

## **Languages and Literacy**

### **The Teaching and Learning of Narrative in English and Modern Foreign Language**

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CfBT contributes funding to the Languages and Literacy project

# LANGUAGES AND LITERACY

## The Teaching and Learning of Narrative in English and Modern Foreign Languages

### Background

**The Teaching and Learning of Narrative in English and Modern Foreign Languages** is a summative report of one of the secondary research and development strands in the **‘Languages and Literacy’ Project**. This project, co-ordinated by the International Learning and Research Centre, has been set up to identify and develop common approaches to the teaching and learning of first and second language.

### Context:

During 2002 and 2003 two different but very interesting projects were undertaken as part of the **‘Languages and Literacy’ Project**. The first focused on developing a common approach to teaching writing through English and Modern Foreign Languages in a secondary school<sup>1</sup>; the second was concerned with the link between speaking and listening learning experiences and their relation to writing in both mother tongue and second language learning in the primary phase<sup>2</sup>. This latter research project led to a DfES Innovation Unit funded programme in 2003-2004<sup>3</sup>.

These projects led to the hypothesis that through children’s understanding of narrative structures, it should be possible to develop well-grounded approaches to writing in both mother tongue and second language. We therefore formulated the research question:

*“What are the most effective strategies for the teaching and learning of narrative in order to increase linguistic achievement in English and Modern Foreign Languages?”*

We were fortunate to have the assistance of Pie Corbett, a writer and poet, at the start of this research project. He established a teaching sequence closely related to the one used in the **Story Making Project** on which we were able to base our work. A year 7 group was selected so that its English and Modern Foreign Languages teachers could work with Pie Corbett. Year 7 is taught in both subjects with mixed ability tutor groups. Pie focussed on the imitation, innovation, invention stages. The students in this class were being prepared to write narrative rather than relate it verbally, but exploring through talk was clearly the first step towards written narrative.

One lesson was spent with the group focusing on story telling techniques and how to adapt them into a written narrative. Following the initial session, the class teacher continued to teach writing across other genres using the methods she had observed so that we could evaluate the effects on student learning. In Year 7 the writing objectives which were felt to be the key to this project were:

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<sup>1</sup> Developing a Writing Tool Kit

<sup>2</sup> The Story Making Strand 2002-2003

<sup>3</sup> Story Making school-based research project 2003-2004

- W1: plan, draft, edit, revise, proofread and present a text with readers and purpose in mind  
W2: collect, select and assemble ideas in a suitable planning format  
W7: use a range of narrative devices to involve the reader

At word level a key objective was:

- WL14: define and deploy words with precision, including their exact implication in context

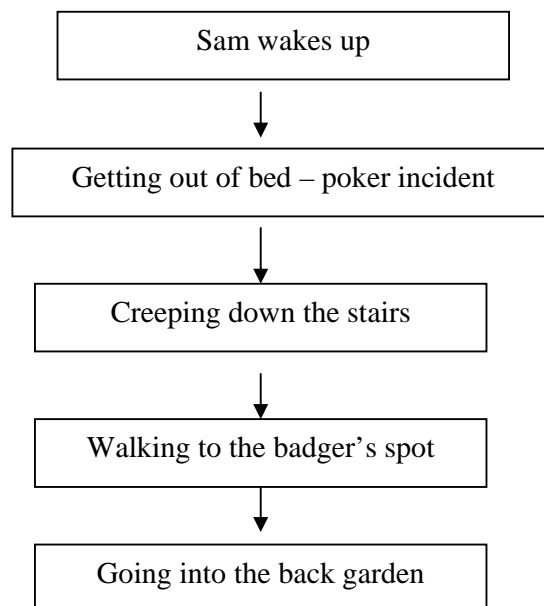
In speaking and listening the key objective which underpinned the whole project was:

- SL2: recount a story, anecdotes or experience, and consider how this differs from written narrative.

