

Extending book talk through teacher modelling

Luke Swift

Context

I am a year six teacher and English Lead at Dixons Manningham Primary, Bradford, West Yorkshire. I am also a research and development leader for Bradford Research school.

- Over 80% of our pupils speak English as an additional language
- Bradford is one of the most deprived cities in the country, and Dixons Manningham is the fifth most deprived school in the city
- Over 20% of pupils are eligible for Free School Meals
- Almost 30% of pupils are eligible for Pupil Premium
- 20% of pupils have SEN support

Raising reading attainment is currently a whole school priority and reading for pleasure is just one way in which we are attempting to tackle this issue, using a research-informed approach.

OU Research inspiration and rationale

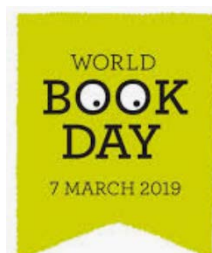
I initially decided to engage with the Halifax OU / UKLA Teachers' Reading Group' as a result of my newly-acquired role as English Lead at my school. Reading attainment is an area for development at school and I was exploring avenues to tackle the issue. I feel that reading for pleasure can sometimes be seen as a luxury in schools, but I've always felt that if pupils do not enjoy reading then it seems as though teachers can be fighting a losing battle with almost every other aspect of literacy and beyond. Having said that, I've engaged in some interesting discussions this year about where reading priorities should lie; with some arguing that pupils can't/don't enjoy reading unless they have a secure enough grasp of the skills and strategies involved in reading fluent. But regardless of where exactly priorities might be, I feel that it is impossible to deny that reading for pleasure matters and should, ideally, run throughout – rather than in addition to - the whole curriculum.

I have both attended and helped to deliver Bradford Research School's Improving Primary Literacy course which has been instrumental in my work as both a classroom teacher and English leader.

I do read a considerable amount of the research regarding literacy and have found the following to be the most influential and useful in my role this year

- https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/Publications/Literacy/Preparing_Literacy_Guidance_2018.pdf
- https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/Presentations/Publications/Literacy/KS1_Literacy_Guidance_2017.pdf
- https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/Presentations/Publications/Literacy/KS2_Literacy_Guidance_2017.pdf
- <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/Presentations/Publications/Implementation/EEF-Implementation-Guidance-Report.pdf>

It has admittedly been very challenging to pin down one aspect to focus on for this Reading for Pleasure project. So much of effective literacy practice is tied to culture – a nuanced, interwoven plethora of activities, routines, attitudes and motivations. I did feel that informal book / text talk had been left a little to chance in my class, so this was one area that I definitely wanted to address. The OU TaRs research (Cremin et al. 2014) provided plenty of food for thought and ideas aplenty. Elsewhere, the National Literacy Trust and World Book Day sites were also ripe sites for picking to find research aligned inspiration.



Aims

To increase pupils' discussion of books, reading and vocabulary.

To increase the amount of reading for pleasure pupils take part in.

To raise the profile of vocabulary, thus raising the motivation to read and enjoy vocabulary acquisition through reading for pleasure.

Outline

Class-based

I thought it was of paramount important for myself to be seen as a 'reader' in the eyes of the pupils (most of which don't naturally have reading role-models at home). To do this I kept a visual, running record of what books I was reading throughout the year.



Accompanying this was a display of a word that I'd learnt from a book that week.

What words have you learnt from reading this week?

Mr Swift learnt: *petrichor* [n]

Etymology: English

It means: a pleasant smell that frequently accompanies the first rain after a long period of warm, dry weather.

In context: *They enjoyed the beautiful petrichor at break.*



I felt it was important for pupils to see that an adult/teacher is by no means a reading 'finished article' (fitting in nicely with our growth mindset culture). It was also an effective way to enjoy vocabulary acquisition as an outcome of reading for pleasure. I've read quite deeply into vocabulary and a central and oft repeated message was the importance of a language-rich environment (as well as utilising the reciprocal nature of speech); so this was just one facet of something larger I was aiming for.

Outline cont.

To facilitate book talk I gave out multiple copies of the same book to different pupils at the same time. After meeting with pupils a few days later on some comfortable chairs in a quiet area I arranged a casual chat about the book. Pupils responded well, enjoyed the opportunity and the motivation to read the books definitely rose at this time. This did actually create a slight issue in that some pupils were reading further ahead than others, which caused some frustration in the pupils that had read less and wasn't conducive to the best book discussions. We tried to solve this by deciding where pupils should read to before the next day (although I didn't meet with pupils every day to discuss the book, I did encourage pupils to hold their own book-chats and overheard some interesting ones).

I also used World Book Day to create some badges. Pupils were free to decorate them in any book-themed way they choose but the template did have the lettering "Ask me about what I'm reading" – with obvious aims. Despite an initial and expected spike in book talk (observed in class and reported from home), the badges (and their influence on conversation) seemed to disappear quicker than I'd anticipated.

School-wide

As part of World Book Day, every class pitched their nomination for the World's greatest book and got creative, using a box to make showcase their choice of book to display in the library. This hopefully improved the social environment of library and encouraged pupils to pick up and borrow books that another class had pitched.

In an attempt to increase library book loans (and hopefully the amount of reading for pleasure taking place), I gave pupils some ownership of what books were available in the library. I implemented a library book requesting system in which pupils had to create a quality piece of writing explaining why they want the book and the impact it would have (also an opportunity to get some extra-curricular writing for a real purpose in).

Impact

Class-based

Anecdotal evidence shows more focused reading for pleasure taking place in the classroom. Pupils are more frequently getting their planners signed at home, suggesting that the pupil has read their reading book. Although the structured nature of the school day still does not naturally lend itself to having large amounts of time to informally discuss books, there's certainly been a visible increase in motivation to read as evidenced by pupils keenly swapping books between themselves and actively seeking out copies of new books, particularly when they are enthralled by a series. I would like to think that book-talk accompanied this at break and lunchtimes.

In terms of attainment in my class, the percentage of pupils reading at age related expectations has risen by 11.1% and their vocabulary has increased by an average of 306 since the start of the academic year.

School wide

Library loans have increased steadily throughout the year from 265 loans during a typical 3-week period in the 1st term, 385 loans in the 2nd term and 425 loans in the 3rd term.

Of course, there's always the difficulty in identifying what led to what in terms of all the above. There's always so many factors and variables at play in the school environment, and I am – first and foremost – a teacher as opposed to a researcher, so I was never going to be able to definitively decide it was me doing X that led to Y (nor was it my intention). And one cannot forget that correlation is not the same as causation. The outcomes, nonetheless, were generally pleasing and were what would be expected when following research-based recommendations.

Reflections on impact the TaRs research had on practice

Whilst reading for pleasure definitely remains an area to develop at school, the RfP group and the OU TaRs research has supported me in both understanding the pedagogy and implementing research-supported initiatives.

Engagement with the OU's RfP project has ensured that developing a positive culture of reading for pleasure is, rightly, high on the agenda at school and is supported by research evidence.

Plans for the future include utilising some funding in order to provide library sessions with a librarian (which class teachers also attend). In addition, the social environment will be developed further by creating an interactive reading display in the library and creating outdoor reading areas in which reading for pleasure and associated book talk is promoted. In addition, we intend to engage more with parents, getting them into our library and encouraging them to be reading role models for pupils.