the teachers find effective about the shared work session?

The shared work section of the literacy hour is intended for teachers to lead pupils into the world of texts at a level in advance of what they could do on their own. The researchers found that teachers and pupils had readily embraced shared reading where teacher and pupils read aloud and explored text level objectives for 15 to 20 minutes. Some teachers understood how this fitted into the pattern of teaching in the NLS and referred to the following advantages:

- less able pupils were able to access a wider range of texts
- all pupils had a chance to say (as opposed to write) their ideas
- teachers were able to boost confidence through targeted questions.

Less widely used was shared writing, in which teachers and pupils jointly construct a text, with the teacher acting as lead scribe.

How did the teachers use the guided work effectively?

A key feature of the NLS is the 20 minute session where most of the class work independently and the teacher works with one group of children in Key Stage 2 (or two small groups for ten minutes each in Key Stage 1) on particular areas of reading or writing development. The idea is to use this time to help pupils of similar levels of attainment gain independence as readers and writers. The use of guided writing was a key feature of the practice of those teachers whose pupils made good progress in writing.

However, teacher planning notes and classroom observation showed that it was this part of the literacy hour that teachers did not consistently implement.

The teachers who did not use the guided sessions for group teaching either worked with individual children or moved around the class overseeing tasks set, responding to perceived children's needs and answering children's questions. This had a knock on effect on developing children's independence.

How did teachers foster pupils' independence during the literacy hour?

The purpose of the 'independent work' section of the literacy hour is to encourage pupils to work independently. In classes in which pupils had made good progress, the teachers had found it important to develop independent working in order to ensure appropriate task demand. The teachers had used flexible grouping and co-operative work to foster independence.

Where the mixed age classes contained children from Reception it was important for these pupils to have the opportunities for play based activities.

One of the reasons teachers gave for not teaching the guided session was that they felt that the rest of the class could not work independently.

Sometimes they used a teaching assistant or other adult in the classroom to supervise the pupils working 'independently'. When teachers did not take the opportunity to teach guided reading or writing with children in differentiated groups, for whatever reason, this had the knock on effect of preventing the other children from working independently. As a result, the children did not learn to work independently, which in turn made further attempts at guided work more difficult for the teacher.

How effective was the plenary?

Teachers in the study found this aspect of the literacy hour difficult. Effective plenary sessions, judged by the observer to be successful in terms of children's engagement, were those when teachers used it to celebrate achievement, focusing on the particular aspect of literacy that had been taught, or to reinforce learning.

When the teacher used the plenary to celebrate individual achievement, without linking explicitly to the learning objectives for that session, the outcome was less successful.

In the following classroom observation, the teacher used the plenary to reinforce the word topic of the literacy hour - prepositions. She clearly engaged the children in the activity:

"At the end of one of the classes observed (Key Stage 2, age 8-11), the teacher said they would play a game. If children could answer, they could go and get changed for PE. The teacher asked questions such as 'I'm thinking of something that's under the sink'. "

The authors suggest that the teacher could have capitalised on the interest and engagement that she had generated in the children by announcing the purpose of the plenary to the class and focusing on the objective by picking out and reinforcing the use of prepositions in the sentences.

Raising standards through classroom assessment, the Research for Teachers for June 2001, contains a case study of the use of debriefing in promoting pupils' learning. Although not part of a literacy hour, this case study describes the effective use of a plenary session as part of a geography lesson.

What were the features of practice leading to progress?

Before the study, the authors had identified several factors from the research literature and the NLS rationale as being likely contributors to the differences in progress achieved by different classes. These were:

- teachers' attitudes and ethos
- range of texts used
- focused use of objectives
- consistency in beliefs about literacy
- subject knowledge
- level of expectations

- quality of questioning and interaction
- whether guided reading and writing was used regularly.

In fact, when the instances of these practices, from classroom observations, were mapped against pupil progress in reading and writing, it became apparent that merely including certain practices was not enough to ensure progress. This study showed that the only pupils to make significantly more progress in both reading and writing were those whose teachers made use of guided writing.

To a lesser extent, teachers' high expectations, coherence and consistency in beliefs about literacy, resulted in some differences in progress from that expected for their age. Using a limited range of texts led to greater than expected gains in reading progress but not in writing.

What was the effect of teacher attitude and ethos?