These objectives formed the basis of subsequent teaching. Evaluation was rooted in the class teacher's observation of how well these objectives were being met and developed by the students within their writing. Development of this type is, of course, not instantaneous. It is necessary to scrutinise student work over a long period in order to assess progress. Nor is it easy to measure how much progress has been made in different writing genres as the criteria for assessment are often slightly different. The measure must therefore be in national curriculum levels with some specific assessment of the key learning objectives. Within the writing attainment target, the strands we needed to teach were:

- awareness of audience
- vocabulary choices
- conscious crafting through sentence types

The method used by the writer was to orally recall a series of anecdotes, selecting one to develop into a narrative. He modelled how to break down the anecdote into a plan:

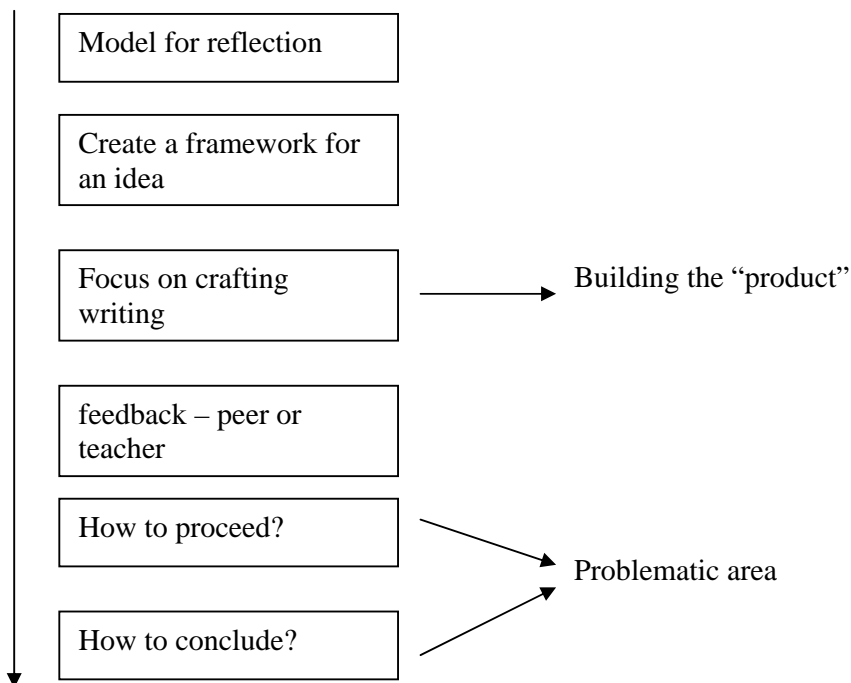


Each box would become a detailed paragraph. The writer modelled how to expand on detail:

*“Staggering from the bed, he stooped down and picked up the poker. Silently, he slipped out of the bedroom and crept downstairs .....*”

He demonstrated his **thinking aloud** as he wrote, critically analysing at word and sentence level in order to amend the writing. Afterwards, he reflected on his writing, stressing the impact of adverbial sentence openers. He encouraged students to think about the effects of this and other types of opener in building tension. This very close study of **language** was designed to focus the students as writers.

### Building a writing sequence



It is interesting to look at this model with its clear focus on planning and language against the sequence for teaching writing below taken from the Key Stage 3 Strategy English Department training pack (2001).

- A sequence for teaching writing
1. Establish clear aims
  2. Provide example(s)
  3. Explore the features of the text
  4. Define the conventions
  5. Demonstrate how it is written
  6. Compare together
  7. Scaffold the first attempts
  8. Independent writing
  9. Draw out key learning
  10. Review

The two models complement each other and, in providing a structured, exemplified approach, encourage students to move from dependence to independence in writing at each stage of both the planning and writing processes.

The teacher defines the process for the learner by selecting the route s/he wishes to take. In Pie's model, he is working as a writer. Therefore, he selects and moulds his material with a writer's eye. The teacher may choose to work with the second, more detailed model in order to secure learning across a wider range of genres and within the constraints of a timetable. The second model should be capable of being reduced once the students have become more confident and capable writers.

