

HOW DOES PLAYING WITH GRAMMAR IMPACT ON PUPILS' WRITING? – A MIXED METHODS RESEARCH PROJECT INTO THE EFFICACY OF CONTEXTUALISED GRAMMAR TASKS

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How Does Playing with Grammar Impact on Pupils' Writing? – A Mixed Methods Research Project into the Efficacy of Contextualised Grammar Tasks

Contents

<u>List of Figures</u>	Page 3
<u>Abstract</u>	Page 4
<u>Introduction</u>	
Grammar, Writing and the English Teacher	Page 5
School Context	Page 6
Aims	Page 7
<u>Literature Review</u>	
Contextualisation	Page 9
Mentor Texts and Genre Writing	Page 14
Play, Motivation and Imitation	Page 18
Hypothesis & Research Questions	Page 22
<u>Methodology</u>	
Method Overview	Page 24
Definition of Terms	Page 25
Research Method	Page 26
Creative Writing Focus	Page 28
The Baseline & Post-intervention Tests	Page 30
A] The Baseline Test	Page 31
B] The Post-intervention Test	Page 33
The Intervention	Page 34
The Groups	Page 38
Collaboration and Interviews with Teachers	Page 42
Quantitative Data	Page 45
The Focus Group Interviews	Page 47
Ethical Considerations	Page 49

Results and Discussion

Introduction to Results	Page 52
Quantitative Data Analysis	Page 52
A] Overall Effect	Page 53
B] Discussion of Overall Effect	Page 56
C] Progress of Subgroups	Page 59
➤ Gender	Page 59
➤ Disadvantaged Pupils	Page 60
➤ Attainment Subgroups	Page 62
D] Distribution of Progress	Page 64
Focus Group Interviews	Page 67
A] Pupil Perceptions of the Intervention's Impact	Page 68
B] Pupil Perceptions of the Intervention's Design	Page 72
Interview with Mrs Swade	Page 76
A] Motivation	Page 76
B] Scaffolding	Page 79
Interview with the English Department	Page 81

Conclusion

The Intervention's Efficacy	Page 85
Limitations and Implications of the Research	Page 87

<u>Reference List</u>	Page 89
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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Departmental Report on Year 7 Reading Ages	Page 94
Appendix 2 – Mark Scheme for the Controlled Trial Tests	Page 95
Appendix 3 – Consent form for Teachers	Page 96
Appendix 4 – Formula for the Effect Size	Page 97
Appendix 5 – Interview Questions for the Focus Group	Page 97
Appendix 6 – Stimulated Recall Material for the Focus Group	Page 98
Appendix 7 – Examples of the Intervention Task for the Focus Group	Page 102
Appendix 8 – Interview Questions for Mrs Swade	Page 103
Appendix 9 – Presentation to the English Department	Page 104

List of Figures

Figure	Description	Page Number
1	Visual prompt for pupils' writing in the baseline test.	32
2	Visual prompt for pupils' writing in the post-intervention test.	33
3	First example of a PowerPoint slide providing the intervention's instructions.	36
4	Second example of a PowerPoint slide providing the intervention's instructions.	36
5	Third example of a PowerPoint slide providing the intervention's instructions.	37
6	Table showing size of classes involved in the controlled trial.	39
7	Table showing variations between classes involved in the controlled trial.	41
8	Table showing profile of pupils participating in the focus group interviews.	49
9	Line graph comparing the progress of the intervention and control groups.	53
10	Bar chart comparing the progress of the intervention and control groups.	54
11	Bar chart showing average test scores for individual classes.	55
12	Table showing individual classes' progress.	56
13	Bar chart showing the average progress of boys and girls in the intervention group.	59
14	Bar chart showing the average progress of disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils in the intervention group.	61
15	Table summarising the attainment subgroups' profiles.	62
16	Bar chart showing the progress of attainment subgroups within the intervention group.	63
17	Bar chart showing the spread of progress in the intervention and control groups.	65
18	PowerPoint slide with the intervention's instructions, asking pupils to write a rant.	77
19	PowerPoint slide exemplifying effective scaffolding of the intervention.	79

Abstract

This research and development project explores the impact of a contextualised approach to teaching grammar upon the writing skills of year 7 pupils at a comprehensive school in Kent. The approach required pupils to imitate complex sentence structures whilst writing creatively. The intervention took the form of starter tasks that were delivered at the beginning of English lessons for three months. I hypothesised that through frequent opportunities to write with this process of creative imitation, pupils would internalise the complex sentence structures and grammatical formations, developing their use of sentence structure and grammatical accuracy in their own writing.

