

Talk for Writing: Building writing and communication skills across the curriculum

Nicola Slorach and Ann Bradbury, St John's School, Boston Spa, describe this process within a specialist school content

"My aim is to put down on paper what I see and what I feel in the best and simplest way." – Ernest Hemingway

Introduction

As long ago as 2012, research from the Department for Education (DfE) identified writing as the subject where pupils perform less well compared to reading, mathematics, and science. In addition, there was a significant gender gap with girls outperforming boys in all key stages.

The same study found that overall, pupils who have positive attitudes towards writing were also more likely to perform at or above the expected level for their age compared with those who had more negative attitudes.

A research report by the National Literacy Trust (NLT) in June 2022, reflected on young people's views on writing during the first lockdown in spring 2020. For some young people, the time was one of increased creativity. However, for many others, disrupted schooling had a less positive link with their writing and in 2021, writing enjoyment levels dropped to the lowest level recorded in over a decade. The NLT found writing enjoyment levels continue to lag behind reading enjoyment levels year on year.

In this article, we will describe

- the difficulties hearing-impaired students at St John's experienced with writing
- why we have targeted this as an area for improvement
- our implementation of the Talk for Writing (T4W) approach
- the impact of the project so far
- collaborating with other special schools.

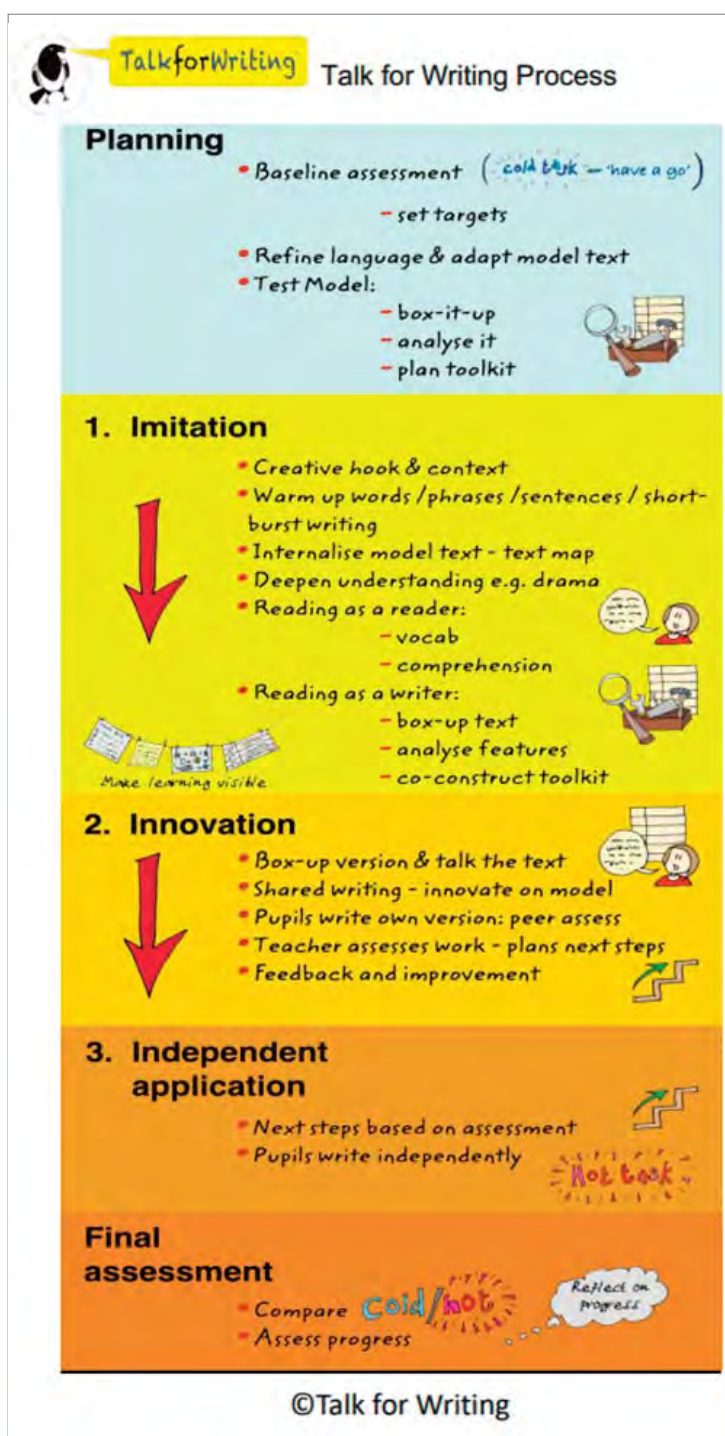
The writing difficulties of St John's students

St John's school was founded in 1870 as a school for hearing-impaired pupils. A key focus of our approach is the development of communication skills, and while a few students join the school who need a holistic approach that includes signing, for the vast majority, spoken language is their preferred mode of communication.