### **Main Findings**

In first language learning the structured approach to narrative demonstrated by the writer appeared to have a number of positive effects. As a starting point, it is important to consider the atmosphere he created by organising the seating in a U-shape. This less formal arrangement had the effect of ensuring inclusion of all the students in the group and allowed the teacher to involve many more students in discussion through this collaborative approach. The students developed a sense of purpose and audience in their own work and were able to adopt confident 'voices' in their narratives. The conscious crafting of writing was apparent in use of simile and metaphor and variety of sentence structures deliberately crafted for impact eg short sentences used to build up tension:

*Hours passed. Jake was having a nightmare and he woke up. He could not believe his eyes. His lamp was on and his bedroom was in a right mess."*

*The trees were laughing.*

The following examples show that able students appeared to use more adverbial sentence structures, selected active verbs for effect and experimented with sentence structures:

*Dave couldn't describe what it was, but he could feel something at the pit of his bones.*

*She slammed into the mattress.*

*"Take", the blur said **softly** like a bird whistling on a crisp morning, "care of..." as the blur spoke the words **drifted out of its mouth**.*

The words **softly** and **drifted** here evoke the quality of the voice. They appear three lines apart, demonstrating this student's control over the material. Planning and a clear focus on language would seem to be evident in this student's work.

The writer's lead with these children had a very positive effect on their narrative writing. The challenge for the class teacher was how to sustain this quality. The techniques for exploring language and planning could now be transferred to learning in Modern Foreign Languages, where a structured approach to creating narrative could reinforce this valuable learning and help pupils to progress in writing.

## Modern Foreign Languages

### Context

Following the experiences pupils had in approaching narrative in English, the same group explored their ability to engage in story telling in a second language, in this case French. Their Modern Languages teacher worked closely with her English colleagues as they went through the processes already described, and as they analysed pupils' writing. **From their experiences, it was decided that a focussed approach on some key linguistic objectives would enable pupils to use the new writing and planning skills they had acquired, as well as expand their command of very basic narrative structures and devices in French.**

The Modern Languages teacher would adapt and follow the sequence of leading planning and writing, introducing some elements of oral story telling to address achievement in both speaking and writing. The key language to be introduced and explored would be based on temporal markers, adverbial sentence starters, and the use of connectives and punctuation to signal a more individual and creative approach to producing a short piece of narrative. Each pupil was set the challenge of creating a brief real or invented anecdote about a day out with their family which would include an unexpected or mysterious event.

Initially, the group was asked to recall what they felt would make a successful piece of narrative, with reference to the work done in English. From this, a review of the use of punctuation and connectives made a very useful starting point for looking at how simple, known language could change the nature of a sentence or paragraph. **The next step was to investigate a range of adverbial sentence starters and temporal markers in English, then in French, with an aim to highlight similarities and potential difficulties when trying to write by translation rather than by creation through application of existent knowledge of vocabulary and structures.**

Pupils were asked to contribute possible words in English, to be shared as a group in order to reinforce linguistic concepts and secure knowledge. They then worked in small groups on a 'time challenge' to create a bilingual glossary of words they could use to enhance their writing. These were fed back to the class, which led to a pupil-led discussion of emerging patterns, (*such as adverbs ending in -ment in French rather than -ly in English*), and how some temporal markers could be problematic or lengthy when trying to successfully complete a piece of writing, (the use of past or future tenses which they had no knowledge of, for example). **Once these linguistic objectives had been secured, it was time to move on to the creation of narrative in French, following the teaching and learning sequences trialled in English.**

The group was provided with a model text which incorporated the desired aims and features for their own work in a longer and, on first reading, more challenging piece. The teacher introduced this by projecting the text and recounting it while she asked pupils to focus on her intonation and use of gesture to help them uncover meaning. **The class and teacher worked together to understand the text by repeating this process, with the pupils imitating the speech and movement to internalise some of the new vocabulary.** Pupils then volunteered to read out individual sentences or longer sequences using these devices so that the class told the story together.

The next step was to identify the key language they might recycle in their own writing. The group were given individual copies of the story and were asked to highlight the temporal markers and adverbs in discussion with a partner, then feed back to the group. To reinforce learning at home, pupils were asked to translate the individual phrases from the text into English to the best of their ability.

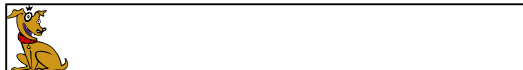
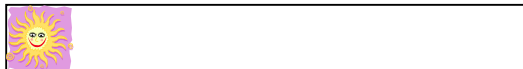
To explore further the idea of using oracy in story telling in French, the class was set the challenge of learning upwards of five phrases from the text. Techniques for this were discussed, including how some sentences could be pared down to make them more manageable for those who might struggle with the task. This naturally led to an in-depth look at the text ‘in reverse’, looking at what had been added to make it a richer piece of narrative.