A controlled trial method was used to produce quantitative data measuring the progress of an intervention group against a control group. Collaboration with another English teacher aided the delivery of the intervention as well as moderating the marking of the baseline and post-intervention tests. Furthermore, through interviews with this teacher and the department, I was able to explore other teachers' perceptions of the intervention which, in particular, provided valuable ideas regarding how the intervention's design could be improved and differentiated. Following the controlled trial, focus group interviews were held which revealed that the intervention's efficacy could be partly attributed to its tendency to motivate pupils. However, these interviews also found that pupils were cognitively disengaged from the concept of grammar.

The results of the controlled trial suggested that the intervention had had an overall positive effect upon the grammatical proficiency of pupils' writing, and was particularly effective for pupils who had performed below average in the baseline test. Further empirical research needs to be conducted to corroborate this project's findings across different school contexts.

Introduction

Grammar, Writing and the English Teacher

Before beginning work on this research and development project, the notion of teaching grammar in secondary school English lessons often conjured up images for me of traditional teacher-centred classroom instruction with pupils working through tedious textbook exercises. With these associations governing my perceptions of teaching grammar, and, consequently, fearing the demotivation of my pupils, grammar became an area of the curriculum which I avoided. Yet, I was still acutely aware that a focus on grammar must be a regular and frequent feature of my lessons. Without it I would be limiting my pupils' abilities to develop the sophistication of their written expression. With teachers facing increasing pressure to enable pupils to secure successful results in public examinations, and assessment scores being predominantly based upon what pupils write, developing pupils' writing skills is a notable priority for English teachers.

Writing is a skill that is cognitively challenging (Harris & Leung, 2011); in order to write accurately and effectively, pupils are required to have knowledge of spelling, registers, punctuation, vocabulary and grammar, as well as comprehension of the subject on which they will write (Syrja, 2011). As such complex demands are therefore made of pupils when they write, it is imperative that English teachers, like myself, properly address the challenges of writing, and developing pupils' use of grammar must be a part of this process.

Alongside my concerns that teaching grammar could stagnate pupils' interest in writing, and my recognition that teachers of English are duty-bound to include the study of grammar in their lessons (DfE, 2013), was an awareness of an emerging consensus within the teaching profession that grammar-focused learning should be contextualised – a consensus driven by empirical educational research, most notably by Myhill (2011) who has identified positive effects of such teaching. Contextualising the study of grammar into writing tasks seemed logical – I viewed grammar as a tool for self-expression so why not learn its application through the medium of pupils' own writing?

This research project, therefore, became a response to my need to develop as a teacher, initiating a fresh approach to teaching pupils to develop their use of grammar as I searched for effective strategies to contextualise their learning.

School Context

The school in which this research was conducted, which shall be referred to as Bowermount School¹, is a comprehensive school situated in a grammar school catchment area. Pupils at the school are therefore of mixed ability but with relatively few higher-ability pupils at national level.

The school's year 7 (aged 11-12) stood out as being a year group that posed particular challenges in regards to literacy: the reading age of this year group was assessed during the

¹ The name of the school and the names of all people referred to (both teachers and pupils) have been changed to protect confidentiality.

first term by a computerised reading test², the results of which indicated that 68% of the year group's reading age was below the age of 11 – the highest percentage for a year 7 cohort since the school began testing reading ages four years previously. The teacher in charge of reporting this data to the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) stated in her summary³, 'the implications of this are immense', suggesting that the test's result potentially indicated a more widespread issue with literacy – a concern that is supported by established links between reading engagement and literacy (Krashen, 2004; Clarke et al., 2017).

Raising the literacy of year 7 pupils was, therefore, important for the school, and, certainly, pupils' grammatical proficiency in their writing was a key skill requiring development. For this reason, this research project's aim was to design and critically evaluate an intervention that was effective in targeting the development of year 7 pupils' grammar in their writing. This aim was, therefore, chosen to address a need to develop my own skills in teaching this area of the curriculum, as well as part of the school's need to improve the cohort's literacy.

