

# **ACTION RESEARCH AT RAINHAM MARK GRAMMAR SCHOOL**



## **‘How can English teaching strategies for developing writing be utilised into the drama context?’**

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## **Introduction:**

Both Drama and English are seen as two very different subjects, one focusing on language and the other focusing on physicality and bringing out confidence. However, within today's current Drama curriculum, these two combine, leaving some students struggling to gain the top grades. This is especially evident for those who excel creatively and in an active environment, but may struggle within the written elements of the course. With a written examination being incorporated into the GCSE qualification for drama, we noticed that for some students this is hindering their opportunities of achieving a top grade because the written examination is being seen as an unreachable mountain to climb.

We therefore chose this area of investigation to decipher whether the current teaching techniques within the English department could in fact be incorporated into Drama in a physical, fun way, which would make the students believe it is simply exam prep rather than a half merged English lesson. Being able to meet the academic rigour of the Drama course is an extremely difficult thing for some students, leaving them to feel disheartened. This case is even worse when the student is a fantastic actor but their grade may fall because of a written exam and we therefore found this topic personal as well interesting. In exploring this question, we hope to find that English techniques can be developed in a more practical way and unified with Drama, and in doing this, find an improvement in the grades of the GCSE students struggling with the final written exam.

## **Methodology:**

In order to first tackle the area of question 'How can English teaching strategies for developing writing be utilized into the drama context?' we broke this into two separate questions which we could base our research on;

- A) What are pupils finding difficult about the written elements of the drama course?
- B) How can pupil voice regarding difficulties and learning preferences be integrated?

Our final sub-questions were:

- What is the impact of utilising English teaching strategies for developing writing within the drama classroom?
- How can pupil voice regarding difficulties and learning preferences be integrated within the process?

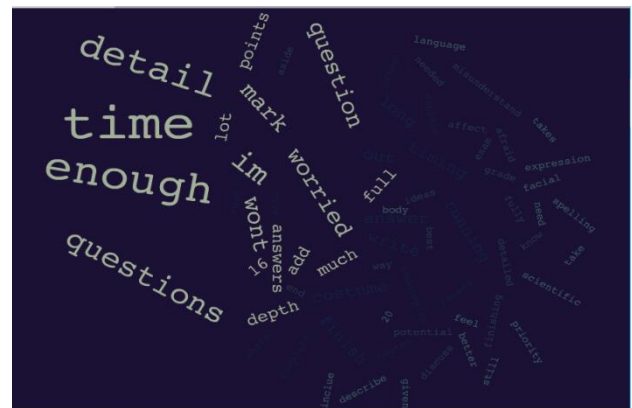
We then made a plan of what we wanted to do, putting our focus on year 10 and 11. This was prioritised as the written examination and controlled assessment components within the GCSE Drama course.

## **Our plan:**

- Observe lessons – with a written focus
- Look through journals
- Interview English teachers – what do they think works well?
- Run a year 10 and year 11 lesson
- Complete initial class questionnaires

### Observing a Year 10 Lesson:

Initially, we observed a year ten lesson to better understand the pupils' attitudes to completing exam-based work and we found that there was some slight deliberation, extended pauses and vague responses when asked to go into detail. They needed to develop points and explain what affects their use of, for example, space would have on the scene and the audience response, as well as their need to integrate more key vocab such as facial expressions and gestures. Through watching the class, we were able to identify some key aspects they needed to work on which we could then focus on helping them with, using our research. The teacher also asked the class to write down their questions and concerns regarding the exam paper which we then turned into a wordle, as shown below:



We decided a wordle would be the best way to collect data from our lesson observation as it would allow us to easily see the main concerns shared by the class. The wordle allowed us to spot that the main concerns they seemed to have about the course related to timing and the amount of detail they needed to go into in their answers. We then used this when we ran the year ten lesson.

