

TEACHING & LEARNING JOURNAL - EDITION 6

English Curriculum

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After an informal observation from English Lead Practitioner in March this year, I began to reflect upon how I can fully support the progress of all pupils with my bottom set Year 9 group. Although they had been making relative progress compared to the beginning year, by Spring term I had been experiencing a lapse of focus from a fair few of them. After discussing this with EIN, I concluded that I was struggling most with their lack of independence; I spent most of my time working the board, directly instructing them and holding their hand through each step of the task. This had two effects; firstly, if ever asked to work independently, pupils would immediately be 'defeated' and become off task leading to unfocused behaviour and secondly, it was exhausting for me to sustain. Moreover, from an English standpoint, I was also interested in developing pupil's literacy and in particular the quality of their written answers. This was particularly pertinent to the progress of the advanced EAL learners who comprised of around a third of the class. Indeed, these specific pupils were experiencing difficulties translating strong spoken understanding into written content. This further contributed to the class' overall lack of focus or engagement with independent writing tasks as these pupils significantly struggled to put down into sentences what they had articulated during class discussions or to their peers.

In light of this and following the advice of EIN, I independently studied the principles of Doug Lemov, Rosenshine and Palinscar in order to design a lesson structure that built pupil confidence, developed their independent writing skills and therefore to ultimately facilitated progress. Consistency was an important facet to my thinking. Drawing on Doug Lemov's 'Teach Like a Champion', I concluded that by having the same five tasks every lesson, pupils (in particular low-ability pupils) become well practiced on how to go about completing such tasks, thus alleviating the cognitive load of having to learn both new content and how to complete a particular task which teaches such content. As such, I designed a lesson format that comprised of the same Do Now, a review of previous learning, a reciprocal read of a key extract, then looking at a set of comprehension questions through a gradual release of responsibility (I do, we do, you do). These tasks were also key in developing pupils' literacy and ability to write independently. For example, following Palinscar's principles of reciprocal reading, I deconstructed and demonstrated to pupils the underlying thought processes of reading (which most expert readers take for granted.) As such, through class discussions, pupils became well practiced in higher-level thinking skills such as predicting, summarising, defining and questioning the text, thus increasing their comprehension of the content. Pupils' ability and confidence to construct written answers was further facilitated through the gradually releasing responsibility of answering questions in workbooks. For example, I would firstly demonstrate how to find the sentence starter in a question by identifying the noun, verb and object of the question. I would then talk through my thought process of how I would go about answering a question, referring back to the extract we had reciprocally read. Specifically modelling the thinking and importantly the writing process to pupils was crucial to their ability and confidence to writing their own answers to similar questions later on in the lesson, particularly for the advanced EAL pupils who tend to lack knowledge of grammatical organisation of writing. Once we had jointly constructed a few answers together following the process I had modelled, only then would be asked to write independently. After a series of lessons using this structure, I found that pupils' independent work as well as quality of written answers had improved – pupils became more able to answer questions and do so independently leading to far higher engagement and less 'poor behaviour' stemming from 'I can't do it' mentality.