The teachers' beliefs about literacy questionnaire highlighted a range of beliefs and approaches to literacy teaching. Teachers also assessed themselves on a scale from most direct to least direct teaching.

The teachers whose classes made good progress were consistent in their responses to the questionnaire and clear in the discussion of their teaching in the initial interview. They were not clustered in any one part of the scale - the degree of child-centeredness was not a factor.

The teachers who demonstrated high expectations of all pupils in the mixed age classes were significantly more likely to have pupils who made more progress in both reading and writing.

Unsurprisingly, the relationship between teacher and class was a consistent additional feature of classes where the literacy hour was established quickly. However, the authors point out that a good relationship was not enough on its own to guarantee pupil progress in literacy.

Teachers' attitudes to the literacy hour were mixed both at the start and at the end of the research. There was no relationship between teacher attitude to the literacy hour at the start and their success in implementation. Nor were teachers whose pupils had made more progress, necessarily more enthusiastic about the literacy hour at the end of the first year.

What was the effect of teachers' choice of texts?

A wide range of texts was used in most classrooms but this was no guarantee of progress. The few teachers who did not use a wide range of texts were more likely to have pupils who made progress in reading but not in writing. The authors alert teachers and schools to the danger of complacency where reading test results are high.

Teachers rated knowing good texts as important but some were concerned about the lack of opportunity to read and enjoy extended text. Two Key Stage 1 teachers felt that the magic of story might be lost by too much deconstruction of texts.

How did teachers use the objectives effectively?

The NLS provides teachers with a menu of objectives for each term.

The author provided a range of examples of teachers' approaches to using objectives. Most effective was the teacher's way of introducing objectives seemed to engage pupils in the learning, as in the following example:

In one shared reading session with a class of five to seven-year-olds, the teacher's objective was story settings. The text was well known, Hansel and Gretel, and at an appropriate level for the children. The teacher kept her objectives in mind and focused children's attention through questions and visual aids. The children read along with the teacher as best they could. The teacher then asked for the words that told them where the story took place and highlighted those words, for example 'in the forest'. The teacher drew a picture map on

the flip chart and traced Hansel and Gretel's journey, day by day, with the help of the pupils. The teacher continued in this way, sharing the reading. At the end, the teacher asked what had happened in the story and prompted the pupils for details, reminding them of the different places in the story. The observer noted that the children were attentive throughout and gave spontaneous responses.

How else did teachers use the objectives?

In other cases, teachers had written objectives in their plans but made little overt reference to them, as in the plenary example or they made objectives explicit but did not appear to teach them in a way that helped ensure pupils' understanding as the following example illustrates.

Here, the author described a lesson where the text level objective was "to discuss the meanings of words and phrases that create humour, and sound effects in poetry, eg, nonsense poems and tongue twisters" (DfEE 1998):

The teacher showed the class a large picture of a sandwich and discussed sandwiches with them and what they liked. This linked the text to the children's experience and the children were very enthusiastic about their likes and dislikes. When the teacher introduced a tongue twister about a sandwich the children were engaged and interested in the contents of the sandwich rather than the words used by the poet to gain effect.

The authors suggest that next time the teacher could link her obvious knowledge of gaining children's interest with an understanding of the language objectives of the lesson. This would help more children to gain an understanding of the language objectives.

How did the teachers use their subject knowledge?

The framework of objectives provides teachers with a scheme of work that covers many more aspects of literacy than most teachers would have covered previously and this was welcomed. Classroom observations provided evidence of teachers using this increased subject knowledge to good effect and pupils responding enthusiastically. Other teachers presented aspects of this knowledge in a confused or unhelpful way.

Two case studies from the research provide illustration.

1. One teacher, working with a Year 5/6 class, was looking at how a newspaper is put together, as part of work on recount. She focused on an enlarged version of a newspaper article on the use of fluoride and followed up with sentence work on the past tense. Here, the aspect of grammar studied, the past tense, was relevant to the text, in this case a recount, requiring use of the past tense. The teaching session was focused and clearly explained.

2. In another Year 5/6 class, the teacher was also teaching the past tense. She focused on instructional texts, considering their purposes, organisation and layout. This was followed by work on changing verb endings to form the past tense, based on the text that had been read earlier. To make the links established in example one, the teacher would have needed to make the link between the text and the word level work clearer and emphasise the usage of the past tense rather than its form. The choice of an instructional text using the imperative, which cannot be put into the past tense was therefore inappropriate for demonstrating such links.