### Looking through journals:

As well as observing a lesson, we then went through the year 10 class's journals to identify trends within their feedback which we could use as another base for our own lesson. The journals emphasised what the students had said in the lesson we observed, particularly the lack of depth they were putting into their answers. Some of the most prominent feedback given to the majority of students included:

- Focus on drama techniques
- Development regarding what happened during exercises which took place in the lesson
- Detail (more evaluation/evaluative language)
- Examples from the text
- Technical elements – more use of technical vocab and evaluative language
- Refining ideas and getting to the point faster
- Impact – justifying why choices were made
- Analysis of their choices

The feedback given in journals allowed us to pinpoint which aspects of their written work we wanted to focus on. We decided to focus on how we could expand their answers and help them to develop and analyse the choices when staging a scene. However, before going to the lesson, we decided to go to the English department and ask them for some techniques they use for essay writing and exam practise.

### Contact with the English Department

After observing the year 10 lesson and looking through their journals, we went to the English department and asked for some writing techniques they often use. We also looked at the scaffolding paragraphs they often use when looking at exam answers and essay writing. One example of the exercises we were told about was when the students write down practise questions and move around the room asking and answering the questions in pairs, swapping pairs in the

time limit given. We also liked the use of the acronym P.E.E (Point, Evidence, Explain) as it is easy to remember, so we wanted to come up with our own acronym for the class to remember (P.E.E.L – Point, Example, Explain, Link to text). Additionally, the English department use ‘scaffolding sheets’ to help the students construct their points so that they would hit certain areas needed to gain marks, which we thought could help encourage the students to analyse and develop their point and choices made in the exam answers.

After going to the English department, we planned what we would do in the year 10 lesson we were going to lead:

- 1) Set up the board with a list of connectives, positive phrases and key aspects of drama. We would then ask the class if they had any more connectives we could add to the list. Introduce P.E.E.L.
- 2) Use an example sentence and ask the group to improve it using the words on the board.
- 3) Ask the students to then improve practise answers they had previously written in class or for homework.
- 4) Ask each student to take a card and write a connective, key drama term and an evaluative phrase on it. Then get into pairs and swap cards and take it in turns to create a sentence on their performance using the words their partner gives them. They would then swap pairs three times.

### Leading Year 10 Lesson:

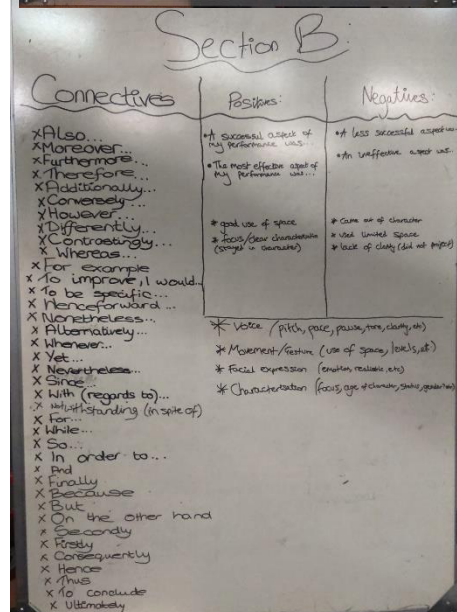
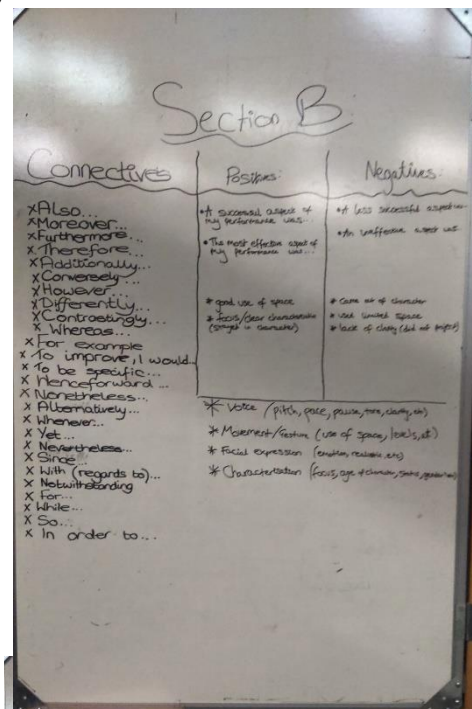
After speaking to an English teacher, we knew exactly what we wanted to do in the lesson and our main focus was trying to help the group develop their written to Section B of the written examination. We went to the drama studio before the lesson so that we could set up the board (right) as we wanted to be prepared for when the students walked in to get their focus immediately. We decided to focus on section B of their drama examination which looks at their characterisation in one of their performances. As they had just completed for their mock performances, we thought this would be a good time to look at section B of the exam; evaluating your own performance.

