Raising the attainment of weaker writers

The ‘Grammar for Writing’ pedagogy

*Developed by Professor Debra Myhill, University of Exeter*
The ‘Grammar for Writing’ pedagogy and weaker writers

Professor Debra Myhill and her team at The University of Exeter recently carried out an initial large-scale study into the impact of contextualised grammar teaching on students’ progress in writing. The results were hugely positive; students receiving this particular pedagogical approach made **almost double the rate of progress** compared to those who didn’t.

**You can read more about this initial study here.**

However, it was notable that the intervention was most effective for able writers; weaker writers did not experience quite the same dramatic improvement in progress. Pearson and the University of Exeter wanted to investigate this finding further.

A follow-on study was designed to answer the question:

> **“Does an intervention for weak writers using the embedded grammar approach to address their identified writing needs support improved attainment in writing?”**

This is a short summary of the subsequent research study, the findings and what this means for addressing the needs of weaker writers.

**How did the follow-up study work?**

The study followed the overall design of the initial study as closely as possible, to allow for comparisons between the two data sets. The team at the University of Exeter worked with teachers in seven Devonshire schools. In each school, two Year 8 classes consisting largely of weaker writers were identified. One class became the intervention group, and the other the comparison group.

The intervention group were taught a four-week unit of work designed to develop students’ understanding of narrative structure and building towards a final assessed outcome. This unit embedded the core pedagogical principles of the ‘Grammar for Writing’ approach:

1. Exploring how grammatical features can be used to create specific effects in writing – with the teaching making connections for learners between grammatical features and their potential meaning-making effect.
2. Using grammatical metalanguage, but explaining it through examples. This means that while the teaching of grammar is explicit, the use of terminology should not itself be a barrier to students accessing the learning.
3. Using discussion to encourage critical conversations about language – with teacher-led discussions helping students move from superficial to deeper understanding.

**Find out more about the Grammar for Writing Pedagogy.**
Those teaching the intervention group received a medium-term plan, detailed lesson plans and half a day of training around the pedagogy. Teachers in the comparison group simply received the medium-term plan.

The initial student sample comprised 315 students, evenly split into two groups and with a good mix of boys and girls. Students’ KS2 writing scores were analysed to ensure the two groups were well matched in terms of attainment. The same KS2 scores also revealed these students were working below national expectations – around the level 3 mark – and so could be considered ‘weaker writers’.

How was the study focused on the needs of weaker writers?

A key difference with this research was the way weak writing was analysed to establish the common writing needs of this particular ability profile. This process of analysis of weaker writing revealed the following key difficulties:

• Limited use of internal sentence punctuation.
• Frequent omissions of full stops or inaccuracy at sentence boundaries.
• Limited description through noun phrase expansion.
• Limited variety of sentence structure or length.
• Overuse of long, complex sentences.
• Plot-driven writing with little establishment of character or setting.
• A tendency towards writing which reflected visual modes.
• A tendency to use language patterns reflecting oral rather than written genres.

The teaching and learning was then focused specifically on these areas.
How was performance data collected?

Students were assessed before and after the intervention using two writing tasks, which were then blind marked by a team of markers using SATs-style mark schemes to give each student a score. To ensure consistency, each piece of writing was double marked and, if there was a discrepancy between the scores, a third marker was used to provide a ‘resolution’ mark.

As well as this hard data, interviews were also carried out with two boys and two girls from each intervention class. These interviews, which took the form of a writing conversation about the piece of writing produced in the unit of work, were used to ascertain what kind of learning about writing the unit had promoted.

What were the results?

Data analysis shows that this approach to the teaching of writing has a significant positive effect on attainment in writing for weak writers.

• The intervention group made more rapid progress in the research period than the comparison group.

• The comparison group increased its score by 0.5 while the intervention group improved by 0.8. This is a statistically significant and very encouraging result, especially considering the intervention was only four weeks long.

• The lowest-scoring classes in the comparison group did not improve in the post test but all the lowest-scoring intervention classes did improve. This is good evidence of the beneficial impact the approach had on writers.

What else did we learn from the study?

Lesson observations and interviews with students have provided a number of insights as to what approaches work best with weaker writers.

Weaker writers were helped by:

• the emphasis on story structure: introduction, problem, climax, resolution, ending: “Now I can really structure a story”; “I learned what structure I should do it in”

• techniques to hook and hold the reader, such as “building up” to the climax and “winding down”: “I want to keep them dangling”; “keep them guessing”

• adding detail to character description, for example through use of parenthetical commas; showing personality through description: “show not tell”.

Weaker writers struggled with:

• applying learning: they often talked confidently about intentions that weren’t then realised in their writing

• understanding of sentence grammar and punctuation linked to meaning and effect; putting complex definitions into words.
How are the research findings being used?

Pearson are working in association with Professor Debra Myhill and the University of Exeter to create teaching and learning resources. *Skills for Writing* is a unique digital, print and training solution launching in 2013.

The design of the *Skills for Writing* resources is underpinned by the research findings and the pedagogical principles of the Grammar for Writing approach.

Find out more about Skills for Writing. [click]

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The evidence-based approach to accelerating progress in writing

Coming in 2013, *Skills for Writing* is a unique digital, print and training solution, developed in partnership with Professor Debra Myhill.

Skills for Writing embeds the principles of the Grammar for Writing pedagogy – trialled and proven to accelerate the rate of writing progress significantly.

- **Accelerate progress in writing** with this new solution using an evidence-based pedagogy, improving writing performance for a clear route to KS4 success.
- **Teach grammar in a contextualised way, always focusing on effects achieved**, so students have a wider range of techniques with which to craft creative, effective texts. This is not just another grammar course.
- **ActiveTeach** supports teachers in embedding the core principles of Grammar for Writing in their front-of-class teaching, providing the student book on screen and a wealth of digital resources focused on building grammatical knowledge and improving writing.
- **Online, self-marking homework activities on ActiveLearn** consolidate and reinforce the in-class teaching, encouraging students to write independently, reflect on their writing and understand how to improve.
- **Accompanied by CPD training** to support teachers in using the Grammar for Writing pedagogy to improve students’ writing.

- Learn more.
- See Debra talk about Grammar for Writing in a short video.
- Try samples.
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