Another technique was the use of pictures as cues for recounting a story. Pupils were asked to select which sentences they were going to learn, and following examples given by the teacher, they created pictorial prompt sheets in the form of storyboards, the creation of which they are familiar with from English tasks. The following lesson, pupils were put into groups and were asked to decide on nominated ‘story tellers’ from each group to recount their sentences from memory and by using their prompts.

### Modelling Writing

It was now time to focus on the writing, and how it could be planned and ‘crafted’. **To guide the process, planning boxes were used, as they had been when the group had worked with the writer in English. However, in this case, rather than each box being used as a stepping stone for expansion into a paragraph, the method was being used to slow down and sharpen the thought process of selecting words and creating effective sentences in a short piece of narrative.** Five boxes were displayed on the board for the class, each containing a pictorial clue as to what might happen in each sentence and which drew on prior knowledge of key vocabulary:

### Planning boxes – what is going to happen in our anecdote?



The teacher then began the process of demonstrating how a sentence could be formed, talking through her thoughts aloud and focussing on word selection, punctuation and points for attention in accuracy. The group then joined in, working on the next couple of planning

boxes together as the teacher scribed, then being asked to think about the last two sentences in pairs to then share their thoughts with the class. Each offering was put to the vote, so that a class ‘anecdote’ was created as a model for all pupils.

Pupils were then given a planning sheet, with reminders of what they needed to consider in their writing. These were once again reviewed together, with some vocabulary being written on the board to support some pupils. **They were all asked to work individually as ‘writers’ to create their anecdote using their notes, prior learning from their books and available reference materials, including dictionaries.** Pupils were encouraged to use the methods explored in preceding lessons to bring some character to their pieces. The writing was completed with minimal support from the teacher for all but the least able, with responses to individual queries and reassurance of the success or otherwise of choices made in language selection.

### **Monitoring Progress**

Throughout the unit of work, a sample of pupils were monitored as they progressed through the stages. They were interviewed informally in lessons, their learning was assessed through work produced and performance in class and group tasks, and they were given a ‘learning survey’ at the end of the unit. Their Modern Languages teacher kept a log of her own observations and pupils’ thoughts throughout the unit. These pupils had also had their writing scrutinised by their English teacher following their learning about narrative and story telling.

### **Findings**

#### **Modern Foreign Languages**

The objective of producing a piece of creative writing in French was a challenge which clearly enthused most pupils in the group. The unit was described as “fun and interesting”, and one boy stated that he’d liked it “because I enjoy stories”. Pupils were initially apprehensive about how they might be able to complete the final task, but **the many strands of preparation involved in this approach led to a higher level of confidence for most in the group.** From the final written outcomes of their learning, many pupils demonstrated a strong will to be creative and very good use of the simple narrative devices that had been introduced and reinforced in earlier lessons. Equally, in their oral tasks, the will to succeed and the effort shown in learning and recounting some or most of a story was most impressive on the part of the majority of the class.

It is important to note that most pupils interviewed made many references to the ‘fun’ factor in the writing process in French. They enjoyed the variety of teaching and learning styles, in particular the opportunities given to reflect with learning partners followed by contribution to whole class activities. They also liked building up a bank of knowledge specific to the final task, as they could understand the rationale for their gradual learning. Pupils were very positive about being able to work on how story telling sounds, and talked about how using different tones and gestures gave them a chance to practice their speaking and reading in a different way, as well as the opportunity to perform to their peers. They all thought that the use of pictorial cues was a very useful way of being able to commit phrases to memory, and that they would use this again when next set a similar challenge. Some expressed a little disappointment that they had not been able to recount their own anecdotes to the class in the same way that the model story had been introduced to the group.

