

## **P.40 Researching how digital video helps lower-ability children to develop their vocabulary**

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### **Background**

Hunwick Primary School is in a rural area with 150 children and 6 classes. Some areas of Hunwick are deprived, however the location of the school is not.

### Aim

I wanted to use digital video as a stimulus to see if it would improve the writing skills of the lower ability children in my class. Some of them struggle to come up with their own ideas and then transfer these to paper.

### Strategies

I asked a group of six Year 5 children, who I identified as being a lower achieving group in Literacy, to write a character description. This followed several lessons that looked at building up characterisations, including physical features, thoughts and gestures. The children had to think of a character and write down what they looked like. I told them they could be as strange as they liked. A teaching assistant supported them and helped them with any problems. She prompted them with ideas and gave them guidance with the task. However even with her support she stated that the children did not really start writing anything for about 10 minutes after the task was discussed and they were reluctant to talk about ideas. What they did discuss was not very creative and tended to be based on eye colour, hair colour, or what clothes they were wearing.

I gathered in their work after 25 minutes and found they had written between 5 to 12 lines, e.g. –

'He has short frizzy hair, he is really small, he has a very big nose.'

'She has dark brown hair with a pony tail in. She has freckles on her face. She is wearing a yellow T.Shirt with blue writing on it.'

'This boy has blonde hair and his name is Kyle. He is wearing a blue jumper.'

The following lesson I introduced them to a 'Digital Blue' camera. This is a small, child-friendly video camera that can be used to make animations and also for film making. The children can edit the slides and add special effects. They had not used this before and were eager to explore it. I showed them what I wanted them to do and demonstrated the features they were going to use. Their task was to film a group member for a few seconds and then add animated features to their face from the Digital Blue screen set-up. For example, they could add alien eyes, a pig's nose and antennae. I then let them explore it in groups of three and supported them with any problems, observing what they did.

As I was without classroom support during this session, the rest of the class were using a class set of laptops to carry out their task and were therefore very focused. This allowed me time to spend with the lower-ability group introducing the Digital Blue camera.

The group of children quickly found their way round the software and were creating very sophisticated pieces of work. They had discovered how to use animations, how to add features to the face and also how to colour in with paint-brushes. Their characters were now becoming very creative. They were also talking more about the characters they were creating

and discussing where they might have come from or what they were, e.g. swamp monster, bogey man etc.

After the children had filmed each other they chose their favourite character and wrote a description for them.

### Collection of data

The children did not write any more than they did in the first lesson, but I think this was because they were still trying to add effects before they started writing and they were looking at and talking about what they had done. What they did write however was of a very different quality. In the first description, each of the children wrote a very ordinary character description using simple adjectives, e.g. 'blonde hair', 'blue eyes', 'a red jumper'. In the second description the children were more creative:

'He has snot coming out of his nose like a water fall'

'A grassy green face and a fiery fringe'

'His eyes have purple pupils like a dragon.'

'This creature is not ordinary, it has five eyes and at midnight he turns back to being Jack'

'He has another eye on the top of his head off the last person he killed.'

I did not see a dramatic improvement in punctuation, grammar or spelling, but what they wrote was definitely improved. It was original, out of the ordinary and they began writing straight away.

### My conclusions

- The children wrote very creative pieces of writing with similes, more adjectives and more creative ideas about who the character was.
- They were talking to each other using more adjectives and talking about the look they wanted more clearly. One child identified that alliteration had been used when another child described the character with a 'fiery fringe'.
- The children were more motivated to begin writing and enjoyed the writing task after using the Digital Blue.
- Additional adult support would be essential when introducing the Digital Blue because although they picked it up quickly they did struggle for the first 5 minutes and also when watching their animation.
- One significant effect of the stimulus activity with the Digital Video was that children felt confident enough to try writing using more challenging words; rather than asking how to spell them first as they usually did, they seemed more prepared to experiment with writing them as well as they could.
- The children were working individually on their first piece of writing and they then worked in groups using the digital blue and writing up their descriptions. Therefore did these small group discussions have more impact on what they wrote? If the children had worked in small groups during the first activity then would their outcome have been different?

### **Learning from this research**

Although it did not improve the writing standards in terms of punctuation and grammar, I would use the Digital Blue to encourage creative confidence in writing. It should give a stimulus for writing about setting, character and then lead on to a much more creative story

experimenting with a wider range of vocabulary. The children were so enthusiastic about writing about their character that it made writing an enjoyable activity for them.

I have learned it may be better for these children to use a visual stimulus before other writing tasks too. Instead of talking and making notes about tasks, using video clips, animation and digital video before most writing tasks should help children explore and create their ideas more easily.