2020 cohort

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"To what extent do you agree?" Tackling evaluation in the English Language GCSE

Why does Critical Literacy Matter?

As an English teacher and lifelong lover of literature, I believe that supporting our students to develop their literacy skills is vital. Interpreting the world around us with words allows us to inhabit that world more meaningfully. Articulating our own opinions is a crucial catalyst to identity formation and the personal, social, and emotional development that, as educators, we strive to foster. However, waging war on reluctant writers in the classroom has made me painfully aware that most students struggle to express their views confidently on the page.

My revision intervention thus addressed the underperformance of high-attaining students in their GCSE English Language exam, with a specific focus on Paper 1, Question 4. This paper is designated 'Explorations in Creative Reading and Writing' and Question 4 gauges analysis and evaluation skills alongside students' ability to construct an argument.

School Context

When I embarked on my intervention, current department data indicated that Question 4 was a particular cause for concern (see Figure 1, below).

Figure 1

Year 11 November Mock 2021 Question by Question

Whole Cohort

	Paper 1						Paper 2					
	Q1: Extract	Q2: Lang:	Q3: Struc	Q4: Eval	Q5: Content	Q5: SPAG	Q1: Extract	Q2: Sum.	Q3: Lang	Q4: Comp.	Q5: Content	Q5: SPAG
Max Marks	4	8	8	20	24	16	4	8	12	16	24	16
Ave Mark	3.6	3.9	3.1	8.4	12	8.6	3.2	4.1	4.8	6.3	11.1	8.1
Lost Marks	0.4	4.1	4.9	11.6	12	7.4	0.8	3.9	7.2	9.7	12.9	7.9

Students achieving 4+ in PPE

	Paper 1						Paper 2					
	Q1: Extract	Q2: Lang:	Q3: Struc	Q4: Eval	Q5: Content	Q5: SPAG	Q1: Extract	Q2: Sum.	Q3: Lang	Q4: Comp.	Q5: Content	Q5: SPAG
Max Marks	4	8	8	20	24	16	4	8	12	16	24	16
Ave Mark	3.8	5.1	4.3	12.1	15	10.9	3.7	4.9	7.1	9.2	14.4	10.7
Lost Marks	0.2	3.9	3.7	7.9	9	5.1	0.3	3.1	4.9	6.8	9.6	5.3

AQA Examiners' Reports also identify the evaluation question as a weakness. The June 2018 report instructed candidates to avoid 'forming an opinion during the course of their writing' (Jun 2018: p. 7). In June 2017, 'the biggest error made by students was that many of them failed to address methods', and this was reiterated in June 2019 (Jun 2017: p. 6; Jun 2019: p. 6). I concluded that explicitly breaking down the AQA's requirements was necessary to improve attainment.

Can explicit discussion of language improve analysis and evaluation skills?

Babette Verhoeven has noted that teachers need to model the writing process more explicitly; she has also raised concerns about the 'conflation of literary analysis with language analysis' in the English curriculum (2021: p. 4). In 2016, a national study led by the University of Exeter collaborated with 54 participating primary schools to conduct 'a detailed analysis of teachers' orchestration of metalinguistic talk'. (Myhill, Jones, & Wilson, 2016: p. 40) Key findings highlighted the impact of discussing strategic language choices and the influence of teachers' own grammatical subject knowledge in supporting students' writing (Ibid: p. 38). My primary research question pinpointed the skills I wanted students to develop and the potential impact of doing so:

Does developing high attaining students' evaluation skills and metacognitive thinking impact on writing outcomes for GCSE English Language Paper 1 Question 4?

Methodology

A qualitative approach was appropriate for a small-scale (six students), context-specific intervention where words, and not numbers, were the analytical units under consideration. When I was planning my intervention, I did not teach any Year 11s and was therefore dependent on my mentor for participants. I felt that it would be unfair to expect her to change her own lessons to include the assignments I set for my intervention group. This meant that I had no control group. Although this reduced the robustness of my enquiry, I felt that pushing my own agenda on my mentor and her class would have been ethically questionable.

Data Collection and Analysis

1. Structured student questionnaires

These were devised by me and completed at the start and end of the project; I postulated that responses would allow me to gauge any changes in students' perspectives and confidence.

2. Baseline and final assignments

Responses to two different Question 4s were completed by students. I used the mock exams as a baseline, and students completed another at the end of the project to measure cognitive outcomes.

Research Design and Structure

I broke down my study into six sessions. Each lasted one hour, was delivered weekly, and developed a specific language analysis skill:

1: Putting your voice on the page: language as power
2: Constructing a persuasive argument
3: Employing textual evidence
4: Analysing word connotations
5: Writing about writers' methods
6: Synthesis and structure

Findings and Reflections

1. Affective Outcomes

Five out of six students completed pre-project questionnaires; one joined the project belatedly. Their responses made me realise that poor confidence might be affecting their attainment. One expressed anxiety about interpreting the text incorrectly, and two others felt unable to write on a topic they were not passionate about. Analysing in detail was identified as challenging by three of the five, and two were concerned about building an argument.

Only three out of the six completed post-project questionnaires due to absence. Two students rated their confidence level at 4 out of 5 at the end of the intervention, while the third chose 3-4 out of 5. This implies a significant shift in students' perceptions of themselves. One participant wrote about enjoying the seminar-style discussions, while another identified expanding vocabulary as her favourite activity. However, one student still preferred previously taught strategies to answer evaluation questions and did not expect to achieve a top-level grade. When asked about the applicability of the skills gained, all three respondents focused exclusively on other components of the English exam, rather than recognising their wider value.

2. Cognitive Outcomes

My data measuring cognitive outcomes is also incomplete due to two student absences. However, four out of the six modestly increased their grades. One student moved up by 4 marks; the average increase was 2.25 marks. This improvement is not necessarily solely attributable to my intervention; however, all four grades were higher than those achieved in the mock exams.

Impact and Conclusions

The outcomes of my study were modestly positive and highlight the potential benefits of explicitly teaching the skills that evaluation questions demand. However, increased student revision at home, or work with the students' class teacher, may also have improved attainment.

Further research is needed to target a larger cohort, construct questionnaires with greater rigour, and measure the cognitive impact on individual skills. However, I have adapted some of the strategies for my Key Stage 3 classes and feel I am encouraging greater cognitive awareness of the writing process. Two students sought me out after the Language exam, eager to tell me that it had gone well. I am cautiously optimistic that they have learned that their own voices, on the page and in the world more widely, matter.

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