We then asked the group for more connectives they could add to the board, and focused on getting a varied list of connectives before linking the exercise to their essay writing. The group came up with twelve more connectives (right) which gave us more to work with and gave them no excuse to keep using the same language in their answers.

Next, we looked at how they could evaluate their performance, using positive and negative sentence starters in order to help them begin their evaluation. And we finally spoke about the four main aspects of performance they should write about when evaluating a performance; voice movement, facial expression and characterisation.

On the next part of the board, we focused on evaluative language, and gave them more sentence starters to use when evaluating a performance. We also introduced our acronym, based on the acronym used in English lesson, P.E.E. Our acronym was P.E.E.L which stood for:

- Point – WHAT did they do – using evaluative language.
- Example – HOW they did this using the aspects of performance we showed them (for example, if they spoke about voice, they could mention pitch, pace, clarity and tone).



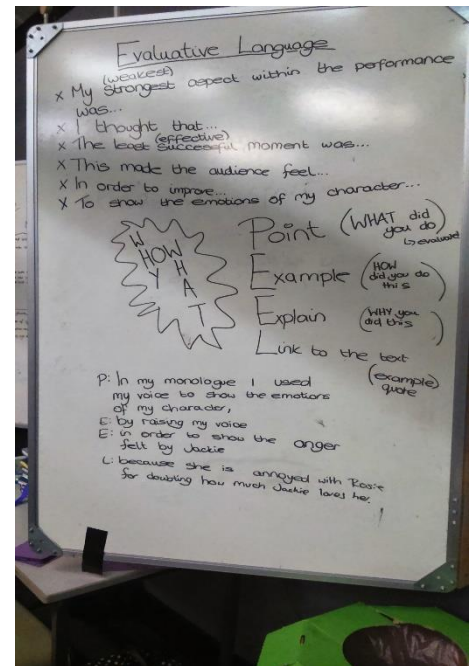
- Explain: WHY they did this – getting them to discuss the impact their choices would have on the audience and their intentions.
- Link: (to the text) – using a quote from their performance text to support what they have said, similar to analysing a text in English.

Using the acronym, we showed the students an example answer we wrote before the lesson, using the points (right). However, we made the answer very basic to show an answer that would get lower marks and we asked them to make it a top mark answer.

Original: In my monologue I used my voice to show the emotions of my character, by raising my voice, in order to show the anger felt by Jackie because she is annoyed with Rosie for doubting how much Jackie loves her.

We then showed the class how we could adapt the answer to make it better and therefore gain marks.

New answer: I was **effectively** able to convey the emotion felt by my character through my **use of voice**. I did this by raising the **volume and pitch** or my voice at certain moments throughout my performance, in order **to convey** the anger felt by Jackie towards her daughter, Rosie, for doubting her love towards her, **for example** in the line, “how dare you?”.



After showing the class an example, we asked someone to give us an answer they had previously written. We followed by asking the class to make the answer better and they were able to, showing that they were capable of doing it.