Aims

This research and development project aimed to investigate the efficacy of a contextualised teaching approach that sought to improve year 7 pupils' grammar in their writing. Following a three-month intervention involving the provision of opportunities to play

² The school uses the STAR (Standardized Test for Assessment of Reading) test which is developed by Renaissance Learning, Inc.

³ See appendix 1

creatively with a variety of grammatical structures, data was analysed in order to evaluate how the intervention had impacted upon pupils' sentence construction and grammatical accuracy, as well as other teachers' perceptions of the contextualised approach.

Literature Review

Contextualisation

For some time, the practice of teaching grammar out of context has been largely discredited within the literature as ineffectual, having no discernible impact upon pupils' reading or writing skills (Hillocks, 1986; Andrews et al., 2006). Scholars such as Braddock, Lloyd-Jones and Schoer (1963) go further by arguing that such practice is detrimental to the development of pupils' writing skills because it 'usually displaces some instruction and practice in actual composition' (p.37-38).

As research that affirms the redundancy of teaching grammar out of context has proliferated, literature that supports claims for the efficacy of teaching grammar in context has emerged (Gold, 2006; Weaver & Bush, 2006; Rimmer, 2008; Kelly & Safford, 2009). Arguably, the strategy of teaching grammar in context has now become firmly established, at least within the literature, as the most effective way of developing pupils' grammatical proficiency – Watson (2012), for example, states that 'there does appear to be a growing consensus that grammar teaching may be useful if it is contextualised' (p.24).

Broadly speaking, throughout the literature, contextualising grammar is predominantly discussed in relation to the development of the domains of reading and writing: scholars commonly cite the need to focus on the grammatical features of texts pupils read. This is then followed by teachers initiating pupils' employment of those grammatical features in a suitable writing task. This pattern of teaching – spotlighting grammar within

pupils' reading, and transferring the newly-acquired grammatical knowledge into pupils' writing – is frequently expounded by scholars.

For example, Simmons (2016) discusses how her class analysed how sentence fragments in an extract from *Catching Fire* (Suzanne Collins, 2009) created a sense of emptiness. She then provided her pupils with an opportunity to 'practice the technique in their own writing' (Simmons, 2016, p.393), using fragment sentences to create a specific atmosphere. In, arguably, the most influential piece of UK-based research to date on the contextualisation of grammar, Myhill (2011) concludes that pupils need to be exposed to 'authentic examples [of grammatical features] from authentic texts' (Myhill, 2011, p.12) and 'understand how writers create settings and develop a character's viewpoint and voice' (Myhill, Lines & Watson, 2011, p.3) as a precursor for pupils 'experiment[ing] with linguistic and literary techniques in their own writing' (Myhill et al., 2011, p.3), again reiterating the two-stage process of contextualisation within pupils' reading and writing.

Paraskevas (2006) also claims that 'thoughtful grammar instruction can lead to better, more effective writing if it is done in the context of reading and writing' (p.65), making it clear that grammatical improvement in pupils' writing is the end result of contextualising grammar in both reading and writing. Zuidema (2012) echoes Paraskevas but also makes her advocacy of the two-stage process of contextualisation particularly explicit when stating that 'going from reading to writing is a recursive process in which grammar is the craft to be discovered in the former and practiced in the latter' (p.7).

The literature, therefore, suggests that contextualising grammar in both reading and writing is effective in generating progress in pupils' written grammar. Interestingly, there is relatively little literature that considers the contextualisation of grammar within the domains

of speaking and listening, although Myhill (2011) does explain how the intervention in her randomised controlled trial ⁴(RCT) sometimes ‘made links between speaking and listening and writing, with short oral games’ (p.10). Such tasks were intended as part of the scaffolding for written work and encouraged pupils to employ certain grammatical constructions in their speech before transferring them to their writing.

The literature, therefore, supports the teaching of grammar *in context*, with scholars mainly promoting contextualisation within pupils’ reading and transferring what is learnt into their writing.

