

ARR 4: The use of a real audience to inspire lower attaining students to redraft proofread and edit writing

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Context

Students' ability to redraft, proofread and edit their writing is an essential part of them refining their skills as a writer and enabling them to craft their writing so it is most effective for its audience and purpose. However, personal experience as an English teacher has shown me that disengagement with this process is common amongst students with lower literacy levels, but is certainly not exclusive to this group. Even higher ability students can be reluctant to take the time to reflect on the quality of their writing and make careful decisions about how seemingly small changes will have an impact on the reader. Students often don't recognise the purpose for making changes to their writing and this lack of motivation means that teacher feedback can often be ignored.

At Alder Grange School in 2015-16, an aim for the English department and wider school has been to encourage students to spend time reflecting on and improving written work, both independently and in response to teacher feedback.

New GCSE developments mean that the expected standard for writing is higher and more is required of students. Summer 2015 GCSE students missed out on marks in the English Language examination due to the lack of consideration given to spelling, punctuation and grammar which now "must constitute 20% of the marks" (AQA English Language Specification, 2014, p14). Having seen the exam scripts, it became evident that some students had some excellent ideas in response to writing tasks but their writing lacked conscious crafting of sentence structures and had too many errors in spelling, punctuation and grammar to express their good ideas effectively.

Our whole school strategic response requires teachers to highlight students' technical errors in blue and give them reflection time to correct their mistakes, as opposed to correcting mistakes for them. Within the English Department, we have used the *Debra Myhill 'Grammar for Writing'* approach to encourage students to consider the impact of decisions they make in writing.

Why write for a real audience?

With a move towards examination only assessment and a need for pupils to become more accustomed to writing under exam conditions, it is important that teachers avoid simply 'teaching to the test' and create opportunities for enjoyable and real life writing experiences. The intention is that this will have a positive impact on the quality of students' writing.

WHY WRITE FOR A REAL AUDIENCE? CONTINUED

It is widely recognised that providing a real audience for students' writing can give them a sense of purpose and motivation. In her blog about motivating student writers, *Elena Aguilar* reports:

what really motivated my students to write volumes of quality prose was when they were offered an authentic audience, an audience with whom they genuinely wanted to connect. (Aguilar, 2011, p. 1)

For some lower attaining students who find writing a challenge, they can often become disengaged with the writing process, particularly towards the final stages, when they can't understand exactly why they have to do something. It has been recognised for a long time that their teacher as an audience is an inadequate motivating factor being: *too remote, too limited and too uninspiring – especially in the role of examiner* (Morsy, Z, 1994, p210).

Depending on the previous experience of students, a teacher may need to find ways to change their students' perceptions of writing as a meaningful method of communication. It may be useful to remember that:

“Before coming to school, children learn to talk in settings where they have real-life purposes for communicating with other people” (Stagg Peterson, 2014, p3)

So it would be logical to provide students with a context as they develop their use of written language as well.

Research Question

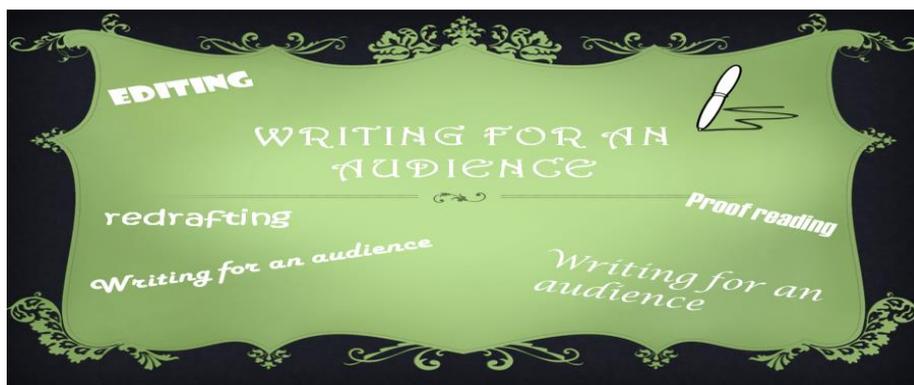
Can using a real audience inspire lower attaining students to redraft, proofread and edit writing?