The most successful teachers attempted to teach complex points by exploring usage rather than laying down rules.

Shared and guided work

Shared reading and writing gives children the chance to 'read' or 'write' texts that they would not normally be able to read or write independently. The teacher, as the expert, reads a text that is beyond most children's ability to read independently. Either supplying the more difficult words, sustaining interest by use of intonation or enhancing comprehension through careful questioning, does this.

In the guided reading session, the teacher works with a differentiated group of pupils on a text that they could read about 80% on their own. The teacher guides the children by providing some of the more unusual words or directing them to identify the main theme of the text or key strategies that will develop their understanding.

Two years after the introduction of the literacy hour, the author found that some teachers still did not understand the different functions of these two parts of the hour. They provide an example of a literacy hour in which children came to the front of the class and read sentences aloud from an enlarged text of a poem during the shared reading, followed by a group of children reading a simple book in unison with the teacher, during the guided session. This is more in keeping with practice in the past where teachers or other adults listened to children read aloud from a text one at a time.

What else influenced teachers' implementation of the literacy hour?
The author points out that most of the teachers in the study had happy classes of well-motivated children. They had good relationships with their classes and tried conscientiously to follow the guidelines of the NLS.

The author argues that although the NLS is underpinned by sound educational principles, these were not made explicit in either the initial documentation or the training materials. The early training videos emphasised the organisational aspects and stressed the importance of timed sessions within the literacy hour, so it is not surprising that these were the features that the teachers often altered when they gained confidence with the hour. For example, some teachers left out the plenary due to lack of time yet this is where objectives can be reiterated and success celebrated; and others avoided teaching groups so they could supervise children as they worked, preventing children from developing their independence.

Implications for practice
Teachers may wish to consider the following implications of the findings of this research:

- Some teachers lacked confidence that their pupils could work independently, so during the time for group work, they monitored the class and helped individuals who seemed to need support. The researchers commented that this practice maintained pupils' dependence on the teacher. What practices have you or your colleagues found that help to establish independent working? To what extent have you found that collaborative work between pupils or flexible grouping can help pupils become more independent?

- It was helpful for pupils when teachers explicitly discussed the process of writing with them and offered them support to scaffold the writing process, such as brainstorming ideas, generating word banks, creating story-boards and using writing frames to support children's own writing. Would it be useful to discuss the last case study on progression in the use of writing frames with your colleagues?

- The study suggested that it was worth concentrating on a few objectives in depth and using differentiation to cover work for a range of year groups (and abilities) rather than trying to cover a variety of learning objectives in mixed age classes. What do you and your colleagues consider to be the key learning objectives within the NLS, upon which other learning objectives depend?

- Teachers have found it more powerful for pupils' learning if they explore language usage and discover the 'rules' for themselves (for instance, by noticing how verbs are used in recipes) than if they are simply told the rule. How have you found it affects pupils' motivation if they know they will be expected to present the 'rules' they have discovered together to the rest of the class at the plenary?

Head teachers and senior staff may wish to consider the following implications:
The researchers found that pupils improved to a greater extent if their teachers used guided reading and writing with small groups of pupils, but that teachers' understanding of the nature of guided work varied and they allocated relatively little time to guided writing. Might this be an area your literacy co-ordinator could explore with staff? Would discussion in a professional development meeting, when examples of practice could be shared and discussed, be a helpful vehicle for such exploration?

The plenary session was found to be more effective when teachers explicitly linked children's learning back to the lesson objectives. What do your colleagues need to know or do to strengthen the links between plenary sessions and lesson objectives?

Case studies

A number of case studies illustrating key aspects of this research are available in the case study section.

Your feedback
Have you found this study to be useful? Have you used any aspect of this research in your own classroom teaching practice? We would like to hear your feedback on this study. To share your views with us email: research@gtce.org.uk

Case studies

There are eight case studies in this RfT.

Your feedback
Have you found this study to be useful? Have you used any aspect of this research in your own classroom teaching practice? We would like to hear your feedback on this study. To share your views with us email: research@gtce.org.uk

How Celia's writing developed

This case study is part of the research undertaken for this RfT but it is reported elsewhere. Celia was five and a half years old in November 1998. She was a confident writer at the start of the year but had problems with sound symbol correspondence, separation of words and knowledge of sentence structure. Celia wrote the following at the beginning of October:

<div align="center">

ThisisbulgjTtblk

tokgjnt got

to bed nlj

ana

nljkn

blgnlj

kljtn.

