

Developing Writing Skills of Learners with Persistent Literacy Difficulties through the Explicit Teaching of Grammar in Context: Action Research in a Welsh Secondary School

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Abstract : Background: The benefits of grammar instruction in the teaching of writing is contested in most English speaking countries. A majority of Anglophone countries abandoned the teaching of grammar in the 1950s based on the conclusions that it had no positive impact on learners' development of reading, writing, and language. Although the decontextualised teaching of grammar is not helpful in improving writing, a curriculum with a focus on grammar in an embedded and meaningful way can help learners develop their understanding of the mechanisms of language. Although British learners are generally not taught grammar rules explicitly, learners in schools in France, the Netherlands, and Germany are taught explicitly about the structure of their own language. Exposing learners to grammatical analysis can help them develop their understanding of language. Indeed, if learners are taught that each part of speech has an identified role in the sentence. This means that rather than have to memorise lists of words or spelling patterns, they can focus on determining each word or phrase's task in the sentence. These processes of categorisation and deduction are higher order thinking skills. When considering definitions of dyslexia available in Great Britain, the explicit teaching of grammar in context could help learners with persistent literacy difficulties. Indeed, learners with dyslexia often develop strengths in problem solving; the teaching of grammar could, therefore, help them develop their understanding of language by using analytical and logical thinking. Aims: This study aims at gaining a further understanding of how the explicit teaching of grammar in context can benefit learners with persistent literacy difficulties. The project is designed to identify ways of adapting existing grammar focussed teaching materials so that learners with specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia can use them to further develop their writing skills. It intends to improve educational practice through action, analysis and reflection. Research Design/Methods: The project, therefore, uses an action research design and multiple sources of evidence. The data collection tools used were standardised test data, teacher assessment data, semi-structured interviews, learners' before and after attempts at a writing task at the beginning and end of the cycle, documentary data and lesson observation carried out by a specialist teacher. Existing teaching materials were adapted for use with five Year 9 learners who had experienced persistent literacy difficulties from primary school onwards. The initial adaptations included reducing the amount of content to be taught in each lesson, and pre teaching some of the metalanguage needed. Findings: Learners' before and after attempts at the writing task were scored by a colleague who did not know the order of the attempts. All five learners' scores were higher on the second writing task. Learners reported that they had enjoyed the teaching approach. They also made suggestions to be included in the second cycle, as did the colleague who carried out observations. Conclusions: Although this is a very small exploratory study, these results suggest that adapting grammar focused teaching materials shows promise for helping learners with persistent literacy difficulties develop their writing skills.

Keywords : explicit teaching of grammar in context, literacy acquisition, persistent literacy difficulties, writing skills

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