AIMS:

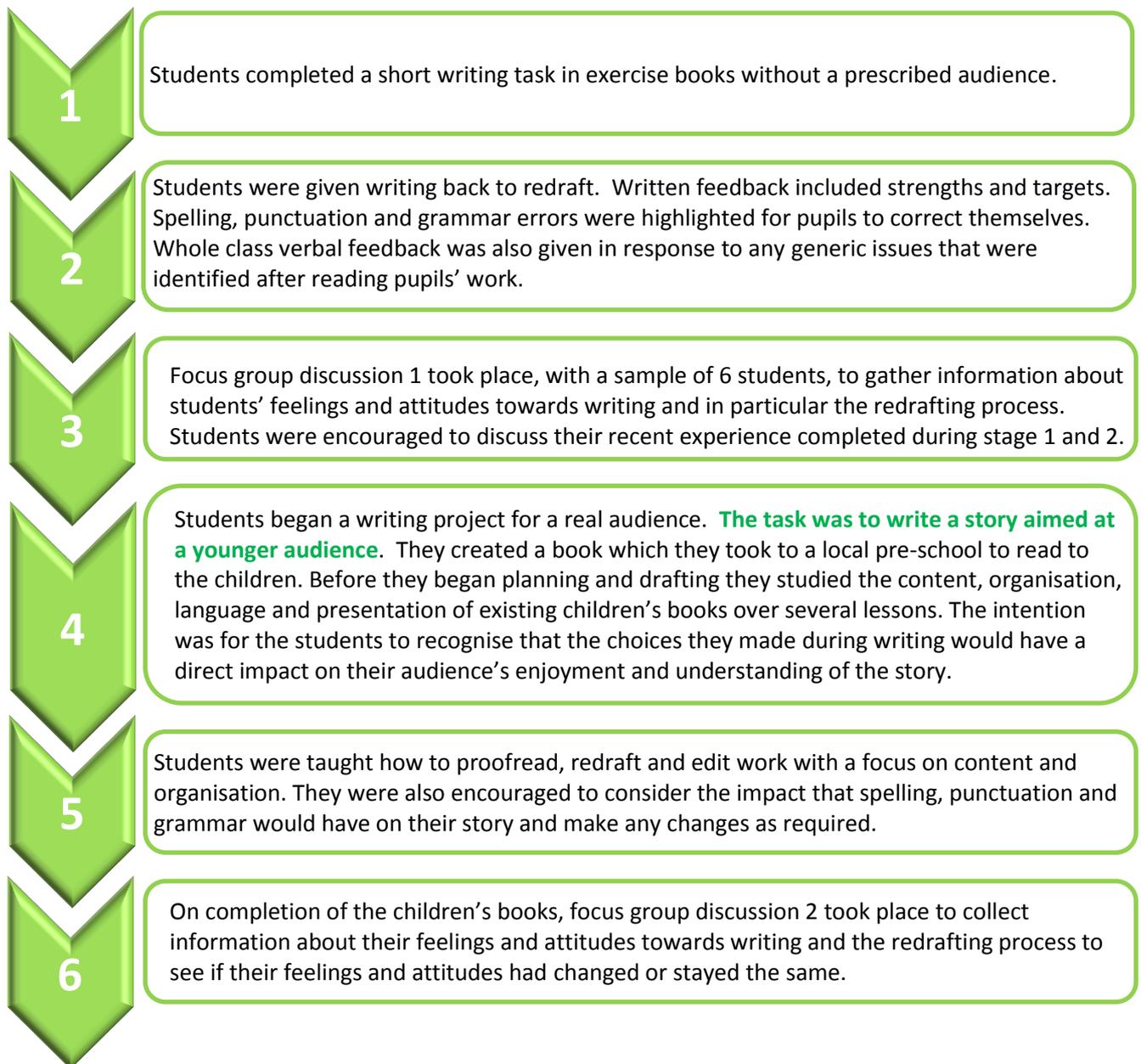
- To find out if having a real audience would encourage students to think about the impact of their writing and motivate them to spend time reflecting on and improving written work.
- To find out if providing a real audience means that students enjoy writing more.

THE SAMPLE:

- There were six Year 7 students in the sample. All of the students were 'working towards' the expected outcomes for Year 7 writing at the time of the research project. Three boys and three girls were included in the sample and covered a range of abilities and personalities within the class. Classes in Year 7 are set according to ability and the students were in set 5 of 6 sets.
- For the purposes of this report, and to ensure anonymity, students' names have been changed and will be referred to as Andrew, Alistair, Alexander, Alice, Anna and Abigail.