</div>

Classroom observation showed that during the year the teacher:

- used shared and guided writing on a regular basis
- used the text as a model and provided a storyboard or writing frame to support children's own writing
- regularly emphasised the importance of full stops and capital letters
- set tasks at an appropriate and challenging level
- encouraged children to use what they knew and build on that
- stimulated the children's interest and supported their responses.

Over the eight-month period between assessments, Celia's writing showed good development. She wrote narrative, Christmas greetings, a nonchronological report, recount and a rhyming poem. The amount she

wrote also increased, as did her use of connectives. She learned to write in sentences, using full stops. Her simple vocabulary was supplemented by the use of adjectives for detail.

In June Celia wrote the following, based on The Ugly Duckling:

It was a sun day in the woods. Sue (So) a egg rolld down fomr a hll. crak! Went the egg and it craked apn. Hello seid a foy (voice) How do you seid th cat. The fury creech (creature) look at him. The creech was blak and fre (fierce). It was los it look at him It foled (followed) him.

Improving reading and spelling with speech feedback in Year 2

This case study was used in 'Research for Teachers' May 2001 to illustrate the use of ICT in the classroom. It is being used here to illustrate the value of ICT in the literacy hour to develop children's independent work.

A Year 2 teacher used Clicker (Crick Software) with Microsoft Talking First Word to support pupils' reading and writing skills.

Pupils learnt the necessary ICT skills at off-site computer clusters. The teacher was keen to develop the children's independence during the literacy hour so that she could work with the guided group. Twice a week the pupils had access to the computers during independent working time. Their task was to work with a differentiated set of key words, selected by the teacher for each group, and altered every week, depending on their success. They drafted writing at the computer with the structured support of the customised word grids.

The provisionality of the text allowed the children to redraft and improve their writing, and the teacher to print out word lists and cloze passages, for group activities. The speech feedback facility and the computer's ability to 'read' children's writing were effective interactive features that supported pupils in re-reading their work for sense and punctuation.

The overall quality of the children's written work increased over the intervention period, word counts increased and the vocabulary the children used more than doubled.

The teacher was satisfied that the management aspects of using ICT in the literacy hour had been addressed and that as the pupils became increasingly independent they would be able to use a number of strategies to check the accuracy of their work before using the computer. Once the pupils knew both the programme and the system of working they could work independently on differentiated tasks.

Teaching the correct use of omissive apostrophes in Year 4 using multimedia software

This case study was used in RfT May 2001 to demonstrate how a Year 4 teacher used ICT as a catalyst in teaching the use of omissive apostrophes (where an apostrophe is used to show that a letter or letters have been omitted from a word, eg, didn't, it's). Here the same case study illustrates how the teacher taught this topic by exploring usage.

She got the children to create a multimedia presentation to teach other pupils about the correct use of apostrophes, with the aim of developing their own awareness and understanding.

Using HyperStudio, the teacher, limited to two computers, organised activities away from the computer, such as word level work, distinguishing use of the apostrophe, and sentence level work, identifying patterns where apostrophes were used, as well as organising a 'character' competition, using colour schemes and layout.

"Asking the children, rather than telling them 'that is the rule', 'it always does this', is more powerful. Asking them, in groups, to find the rules and report back in a plenary session is a good way to get them to focus on a

particular aspect."

The pupils made use of the speed and automatic functions of the program to control the presentation, display text and create animation. The functionality allowed them to make changes with ease. The sense of audience and the involvement of all pupils ensured that they were highly motivated. The real value for the teacher, however, was that her approach made her realise how complex the teaching of apostrophes was and explained her previous difficulties in teaching this aspect. It helped her appreciate the children's difficulties and use that knowledge to improve their understanding.

Presenting texts and supporting writing with ICT in Year 2

This case study illustrates how one teacher used ICT to support children's writing in a Year 2 class during the shared and guided sections of the literacy hour. It was part of the Ways forward with ICT project, the subject of the first RfT.

Initial assessments showed that a number of pupils were achieving below what might be expected for children of that age in both reading and writing.