**It was clear at all stages that the premise of ‘slowing down’ the writing process and giving pupils the planning structure by which they would craft sentences in a very detailed way was highly successful in reinforcing key linguistic objectives.** These were constantly reviewed and built upon throughout the teaching sequence, with evidence of how well they had been internalised and then used by many pupils in their own writing. The planning processes, taken from both the writer’s model from prior English lessons and the sequence for shared writing, gave pupils a very clear framework for their writing through a sense of security, purpose and structure. Pupils felt very positive about applying their skills from their first language, not only because of the familiarity of it, but also because it gave them a sense of ‘professionalism’ about their writing of an anecdote in French. In discussion and in their learning surveys, pupils talked about how they could now use the linguistic structures covered to “sensationalise” and “give a different impact”. **Indeed, it is evident that as a result of using this approach there was value added to the pupils’ engagement with writing, and that it helped to significantly overcome resistance to attempting creative writing in their second language.**

**The evidence of pupils’ final written outcomes shows that the attention to detail and the thinking skills required to produce a piece of narrative can make a very strong contribution to improving pupils’ achievement in writing and has the potential to do so in speaking.** The teaching and planning sequences follow a logical pattern for both teacher and learner, and the time taken to use this exploratory approach is worthwhile in terms of opening up pupils’ perceptions of how language can be commanded regardless of whether or not it is their first language. It also allowed for comparison of differences and similarities, with pupils’ language awareness extending to the very practical skill of realising what their current limitations might be for expressing themselves in a newer language.

Pupils were able to see how some basic techniques and a modest range of new vocabulary might help them to take their production of language beyond the very basic and mundane. However, it was inevitable that some pupils, particularly some of the most able boys, found the limitations of their range of language in French to be a frustration when they had great plans for their final pieces of writing. **It would seem that it is in the reinforcement of the skills required to create narrative that successful links with English can be made, and that a simplified expectation of final written or spoken outcomes need to be clear in order to avoid a lack of sense of purpose for pupils.** From the point of view of the Modern Languages teacher, the confidence gained by **knowing how to plan and structure writing by thinking it through and ‘crafting’ rather than just completing a piece of writing is an invaluable tool for raising achievement and pupil engagement.**

### **Next Steps In English:**

The English Department has already developed some skill in guided writing. This work requires further development and needs to be applied much more systematically to the process of writing at Key Stage 3. Similarly, starter activities will be extended to include a greater range of writing foci. During 2003-2004, Framework training has centred on Grammar for Writing. The Key Stage 3 Co-ordinator for the English Department, and The Key Stage 3 English Strategy Consultant, have collaborated closely on developing this strand. Their work on planning and organising will be used to underpin the narrative approach to writing.

A further recent research project undertaken as part of the ‘**Languages and Literacy**’ project, focussed on boys’ attitudes to writing in the secondary phase of education<sup>4</sup>. This research identified the reluctance of those boys in the middle range of ability to write for sustained periods. It was clear that they found structuring and developing written responses of length very difficult indeed. One way to support these boys is by breaking down writing tasks into manageable “channels”.

### **In Modern Languages:**

In order to develop these approaches, there needs to be some work done to create a climate of more teacher confidence in creativity and the production of narrative by pupils at such an early stage of their second language development. This could be achieved by the further exploration of modern languages teaching which is more objective-led and which does not rely so heavily on coverage of content.

Pupils have shown consistently that they respond well to having linguistic concepts and objectives explained, reinforced and put into practice. They also gain a great deal from having a very clear purpose to their final task in which they can draw together their recent learning and build on prior achievements. This is in the spirit of the Framework for Modern Languages, and the Languages Department has begun a programme of reorganising schemes of work by agreed coverage of objectives across the year. It is hoped that this approach will allow teachers to think creatively about how the objectives are exemplified and to create units of work which have clear aims and a degree of challenge for all pupils.

### **Summary**

There are some key points which apply equally to taking forward approaches to narrative writing in both English and Modern Foreign Languages. Firstly, **the writer advocated a journal for writing so that students build up a resource bank of ideas, words, phrases and so on for use in their work.** This would clearly shift the emphasis away from the mechanistic approach to writing that can often arise by allowing students to regard themselves as writers. Further to this, **the shift in emphasis from product to process is worthy of further exploration.** The journal can then become the source of ideas from which only some final pieces will be derived. Finally, what **the initial work with the writer clearly suggests is that writing does not require a linear approach.** Certainly, a process which breaks down writing into manageable sections will benefit less confident writers and will particularly suit boys.

**Rosanna Raimato and Barbara Woods**  
**Senior Teacher Researchers**  
**2004**

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<sup>4</sup> The Writing Dilemma: Phase 2