Research process



Discussion 1:

- Can you recall a time when you enjoyed writing?
- What is it about writing that you enjoy?
- What do you dislike about writing?
- What do you find difficult about writing?
- What do you think writing is for?
- How did you feel about proofreading, redrafting and editing your last piece of writing?

Discussion 2:

- What have you enjoyed about the writing project?
- When you redrafted and edited your writing, what did you do to improve it?
- Why did you do these things?
- Was there anything you disliked or found difficult?
- How do you feel about proofreading, redrafting and editing now?

NB When analysing the findings from each of the focus group discussions the term 'some' will refer to 1-2 students; 'many' will refer to 3-4 students, 'most' will refer to 5 and 'all' will refer to the full sample of 6 students.

Enjoy writing

Key themes identified:

- Writing about hobbies;
- Writing about personal experience;
- Writing in primary school;
- Writing on the computer;
- Writing about a topic chosen by themselves.

Having been asked about occasions when they had enjoyed writing, most of the students in the sample felt happier when writing was personal and about a topic that they had been able to select themselves. For Alistair, this had been the opportunity to write about football. He recalled: *“We had to write about our favourite thing to do. I wrote about football – that’s my favourite thing to do.”* Alexander enjoyed the experience of recounting his own experiences at the weekend referring to *“writing about something funny that happened”* as being memorable.

Many students spoke enthusiastically about writing stories where they could choose the topic, or for Alice, writing her own version of an existing story was a positive experience: *“In primary school, we had to write a book. It was our own version of it though and we could do it how we wanted.”* Possibly the reason for Alice enjoying this was that she wasn’t faced with the challenge of creating an entirely new idea but still had the opportunity to use her imagination.

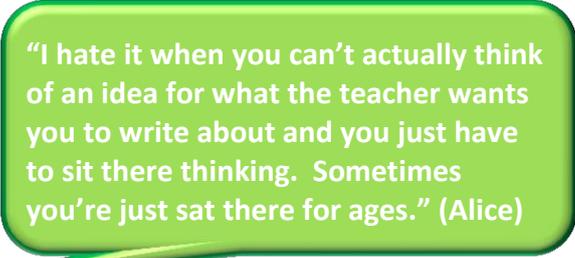
Only Andrew was unable to recall an experience of writing that had been enjoyable, but he did say that he preferred *“writing on the computer.”*

The overall message from the students was that personal writing based on their own experiences was preferable to other tasks they had been given as they found it easier and more enjoyable. Interestingly, most of the positive writing experiences they had referred to had been from primary school. This could simply be because the focus group discussion took place just at an early stage in Y7 or could suggest that writing tasks in secondary school had to date been more prescriptive.

DISLIKE/FIND DIFFICULT ABOUT WRITING

Key themes identified:

- Unable to think of ideas;
- Using punctuation when focusing on ideas;
- Choosing suitable vocabulary.



“I hate it when you can’t actually think of an idea for what the teacher wants you to write about and you just have to sit there thinking. Sometimes you’re just sat there for ages.” (Alice)

Less positive experiences of writing for the students included *“copying out”* and times when the subject matter had been less familiar. *“I hate copying. Like if you have to copy off the board.”* (Alistair) Meanwhile, Alice expressed her frustration recalling, *“when you can’t actually think about an idea for what the teacher has said to write about...”*

Most of the students were in agreement that using punctuation was challenging and time consuming as having to think about the *“rules for punctuation”* held them back from expressing their ideas. *“It’s boring trying to think about all the rules for punctuation and that. I know how to use punctuation but you have to think about it when you just want to write everything down. You can write it down without punctuation.”* (Andrew)

They were all in agreement that the most daunting aspect of writing was when they did have a topic they were able to discuss; they couldn't express it clearly, finding they were hindered by a limited vocabulary and difficult decisions regarding syntax and punctuation.

It's an effort to keep writing for a long time when you've got to be thinking which words to use and where to put your full stops. (Abbie)

REASONS FOR WRITING

The following chart shows quotations from responses given by each student when asked what they thought were the reasons for writing.

Andrew	For your grades for your exams...
Alistair	It could be for anything – it's everywhere. But for us it's for our teachers I think.
Anna	It's for people who write books .
Alice	You have to write to do work in your lessons in your exercise books to help with learning and stuff like that.
Alexander	It can be for giving people information in the future, like in history, so they know what it was like for us.
Abbie	My mum has to do writing for work. She writes everything down for when she goes to meetings for work .