We then wanted to get them to write new answers utilising the English strategies in a Drama context making the lesson more practical, because observing the lesson allowed us to see that the group did not like the theory in drama as much as the practical work. We gave each student a piece of paper and asked them to write a connective, key drama term and an evaluative phrase. We then asked them to go around the room and get into pairs and then create a sentence similar to the one we showed them.

After the lesson, we made a crib-sheet for the students as we felt that it would help them in their future exam practise as they seemed to benefit from the lesson. (See Appendix)

### Leading Year 11 Lesson:

As we were aware that the students preferred the practical side to drama, and they had been working heavily on the examination, we wanted to help them with the written side of the course practically. Before the lesson we created a ‘scaffolding sheet’ based on speaking to the English department, to make the group focus on the written side of the course whilst exploring it practically. We decided to split the room into sections, the sections included:

- Costume
- Lighting
- Set
- Staging

The plan was to have the groups on a station for five minutes and then swap, however there were less students than we had expected so we merged the set and staging sections into one. We separated the students into groups of three and sent them each to a station to do come up with ideas for the scene they were working on. We timed them at each station so they had five minutes to experiment and come up with ideas for the scene, and when the time was up we then gave them two minutes to write notes on the scaffolding sheet we gave to them.

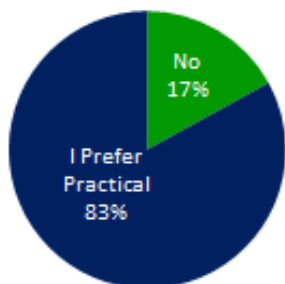
Once they had gone to each station we gathered them back at the tables and asked them to write up an answer to the exam question, using the notes they used during the practical exploration of the question. The notes appeared to help

the students as they were writing the answers. Positive feedback suggested that pupils preferred the practical approach combined with the familiar English writing strategies.

**Data Analysis:**

**Initial research: Student Survey**

**Do you enjoy the written side of the drama course?**



It was clear from the start of the process that the Year 10 group of students disliked the written side of the course. However, by mixing proven English strategies with creative exploration we hoped to engage them more successfully and therefore improve their writing abilities.

NB: There was a ‘Yes’ option for this question but no students selected it as their answer.

**Tracking improvement: Student Journals and Mock Exam**

**Four Marker:**

Student	13/02/15	27/02/15	13/03/15	Mock Exam 24/04/15
A	4	-	4	4
B	3	-	4	3
C	2	-	-	4
D	4	-	4	4
E	3	-	4	4

Indications from data above: An indication of stability in attainment.

**Six Marker:**

Student	13/02/15	27/02/15	13/03/15	Mock Exam 24/04/15
A	-	5	-	5
B	-	6	-	4
C	-	3	-	2
D	-	5	-	4
E	-	5	-	6

Indications from data above: Reduction in attainment for short mark questions.

**Sixteen Marker:**

Student	13/02/15	27/02/15	13/03/15	Mock Exam 24/04/15
A	13	-	-	14
B	7	-	-	12
C	5	-	-	11
D	2	-	-	14
E	13	-	-	14

Indications from data above: Positive impact on longer mark questions.

**Twenty Marker:**

Student	13/02/15	27/02/15	13/03/15	Mock Exam 24/04/15
A	-	11	14	16
B	-	4	12	8

<b>C</b>	-	10	-	16
<b>D</b>	-	6	13	14
<b>E</b>	-	15	18	14

Indications from data above: A mixture of increased and decreased attainment.

While the year 10 mock exam results showed that the results after we had worked with them maintained a medium score, with the exception of an exemplary few such as Student A, the results have improved somewhat. Looking at the journals the students completed, the various exam questions showed that students can excel but their consistency seems to be an issue; pupils gain full marks on some questions then fall to a little over half marks on others. It is clear from the results, and the previous information we gathered, that the written side of the curriculum may not be suitable for a creative arts subject, specifically that which focuses heavily on the creative process. However, we cannot ignore the increase in marks either due to our efforts or the encouragement given for the students to revise. The exam results did not necessarily show the students' best work however they all achieved better marks than they were previously gaining. In summation, our research project has given insight into what pupils struggle with the most and offered possible exercises as solutions; however the pressures of the exam still presents itself as an issue rather than the writing itself. We suggest that in other years, once the English writing strategies have been incorporated, there is focus on how students can tackle this problem of pressure.