Whilst contextualising grammar is a popular approach within the literature, it is, however, important to recognise the existence of criticism and, indeed, scepticism for the strategy. Sams (2003) for example, writing in the US, discusses her criticisms of the strategy of contextualisation, claiming that the teaching of grammar in the context of writing leads to a ‘haphazard and band-aid fashion’ (Sams, 2003, p.64) approach to ‘correct errors [teachers] detect in the writing process’ (Sams, 2003, p.57). Viewing contextualised grammar teaching as inherently unsystematic in its introduction of grammatical features and terms, Sams favours ‘a sequenced approach to grammar instruction’ (Sams, 2003, p.64). Critics of Sams’ perspective here might argue that identifying errors and responding to pupils’ needs is good teaching practice, rather than a *haphazard* approach.

⁴ This RCT, conducted between 2009 and 2010 by Debra Myhill and a number of scholars from the University of Exeter, will be referred to as *The Myhill RCT* in this report.

However, elsewhere, while acknowledging that conclusions based on research into contextualised grammar teaching conflict with the approach she advocates, Sams boldly claims the following:

Finally, we need to free ourselves from the tendency to value research over the experience of the expert teacher. Methods that have been proven to work over time by teachers who know how to use them should not be summarily dismissed. (Sams, 2003, p.64)

Writing as one of these 'expert teachers', Sams shows a mistrust of research into the efficacy of teaching grammar out of context. Sams argues that an *out-of-context* approach is effective *if* it is applied by teachers who understand how such an approach ought to be applied, thus highlighting the knowledge of the teacher as a significant variable in the outcome of an out-of-context approach.

Furthermore, Sams raises a criticism of a contextualised approach that resonates with a number of scholars, including those who are proponents of the contextualised approach as well its detractors. Sams claims that 'the "in-context" approach to grammar instruction... has negligible impact upon writing' (Sams, 2003, p.57); it is not that the contextualised approach is ineffective, but that its effect on pupils' writing is felt to be highly limited. Gorlewski & Annable (2012) echo Sams when discussing Annable's frustrations as an English teacher with the limited effects a contextualised approach had had upon pupils' written grammatical accuracy. These frustrations, ultimately, led to Annable abandoning the contextualised grammar strategy. These scholars' judgements, based on their personal experiences as professional teachers, provide a critical perspective of contextualising grammar instruction, raising questions regarding the limitations of its efficacy.

Significantly, Myhill describes how, in her RCT, contextualised grammar lessons had a ‘strong’ effect ‘for the whole sample’ (Myhill, 2011, p.13). This judgement was made through calculating the effect size (1.53) and making comparisons with the effect size of other educational research. However, while the intervention had a positive impact upon most pupils’ writing overall, for lower ability pupils – pupils identified as being below average in the baseline writing test – ‘the impact of the intervention was neutral’ (Jones, Myhill & Bailey, 2013, p.1254). Reasons for the limited impact on this subgroup are unclear but Jones et al. suggest that, perhaps ‘the grammatical features addressed in the teaching materials were poorly matched to their learning needs as writers’ and that ‘the use of metalinguistic terminology may have been a barrier, rather than a support’ (Jones et al., 2013, p.1254).

Although the Myhill RCT failed to engender progress in lower-ability pupils, the intervention had an overall positive effect on pupils’ writing, and alongside a great deal of other literature that makes the same claim (Anderson, 2006; Gold, 2006; Weaver & Bush, 2006; Fearn & Farnan, 2007; Rimmer, 2008; Kelly & Safford, 2009; Clark, 2010; Simmons, 2016) there is much evidence within the literature of support for the strategy of contextualisation. With recognition of the redundancy of the *out-of-context* methodology, the literature regularly calls for further empirical research to be conducted into effective methods of developing pupils’ grammar in writing (Sadler & Graham, 2005; Andrews et al., 2006) including effective methods of contextualisation (Myhill, 2011; Jones et al., 2013). This research and development project is, in part, a response to these voices.

Mentor Texts and Genre Writing

Mentor texts, sometimes referred to as 'touchstone texts' (Paraskevas, 2006, p.66), are texts that are used to exemplify particular grammatical features. There is much discussion within the literature of how mentor texts are a key feature of contextualising the study of grammar in the domain of reading. However, as this research project focuses upon contextualising grammar in the domain of writing, such discussions are only briefly summarised below before considering the use of mentor texts in the contextualisation of grammar in writing.