As part of her strategy, the teacher used ICT to support her work with the whole class in presenting and sharing texts, in teaching word level work and in the plenary. She used Microsoft's PowerPoint software package to help pupils identify the appropriate common spelling patterns for vowel phonemes in the text, as well as to teach specific word endings and for word level revision work. The teacher found the feature of the programme that enabled her to present word endings by having them move across the screen to make new words, particularly helpful in focusing pupils' attention.

The teacher wanted to take advantage of the speech feedback facility in Clicker (Crick Software) combined with a talking word processor (Microsoft Talking First Word) to support the pupils' reading and writing skills. The children made two visits to computer clusters (at the University) so that they could learn and practice the skills needed to use the writing software. This enabled them to achieve the literacy objectives in the literacy hour and allowed the teacher to focus on teaching the guided work with another group of pupils.

To help pupils develop their writing in shared and guided sessions the teacher used word grids to provide structure for the children's writing. The teacher selected words for the word grids dependent on the children using them. The pupils drafted writing at the computer with the support of the word grids, that spoke the words highlighted by the pupils, and inserted them into the text. The talking First Word supported pupils in re-reading their own writing for sense and punctuation.

Re-assessment after two months showed that the pupils' reading ages had improved by an average of almost seven months. A repeat of the writing task also showed that the children had written considerably more on paper and that there had been an improvement in punctuation and in elements of story structure, such as the use of connectives.

The improvements suggest that carefully planned and structured ICT activities could be used as part of a broader approach to literacy that could be integrated into the literacy hour.

How teachers taught the whole class session of the literacy hour in a multi-lingual class

Language and Curriculum Access Service (LcaS developments) London Borough of Ealing

This case study demonstrates how some teachers have supported pupils who speak English as an additional language (EAL) in the shared reading and writing parts of the Literacy Hour.

A multi-lingual Year 1 class was engaged on a three-week unit of poetry from NLS text level objectives (Year

1 Term 3). The teachers were flexible in their use of the literacy hour, concentrating on reading during the shared text work for two weeks then focusing on writing in the third week. By the time the pupils came to write poetry themselves, they had had a lot of experience of listening to, reading and discussing poems. The shared writing was carefully staged and modelled so that all the pupils knew how to write their individual poems and had access to word banks and frameworks to help them achieve the more stretching objectives, such as using poems or parts of poems as models for their own writing.

An example of the work of one child, Rahima, was provided. Rahima was a Bengali (Sylheti) speaker who spoke little or no English when she started school. Rahima was quiet in class and the teacher was concerned about her English language acquisition in general and Rahima's engagement during the whole class session of the literacy hour.

The task was to write a poem about a spider in the style of John Agard's Call alligator longmouth. Resources included the use of a magnetic boards and figures, puppets and optional writing frames. The teaching strategy included turning verbs into nouns, and a shared writing activity brainstorming what spiders can do. The teacher and class jointly constructed illustrated word banks and a 'what we know about poetry' chart.

Rahima was engaged throughout the three-week unit of work and particularly enjoyed seeing and handling toy animals during the shared reading and writing sessions. The activity of changing verbs into nouns was difficult for all the class but Rahima quickly understood. Her finished poem included selections from the class poem but also her own line 'Spider, spider drainpipe climber' drawing on her knowledge of English nursery rhymes.

Rahima's finished poem:

Spider, spider bath walker
Spider spider people scarer
Spider spider drainpipe climber
Spider spider fast runner
But not as fast as me!

The teacher assessment stated that Rahima's final line had demonstrated not only that she had understood the essence of the poem but also was able to use English in a sophisticated and playful way.

How one Reception teacher introduced play into the literacy hour
Mena Digins

This case study is taken from the United Kingdom Reading Association (UKRA) 'Hourwatch' project and demonstrates how an experienced infant teacher, in the early stages of implementation of the literacy hour, used her judgement about how much time to allow for each section of the hour.

The teacher was uncomfortable with the idea of reception children sitting on the carpet for 30 minutes. She also felt it was important to keep an element of play in literacy teaching and to retain creative learning experiences.

The sessions were short and sharp. The teacher began by reading from The Enormous Turnip in big book format for about 10 minutes. Some children had been given key word cards and had to watch out for their word and hold the card up when it was read. This held the children's interest and made it into a game.

The next focus was writing the letter 'k'. The teacher used the flip chart to demonstrate then the children practiced the letter 'k' for about five minutes.