Many of our students have found reading, especially for meaning, difficult to achieve. These students have a personalised pathway designed for them. The interventions used will depend on the strengths and weaknesses our assessments identify but may include phonics, sight reading, or have a

comprehension focus.

For these young people, writing is even more difficult. Young people with good writing skills demonstrate their knowledge of vocabulary, syntax, and meaning in context.



Talk 4 Writing Process

However, our students' hearing impairments (together with sometimes co-existing specific learning difficulties) presents challenges to the development of complex language forms through lack of exposure. This influences their ability to write extended sentences that are linked together coherently, resulting in 'stream of consciousness' pieces where communication intent floods out of limited language structures. This lack of structure seems to result from a fractured 'internal voice' ie the lack of an internal storyteller maintaining the lucidity of the text and telling the writer what to write next.

Why we targeted writing as an area of improvement

Far from being simply the act of forming visible characters, writing expresses who we are even after our own lifetime and makes our knowledge, personal aspirations, and work for the future visible to others. Writing provides us with the means to explain ideas to ourselves and others and preserve our personal experiences and memories. Writing enables us to communicate the very essence of who we are. Learning to write well offers young people opportunities for creativity and enjoyment that can enhance their life and intellectual engagement throughout adulthood.

In a narrower focus, acquiring the patterns of language across the curriculum in specific subjects has a positive



T4W wall

impact on academic attainment. Modelling the specific outlines and rhythms of different subjects enables teachers to support pupils to develop clarity and deepening of thought.

In St John's, we are only too aware of the 'gatekeeping' role of General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSEs) to access further and higher education as well as skilled employment. In Key Stages 3 and 4, there is a strong focus on coaching to gain grades that enable young people to move on to their next stage of education. In English, this includes writing effectively for different purposes and audiences in exams, where 40% of the marks rely on technical accuracy. Our pupils' work shows their ability to use a high proportion of all the language they know, but attainment is capped by the limitations of the language pool they have to draw from.

Implementation of the T4W approach

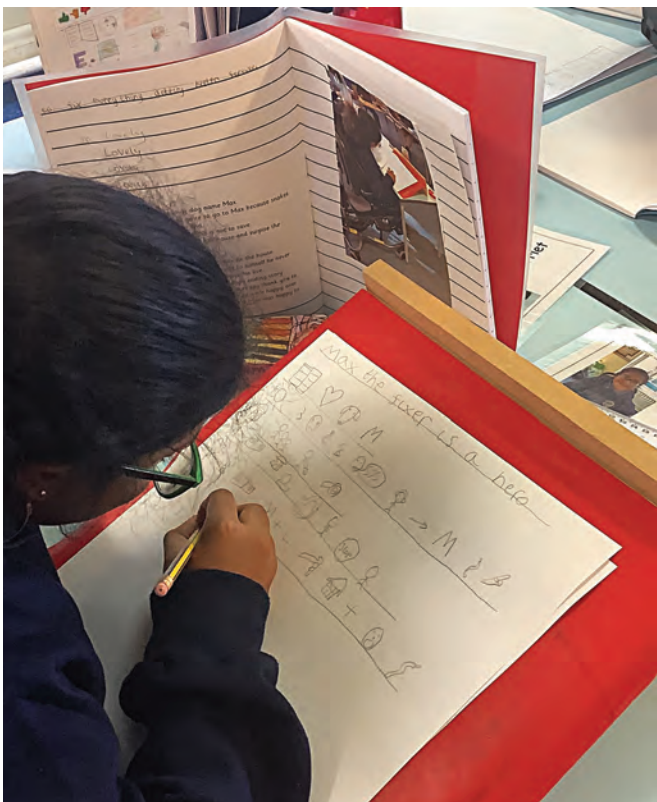
While exploring the ways and means to improve our pupils' writing, we looked for evidence of approaches that were effective with Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) pupils. These came as no surprise:

- explicit, scaffolded instruction in planning, composing, and revising writing
- a focus on how a pupil is taught, in addition to what is taught.

We already had our own shape-coding system that supported young people to write grammatically at sentence level but wanted to incorporate explicit vocabulary teaching across the whole curriculum.

Our research identified the T4W approach as one that could help us achieve the improvements we were seeking. In outline, the process moves from imitating a text to innovating a new one, and then applying this learning to independently invent a new text.