Students' ideas about audience and purpose can be categorised as follows:

- Writing is for teachers;
- Writing is for an examiner;
- Writing is completed by people other than themselves;
- Writing is to communicate information.

The chart indicates that other than Alexander and Abbie, the students didn't really have a sense of audience or purpose for writing with none of them having a true sense of audience or purpose for their own writing. During the discussion all students were in agreement that any writing that they had to do was for their teachers or as Andrew said: "for learning."

It is also notable that in terms of purposes for writing, students only saw it as transactional without any reference to writing to entertain an audience in any way.

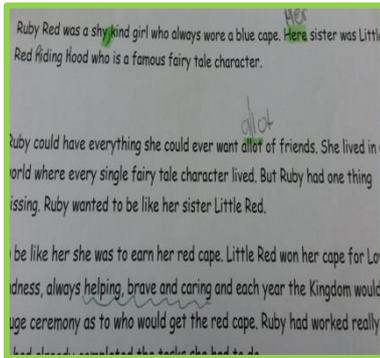
^{past tense}
This **is** Harry the night before his birthday. He was extremely excited about his presents.
On the morning he turned four, Harry woke up joyfully **he** ran downstairs very quickly.

Left: Change to tense
Right: typos e.g. here instead of her, allot instead of a lot.

Ruby Red was a shy ^{kind} girl who always wore a blue cape. ^{her} Here sister was Little Red riding Hood who is a famous fairy tale character.
Ruby could have everything she could ever want ^{allot} of friends. She lived in a world where every single fairy tale character lived. But Ruby had one thing missing. Ruby wanted to be like her sister Little Red.
To be like her she was to earn her red cape. Little Red won her cape for Loyalt ^{indness} indness, always ^{helping} helping, brave and caring and each year the Kingdom would ho ^{huge} huge ceremony as to who would get the red cape. Ruby had worked really ha ^{te} te had already completed the tasks she had to do.

FEELINGS ABOUT REDRAFTING AND EDITING WRITING

"It's hard doing your corrections and adding stuff because you've got to squash it together and there isn't always room then it looks a mess." (Abbie)



Sometimes I do changes but not all the time. It depends if I have enough time or not. If I've not got time, I just leave it." (Alistair)

"I added more information. I can't remember what but I'm sure I added some more." (Andrew)

"I hate it when you've got to copy it out again in best. I'm slow and it takes me ages." (Alexander)

"It's annoying when you've already wrote it and you've got to do it again to make it neater." (Alice)

"It was better in primary when your teacher just did your corrections for you. Then you didn't need to do anything with it." (Abbie)

"I don't like finding spellings in the dictionary. No point when you sometimes only get it wrong by accident." (Anna)

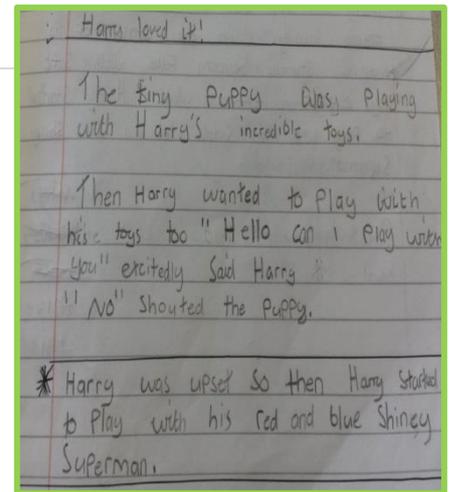
Pupils discussed a recent experience of redrafting a short piece of descriptive writing that had been marked and handed back to them. They had not been given a specified audience. All the pupils in the sample attempted to respond to targets set for redrafting and attempted to correct spelling, punctuation and grammar errors that had been highlighted to the best of their ability. Although they could recall changes they had made, none were able to offer a reason for making changes other than because they had been told to and thought it would make their work "better."

KEY THEMES IDENTIFIED:

- Redrafting was perceived as writing work out neatly;
- Pupils were concerned about presentation when redrafting in exercise books;
- Time given influences how much proofreading takes place;
- Writing on the computer was easier;
- Pupils were unaware of the reasons they were making changes.

When asked about how they felt about redrafting and editing it became clear that there were misconceptions about the definition of these terms. They recognised this process as one where they had to "make it neater" as Alice highlighted, reinforced by Alexander who referred to "copying it out in best" and claimed this is what teachers usually have told them to do. Abbie even said that it was "annoying when teachers tell you to do it again but neat."