The class was then divided into groups:

Group 1 - worked with the teacher on guided reading to reinforce word recognition and extend language structure, vocabulary and spelling

Group 2 - worked with a classroom assistant sequencing pictures and text cards from the shared story

Group 3 - worked independently using plasticine to create models of the characters from the story, linking play-based activities to literacy

Group 4 - was composed of two pupils working at the computer using a software programme to help them discriminate between letters 'c' and 'k'

Group 5 - also working independently, listening to the story using headphones and following it in an individual copy of the book.

When the children came back together as a class the teacher followed up the work of Group 4 on the 'c' and 'k' sounds.

Further details of the 'Hourwatch' project are available on the UKRA website (as above).

Video observations in Key Stage 1 classrooms

Carol Precious and Hazel Bryan
Part of the UKRA 'Hourwatch' project

This extract from the 'Hourwatch' project is being used here to illustrate the creative use of texts. The video data for this project were collected during the autumn term 1998 and the summer term 1999.

From their data, the authors suggest that pupils' most positive experiences were with multi-layered texts that engaged and excited their imaginations. Texts that provided opportunities for linguistic exploration at text, sentence and word level were seen to be most valuable; rich in tone and tempo, they stimulated children's imaginations. The skill of teaching within the shared reading element of the literacy hour was fundamental, particularly with regard to the provision of an inclusive learning experience. For some children the teacher had to provide situations where the children could take risks, within an intellectually stimulating context. For other children, the teacher's skills were in developing emotional security and preserving self-esteem.

The researcher also noted that in the case of two children, they had been introduced to the text in advance of the session and this seemed to give them the 'hooks' to hang the session together with.

Contexts of meaning: Assessing bilingual pupils' comprehension of text

Emily Janes
TRG 1999/2000 Publication number: TPU0656/07-01
This case study is being used to illustrate how one teacher used activities outside of the literacy to improve her bilingual children's comprehension of the shared text. Here the teacher-researcher investigated how the literacy hour, as taught in her school, could be used to support the reading development of beginner bilingual children (Year 1) and, in particular, their comprehension of the weekly whole class shared reading text.

The author found that two out of the three bilingual children within the target group gained only partial and fragmented understanding of the shared reading texts in comparison with the monolingual children, who had no such difficulties. Comprehension and uptake of the text were generally determined by the vocabulary demands of the text rather than the genre.

The evidence suggested that the language needs of beginner bilingual children could be met by providing time outside of the literacy hour to undertake activities related to the shared reading texts, such as making picture

books, puppets and models. This gave the pupils opportunities to use and rehearse the language in a meaningful context. These artefacts were then used as starting points for role-play, writing and other activities linked with the NLS learning objectives within the literacy hour.

The author also concluded that the maintenance and support of the first language of a bilingual child might be an essential step to developing the child's second language, English.

The use of writing frames to improve boys' writing at KS2

Robin Marlin
TRG 1998/1999 TTA Publication Number: 126/7 - 00

This case study has been selected to show how guided writing was used in the literacy hour to improve boys' narrative writing in a Year 5/Year 6 class and develop their independence.

The attainment of two thirds of boys in the intervention group improved by at least one national curriculum level, compared with one half in the control group. One pupil in the intervention group moved from Level 2 to Level 4. The most noticeable improvement was in the pupils' structuring of the story and their use of adverbial phrases and conjunctions in sentences.

The teacher used the shared and guided teaching sessions to introduce a familiar story around which the children could structure their own stories, in one case a newspaper report. She produced a writing frame to support the development of style, conflict and resolution aspects of the story and discussed with the pupils the specialist aspects of report writing. Differentiation was introduced by the extent to which pupils used the writing frame. At the end of the week, a period of extended writing was included. During the plenary, the pupils read out their stories to the class, in a group or to a partner and evaluated them. The teacher awarded marks according to the set objectives.

The second stage of the research involved the pupils using writing frames to unpick a story of any genre. The objectives of the extended writing session at the end of the week were to construct a joint writing frame or plan, based on a chosen text and to retell the story in the first person. The teacher explored with the class the author's use of vocabulary, setting and characters, how interest was created and how the story was paced to maintain interest. Differentiation was again introduced into the writing task by using the writing frame in different ways.

The author concluded that the use of modelling and writing frames made teaching and learning explicit. Modelling writing gave pupils the opportunity to reflect and participate and the time to share and clarify ideas before committing them to paper.