Teaching is shaped to offer students the opportunity to be immersed in and internalise the language focus. Most of



Pupil writing using symbols

the learning is vocalised and uses actions and images to support students to be able to recall and retell stories and other texts. At every stage, there is an opportunity to repeat and rehearse key vocabulary, sentence structures, and composition so that these are committed to a student's long-term memory. It also allows teachers the flexibility to select key grammatical skills that have been identified as gaps in the student's learning. This last factor was important so we could meet the specific requirements of hearing-impaired learners.

The T4W process

1. Planning

The 'cold task' establishes a baseline of skills before work on the unit begins.

This informs the teacher about which aspects of writing need to be the focus of the learning, personalised for the needs of the group. It also supports teaching staff to write their model text which is essential for the students to learn the sentence structures and vocabulary needed.

2. Imitation

The length and complexity of the model text depends on the level the students are working at. Where possible, this links to other areas of the curriculum. For example, during the summer term 2022, our students were learning about the history of St John's School and looking at images of the school as it was decorated for the coronation of King Edward VII in 1905. This was linked to the celebration of the Queen's Jubilee and one class of students imitated a five-sentence story for The Queen's Hat by Steve Anthony.

The five-sentence story uses key opening phrases for each sentence to structure a simple story:

- Once ...
- One day ...
- Unfortunately ...
- Luckily ...
- Finally ...

The sentences following these opening phrases can be long or short, but as our teaching staff experimented, they found reducing the length of the sentences gave a secure starting point for learning to build upon. Some students were then able to elaborate upon this initial structure.

The opportunity for students to engage with and absorb the context of the writing and the vocabulary in the text is called the immersion phase. It is at this point that the stimulus is used to engage and interest the students, and

Cold Task

LO – To write a story opening.

The lady was awake on the shining moonlight. When the moon shines its magical nights. Bats and sea birds is her talking animals to make dreams come true. Her hair is rainbow of magical for the world. The lady name is green woodland, she so beautiful young lady.

Immitate

LO – To imitate the story of the Rainbow Serpent.

The earth was layed flat and pretty still. Soon the snake began to wake up. She was a rainbow bright snake.

When the snake moved it made huge mountains valleys and rivers. She travelled for a pretty long time. She got sleepy.

She tickled the frogs belly till the water fill the tracks which became the rivers. Some animals did not like this and turned to stone or rock. Those who behave will be award with human form but those who don't will be punished.

The tribe of people lived together on the wonderful land who was given by the Rainbow serpeant. They knew that the island would always be theirs as long as they would look after and care for it. They believed that no one would ever take there land away.

Innovation

LO – To write an innovated version of the rainbow serpent.

The Huge Rainbow Butterfly?

Long, long ago, the earth was flat and nothing moved or grew. One day, the beautiful magical butterfly woke u. It was a rainbow butterfly. It fluttered around for a long time. As it fluttered, it made houses, valley's and rivers with its huge wings. Then the butterfly's wings got tired and it

went to sleep. After some rest, the butterfly went back to the third place it created, the river. It called to the frogs and tickled their filled up tummies with its wings until it made more water in the rivers.

After some months, the flower paths, grass and trees grew because there was more water. Then, the animals woke and followed the huge butterfly. Some of the animals became greedy and took more water than others. They did not share equally so the huge butterfly made some rules.

Hot Task – Invent

The Butter-boy and the leaves

One night a shooting star came shooting to the ground and then a boy appeared. He had wings like a butterfly and bright red cheeks. The star was burning hot.

Soon, he saw a strange tree. The tree was crying. The boy was shocked with his eyes wide open.

Next, he made the tree calm down and made friends with it. The boy was called butter-boy. Soon he began shivering. Suddenly the tree cast an orange light which immediately warmed him up. He fell asleep.

The next day, he woke up to a group of people staring at him lying on the ground. 'The tree is magic!' he said to the people. They looked at him like he was crazy.

An example of the progress one student made throughout one cycle of using the T4W principles

often the full version of a text would be shared with the students as a part of their daily form group reading rituals.

This stimulus must offer an extension to the pupils' linguistic skills. For example, in an early experiment with the T4W approach, deaf students with complex needs were aiming to rewrite the story of the three little pigs from the wolf's perspective. However, to access the problem or the 'unfortunately' moment within this story, the students needed to understand the properties of straw, sticks, and bricks. This linked with the science curriculum and involved exploring these materials to develop a deeper understanding of why a house made from straw would not be suitable to protect the pigs from the wolf.

After the immersion phase, the students learn and frequently rehearse the model so that they can begin to internalise the speech. At St John's, we have used a range of ways to imitate the text. Drama has been used to engage with the series of events and emotions of the story; some students will read the text aloud; some vocalise the story as well as using signs and actions; others use pre-selected images or draw their own images and symbols; for others, staff use some British Sign Language (BSL) signs and some Makaton signs to help students internalise the text.