Some students said they preferred it when mistakes were corrected for them and they simply had to copy out the correction in their final version so that they didn't have to think about it. Although



"If it was in your book people would make fun of you because of your handwriting so better that it's on the computer"

easier in the short term, not thinking about the reason for correction means the pupil will continue to make the mistake which is the reason behind the whole school marking policy where teachers highlight mistakes in blue.

All students preferred word processing to handwriting as it made the redrafting process less time consuming and they weren't afraid of making their exercise books look untidy. The issue regarding resources is challenging; availability of computers over a period of time for any particular class is limited. One student commented that they only ever make changes independently if there is enough time. None of the students enjoyed making changes and it was apparent that they couldn't see a real reason for this other than to please their teacher.

Pupil achievements when writing for a real audience

Having completed the stories ready to read to their 'real life' audience, the main findings from the focus group discussion 2 were:

- Many students explained that they had changed some of the **content** of their writing to make it more suitable for the age group of the audience:
 - At first I had put in that my character played Xbox but changed it because little kids wouldn't know what that was. (Abbie)
- All students recognised that the **punctuation** was going to enable them to read their stories out loud more effectively so they wanted to make sure it was accurate:
 - I know how to say things better out loud now I've put more punctuation in. Like when we practiced reading that book and doing funny voices and making our voices go high. I might feel a bit stupid doing it first though. (Alice)
- Some students recognised it would be easier for their audience to visualise the images they were trying to create and therefore enjoy the story more by selecting precise **vocabulary**:
 - I put in better words. It sounds a bit more lively now - better for the children so they can imagine better."
- Some were aware that building **descriptive detail** into simple **sentences** made writing more interesting:
 - Mine was a bit boring to start but I put things in like you said. Like instead of just saying 'he said' saying he said 'angrily' and that.
- Some students had a **misconception** that adding descriptive detail would not help the audience:
 - I hope it's better but I'm worried that adding extra details might make it complicated for the young kids listening. You said don't tell them how he felt; show them how he felt and describe it and that. I think it would be easier for the kids to just tell them. (Alice)
- Using a **computer** eliminated concerns about **presentation** and therefore was a motivating factor:
 - I looked at paragraphs...finding places where you can put extra paragraphs in and putting them in without it making it a mess (Abbie)
- Some students recognised that having an audience meant that accurate **spelling** was important:
 - It was better to get the spellings right so we can definitely read it out properly on the day without them thinking we're stupid. (Alistair)

Only one student implied he did not see the value of developing writing for a real audience and that was Andrew: *"I only did it because you told me to. I've said I'm not reading it out."*



Whilst this could indicate that Andrew lacked motivation, it could also be an example of Andrew's anxiety about sharing his work and receiving negative feedback from his audience. Some students had expressed concerns about this throughout the project but on completion of the stories most were positive about their visit to the nursery and thoroughly enjoyed reading their work to the children.

Questions this raises:

- ? How frequently are students asked to proofread, redraft and edit?
- ? Are teachers using a common terminology to describe the process?
- ? What expectations do different teachers have of students when they ask them to proofread, redraft, edit?
- ? How much time are students given to engage with this process?

Conclusion

Questions raised by students' feelings about redrafting (see page 7) would be relevant questions to address by the literacy working group, as part of a whole school strategy to develop writing skills.

A project where pupils have the opportunity to write for a real life audience appears to be a worthwhile experience. In this case, it provided students with a motivation to develop their writing and the chance to enjoy a sense of achievement when sharing their work. Such a project does not have to be limited to English lessons and teachers of other subjects could consider occasions where writing could be produced for an audience other than the teacher or examiner. Introducing projects similar to this in Year 7 would be beneficial; it is hoped that the students within the sample for this research may consider the importance of redrafting, proofreading and editing in future writing.

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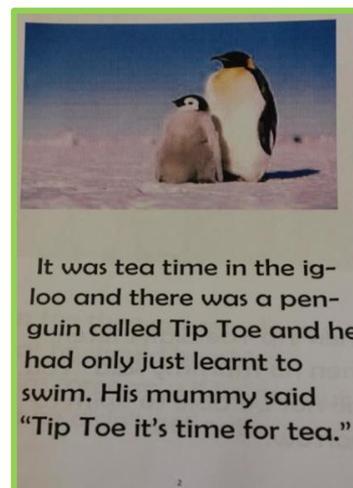
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East Lancashire Inclusion Partnership <http://www.elip.org/>

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