Using familiar stories helped the pupils' understanding of narrative structure. Breaking down a text to its skeleton and reproducing a framework, helped pupils understanding of story development. The author felt that this understanding enabled pupils to become familiar with text in a new way, internalise what they had learnt and take on more responsibility for their own independent writing.

Back to top

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Further reading

What else might I enjoy reading?
Case study 'Celia'
Fisher, R., (September 2000)

Sainsbury, M., Schagen, I., Whetton, C., Hagues, N., Minnis, M. (1998). National Literacy Project Evaluation of the national literacy project - Cohort 1 1996 - 1998. Slough: National Foundation for Educational

Research.

The national literacy strategy
Ofsted, (2001)

DfEE, (1998). The national literacy strategy: Framework for teaching. London: Department for Education and Employment.

Where can I find out more online?

Contexts of meaning: Assessing bilingual pupils' comprehension of text
www.tda.gov.uk/upload/resources/doc/e/emily-janes.doc

Literacy Digests
Digests of research studies on the theme of literacy are available at:
http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/research/themes/English/

NERF Bulletins

Short summaries of research about literacy can be found in the following NERF bulletins:
Issue 2: What factors influence the development of writing competence?
Issue 3: To teach or not to teach? The great grammar debate
Issue 4: Is synthetic phonics the answer to closing the gap in attainment?
available at:
http://www.eep.ac.uk/nerf/bulletin/index.html
Back to top

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Appraisal

An investigation into the implementation of a literacy hour in small rural schools
Ros Fisher, Maureen Lewis and Bernie Davis

Changing teacher practice: A report of changes in the practice of teachers in England following the introduction of a national literacy strategy.
Ros Fisher

Robustness
The main report (1) describes a research project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC ref. R000 22 2608). The research aims and objectives are clearly stated, well defined and unambiguous. The study aimed to identify the problems, issues and possible solutions arising from the implementation of the literacy hour in small rural schools with mixed age classes. The study built on what was already known, citing data from a small number of relevant studies of the literacy hour research on small schools. The methods used were systematic, rigorous in the context of the aims and scale of the study, and practical. They were designed to give a detailed picture of literacy hour teaching in these types of classrooms in Key Stages 1 and 2. Evidence was collected from a variety of sources including surveys, interviews, teacher planning documents and classroom observations along with pupil attainment data.

The data sets are available separately from the main report. They have been subjected to rigorous peer review by the ESRC, the most prestigious national education research organisation.

The follow-up paper (2), 'Changing teacher practice' draws on the same data as the main report

but includes a follow up study of 12 of the original teachers. It also includes exemplars of teaching. The study aimed to explore what, if any, changes were made by the teachers to their existing teaching methods because of their implementation of the structures and sequences imposed by the literacy hour.

Relevance
This study involved only a small number of classes (20) in small rural schools and so does not support generalisation. There is, however, much in the reports addressing the specific and detailed challenges of teaching mixed-age classes (sometimes ranging over three to four years) that teachers of literacy to, for example, mixed ability classes in larger schools will find interesting and capable of informing practice in their own context. The studies will also be of interest to teachers in Key Stage 3, where the literacy strategy has now been introduced, as they explore some of the problems that arose when the literacy hour was introduced into primary schools and some of the issues and strategies involved in overcoming them. The authors provide a range of data that seem to reinforce the link between attainment gain and effective teaching strategies.

The range and nature of the data (for example, observing classroom behaviours, interviews with teachers about their practice, pupil test results) are also, in |themselves, of relevance to teachers who may be seeking ways of collecting evidence for improving or developing their practice.

Applicability
The data provided detailed information about the teaching and learning process during the literacy hour, in this particular type of school. Evidence of learning gain was reported and the second report contains examples to illustrate both the teaching strategies used and the pupils' responses. The authors explore the experiences of the teachers as they adapted to the introduction of the literacy hour and examine ways in which their practice has and has not changed.

Writing
The main report is clearly laid out and different sections are sign-posted. It is written in a relatively lively way and the findings have been clearly identified and presented. The report contains two statistical tables and some statistical terms that would have benefited from further explanation for the non-specialist reader. However, the main data sets are to be found elsewhere.

The second paper, 'Changing teacher practice', draws on the same results as the main report and includes a follow-up study. It is presented in an accessible form and is illustrated with classroom examples of teaching activities.