3. Innovation

For some of our students, just imitating the model text would demonstrate significant progress. However, for those who are ready and able, we would take the model text and innovate it. We explore different settings and characters, introducing unfamiliar vocabulary as required. The students can then take ownership of the model text and make their own changes to the content. However, they will keep the basic structure the same. In the groups

where a five-sentence story is being used, the key opening phrases remain in place as this gives the students an opportunity to continue to rehearse and internalise sentence structures and patterns. Students continue to rehearse the model text with their changes in the same way as the imitation phase. Students are filmed rehearsing their innovated stories as well as being asked to write these down or use word processing software to publish their work.

4. Independent application

This is the stage where children can show their ability to independently use the features the unit of learning has focused on. This is the time for pupils to choose how and what they want to write. After brainstorming ideas and embellishing the text, they have the chance to plan and write their own version.

This final piece of writing can be used as the 'hot task', showing what they know. By now, the pupils will have revised their own work and participated in peer assessment.

The teacher can look back to the cold task and assess the progress made. This formative assessment is used to plan the next steps.

So far, we have found that when pupils compare their cold and hot tasks, they are proud of the progress they have made and this is highly motivating.

Impact of T4W

At St John's, we only began using T4W a year ago, so we are only at the early stages of implementing and adapting the approach to meet the needs of the deaf students taught here.

However, we hope the energy and enthusiasm teaching and support staff have dedicated to the new initiative will deliver raised standards.

The process has required a strong commitment in terms of time for training and planning. During the first year, our teachers and support staff participated in a training day and a series of twilight sessions. We also benefitted from a T4W clinic where teachers brought examples of the early texts they were trialling. More training will come over the next three years.

Our early attempts of using T4W were challenging but teachers supported each other to create a low stress atmosphere of 'just have a go' and enjoyed thinking about what the process of writing really involved. They felt positive about creating teaching sequences that could unblock our students' writing potential.

So far at St John's, we have observed definite improvements in students being able to communicate stories and non-fiction texts due to repetition and practice. There has been an increase in the amount of language our pupils can commit to memory. We film students imitating the text and share this on a shared learning platform for staff to evaluate and send to pupils and parents to demonstrate their achievements. The writing produced demonstrates a much greater amount of independent text

and the structure of the five-sentence story provides a less daunting way to start writing. Over the next two years, we hope to gain further insights into how we can adjust the approach for our pupil cohorts and apply it across the curriculum.

The Leadership Project

T4W has been used in many primary schools but not so commonly in special schools. To see how T4W can improve outcomes in pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN), we are involved in a leadership project to look at how the basic principles of T4W are being adapted in specialist settings and learn how other schools have developed the process. It will involve discussing how to broaden pupils' experience of high-quality texts that are at an appropriate age-related interest level for readers and authors with emerging literacy skills.

Eventually, the aim is to develop and articulate a transferable whole-school T4W approach for special schools and establish potential T4W training centres.



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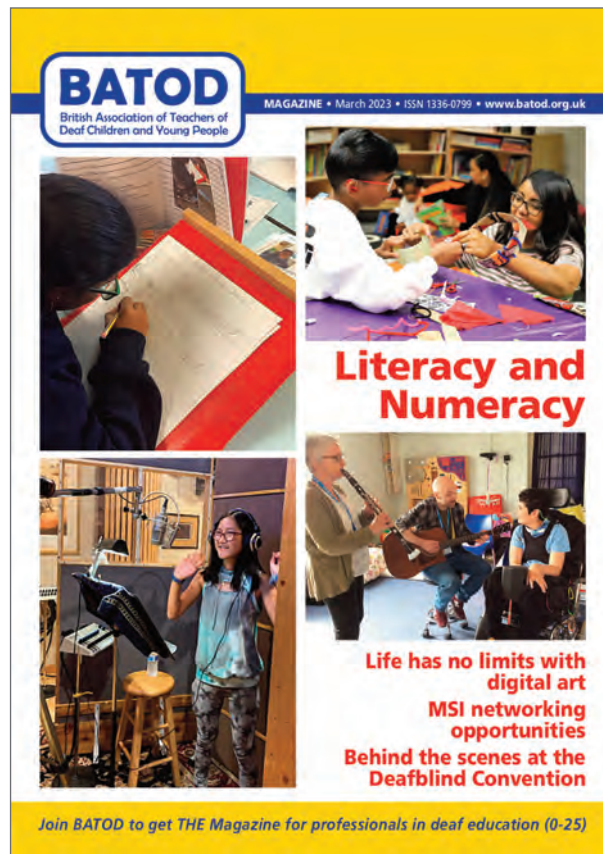
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