### **Evaluation:**

Overall, we feel that we have explored our question successfully, both in terms of initial research, and in improving that which we set out to: to improve written work within Drama using English techniques. We gathered a wide range of research, both qualitative and quantitative, in terms of researching the particular difficulties pupils faced with written work in drama, such as observation of lessons, data collection from their journals (written class work) and mock exams. We also created a survey so as to ascertain what the students personally thought and felt about their skills in terms of writing within drama. We collated this wide ranging research so as to understand the key issues that students were struggling with: using evaluative language, using examples from the text to support their answers, and managing their time effectively. Condensing our research into these key areas of focus was easy, as we had used 'Wordles' throughout our process for each method of research, picking out reoccurring phrases students themselves had said, or reoccurring comments in the teachers notes on their journal work such as 'you should make reference the play'. Consequently, we needed only to compare these 'Wordles' to realise our main areas of focus. Having successfully understood the struggles the students had, we moved on to the next stage of our process: trying to improve the students written skills and solve these issues with the help of English techniques.

Before we could begin to help the students develop their skills, we needed to research some English approaches to aiding students written skills. We gathered this research in a variety of ways, both speaking directly with English teachers and looking at resources they had created to assist their students, namely, written 'guides' to answering questions and 'scaffolding paragraphs'. This stage proved more problematic than the initial research stage, as we found that a lot of the English techniques were far more theoretical than practical, unsurprisingly, and we were concerned that the students may be too bored to connect and respond well to such theory based tasks. Therefore, we began to take the ideas behind these English techniques and use the ideas to create a more practical approach. A particular exercise we found effective within English was one in which the students wrote down practice questions and moved around the class both asking and answering said questions, swapping pairs as they went. This exercise stood out to us as having the 'blend' of written theory and practical exploration that we had hoped for, and therefore we highlighted this exercise as one which we would use with the students. Having decided upon the exercises we wished



to explore with the students, we moved on to the most exciting stage of our process: putting our plan into action with the students.

When applying our ideas to the class, we used various methods: we lead a lesson in which they practically explored a question (such as setting a scene) and then had to use our 'scaffolding' sheet to construct points; we used the English exercise in which students swapped questions and moved around the class-room directly; and we created a guide, as an entire class with the students vocal input, on the board as to creating the 'perfect answer', and then created a crib-sheet with their ideas on it for them to keep. Whilst it was a challenge at times to keep the students engaged, especially within the last, more theory based exercise in which we wrote on a board, overall we feel the techniques were successful, but we needed to prove that we had been, leading on to our final stage.

Having implemented our ideas, we collected more data so as to assess the success of our project. Qualitatively, the students responded well to the practical exercise of swapping questions and moving around, as we could note a more positive attitude towards the written work than we had noted in our initial observation of their lessons, with the students having happier facial expressions and being more focused on the task (less off-topic chatting). Analysing their exam results provided us with quantitative proof that our methods had been effective, with the marks being higher than the mocks we had originally read as initial research. Despite this, an element of our process which was unsuccessful is that we did not tackle the issue of timing with the students, and issue which we had noted throughout our various research; undoubtedly, they would have benefited from our exploring solutions to this issue alongside the others, and this was clearly an over-sight on our part.

Overall, we enjoyed the opportunity to undertake this research project, and feel that we had a positive impact on the students, successfully exploring our question. Both the students personal reactions and the mathematical data support our claims of success, and we hope that the drama department can re-use our developed exercises to continue to develop students written skills within drama.