As has already been referenced, Simmons (2016), for example, explains how she used a mentor text – an extract from *Catching Fire* – in order to facilitate her pupils' understanding of what a sentence fragment is, and how it might create a meaningful effect. Simmons' use of the *Catching Fire* extract demonstrates the process of identification and analysis of grammatical features that is commonly advocated within the literature (Kane, 1996; Keith, 1999; Myhill, 1999; Anderson, 2006; Zuidema 2012). Clark (2005) summarises the purpose of the analysis of a mentor text's grammar when stating that pupils must analyse 'the effects of grammatical patterning in texts so that their meanings can be uncovered' (Clark, 2005, p.45).

Because of scholars' insistence that the utilisation of a mentor text should involve an opportunity for pupils to analyse how a writer's grammatical choices affect the meaning of the text, citations of the theories of the linguist Michael Halliday are a regular feature of the literature (Clark, 2005; Simmons, 2016), strengthening and supporting the argument for the necessity of connecting grammar to meaning. Halliday's theory of systemic functional linguistics – SFL – (1985) is based on the notion that language is a social phenomenon and

every choice that a writer, for example, makes, including grammatical choices, has an impact upon the meaning of the text, rather than merely impacting the text structurally. Grammar is therefore *functional* because it functions in the creation of a text's meaning.

Returning to the notion of a mentor text, the literature offers a range of opinions regarding what the parameters should be of such a text. One common view is that a mentor text ought to be short in length (Myhill et al., 2011; Zuidema, 2012) with Anderson (2006) explaining that this avoids pupils becoming overwhelmed by text, enabling them to 'cling to the craft and meaning' (p.32). However, exactly how short a mentor text ought to be differs between scholars with Paraskevas (2006), for example, advocating the use of single sentence mentor texts, while Zuidema (2012) recommends the use of 'a one-pager' (p.68).

A second commonly stated opinion is that mentor texts ought to be engaging and thought-provoking for pupils, rather than being a text that simply exemplifies the functionality of a particular grammatical feature (Kane, 1996; Zuidema, 2012; Dean, 2003). Simmons (2016), for example, advises using mentor texts from pop culture in order to exploit established interest pupils may already have in such texts, generating pupil motivation. For both Simmons (2016) and Zuidema (2012), studying mentor texts with which pupils are already familiar is another desirable aspect of a mentor text. While agreeing with these scholars over the importance of providing pupils with engaging mentor texts, Carter (1999) adds a warning that the content of such texts have the potential to 'distract from detailed consideration of the working of grammar... [with] content that inspires but also takes over discussion' (Carter, 1999, p.17).

For many scholars, the study of a mentor text's grammatical features then leads on to a written task, providing pupils with opportunities to employ what they have learnt about the

grammar of the mentor text in their own writing – the teaching moves from contextualisation within reading to within writing (Paraskevas, 2006, Myhill et al., 2011; Zuidema, 2012; Simmons, 2016). Dean (2011), however, points out that in using this two-stage process of contextualisation, it is vital that if pupils are required to employ grammatical structures from the mentor text in the writing of their own text, that those grammatical structures must be appropriate to the form in which they are being asked to write – a stylistic correlation must exist between the two. To exemplify her point, Dean provides an anecdote in which a pupil writing an essay on her interest in skateboarding was asked to use sentence structures studied in a president's inaugural address, resulting in 'a tone that wasn't quite appropriate for her purpose and topic' (Dean, 2011, p.21).

The necessity to consider the suitability of the grammar being explored in the mentor text to the style and tone of the writing task highlights the connection between the theory of contextualising grammar in both reading and writing, and the genre approach to writing. According to Badger & White (2000) the genre approach involves studying examples of a specific genre of writing, identifying common features in aspects such as the relationship between the writer and the audience, the texts' organization and, indeed, grammatical choices. With understanding that such features are recursive because of a commonality of generic purpose, pupils attempt to employ the same features in their own original text of that genre.

Although the above summary of the genre approach is applicable to both its manifestations in Australia and North America, it is worth noting that versions of genre theory developed differently in these two respective settings: the Australian version, with which the UK is more closely aligned (Rosen, 2013), became popular in schools as a tool for social

empowerment. Educators such as Francis Christie, Jim Martin, and Joan Rothery, 'all of whom studied with Halliday' (Coe & Freedman, 1998, p.43) and influenced by his theory of SFL, advocated the application of a genre approach in schools. They claimed that disadvantaged pupils, who did not often hold prior knowledge of different genres, should be explicitly taught the features of genres to enable them to compete academically with other non-disadvantaged pupils who 'tend[ed] to acquire tacit knowledge' of generic structures (Coe & Freedman, 1998, p.43).

The North American version of genre theory was less concerned with social empowerment and developed in different educational contexts – post-secondary and in teaching English as a second language (ESL). In the former and more predominant context, genre theorists advocated the explicit teaching of writing styles for individual disciplines at college, as well as workplace genres. Within these educational contexts, a genre approach was employed in order to raise standards in a broader sense than in the Australian version (Coe & Freedman, 1998).

The connection between contextualising grammar and the genre approach is identified by a number of scholars (Christie, 2004; Clark, 2005; Clark, 2010; Dean, 2011). Clark (2005), for example, while discussing contextualising grammar, encourages teachers to use the genre approach as it 'provides pupils with a starting point for their own writing which is based on something more than intuition' (Clark, 2005, p.44) and emphasises the necessity to expose pupils to 'a variety of text structures or genres' (Clark, 2010, p.196) to develop versatile writers. With both theories of contextualising grammar and the genre approach being relatively new pedagogies (both being sidesteps away from the more traditional

pedagogies of decontextualized grammar teaching, and the process approach to writing⁵), it is possible to perceive a shifting ideology in teaching which increasingly values a method of learning through reflection in reading and imitation in writing. The concept of imitation is, indeed, important within the literature and one that will be covered more fully in the following section.

Play, Motivation and Imitation

The notion of play features regularly within the literature on contextualising grammar. Hedges et al. (2013) describe play to be a ‘process of engagement with the world’ that is ‘exploratory’ and ‘repetitive, but not stereotyped, and is spontaneous in nature’ (p.17). If this definition is mapped onto the concept of playing with language then an image emerges of pupils being *explorative* with their writing – finding new ways of expressing ideas in written form – and trying to apply a linguistic concept again and again *repetitively*, but with control over the variation within the repetition. The idea of such language play being *spontaneous* within a classroom setting seems inapplicable as it would be directed by a teacher. However, play can be categorised as both structured and unstructured and spontaneity remains a factor of both forms (Hedges et al., 2013) – in structured play, when a child is provided with a stimulus, he or she may still respond with an open, natural and uninhibited manner.

Roskos & Christie (2001), and Yaden, Rowe & MacGillivray (2000) argue that certain kinds of play during children’s early years have a direct impact on their literacy skills’

⁵ See Badger & White (2000) for a definition of the process approach to writing.

development. While the scholars who write about contextualising grammar may not display overt interest in exploring the concept that Roskos and Christie (2001) term the 'play-literacy interface' (p.59), their frequent referencing of play reflects a belief that play can aid this development in later childhood too (Rhodes, 2005; Anderson, 2006; Dean, 2011; Myhill, 2011; Myhill et al., 2011; Watson, 2012; Zuidema, 2012). For example, Rhodes (2005) discusses his method of 'playful imitation' (p.130); Zuidema (2012) describes prompting pupils to 'explore and play with grammar' (p.64); and Myhill et al. (2011) advocate directing pupils to consider grammar 'as a tool for playing with language' (p.13).

Why then is the concept of learning about grammar through language play considered by scholars to be effective? Vygotsky (1978) provides some explanation through his assertions that play is an activity that stimulates progression in 'all developmental tendencies' (p.130), stretching a child's abilities – 'in play he is, as it were, a head above himself' (p.130). Gilbert (1999) provides another explanation writing that 'language work presented as a game can motivate and encourage pupils to see language study as enjoyable' (p.46). Perhaps building upon the notion of play generating pupils' motivation, Myhill et al. (2011) contribute by claiming that language play has the potential to trigger further positive attitudes to learning – they report that teachers delivering the RCT's intervention 'were aware of the experimentation and playfulness of the schemes and how this gave more ownership to students' (p.17).

The process of imitation is closely associated with the notion of play within the literature (Rhodes, 2005; Anderson, 2006; Dean, 2011; and Myhill, 2011). For many scholars, asking pupils to create their own examples of language by imitating a mentor text constitutes a form of play. Dean (2011), for example, highlights how engaging the process of imitating

language can be for pupils, stating 'imitation felt like play not study' (p.21). Myhill (2011) provides a deeper insight into the mechanics of this imitative form of language play – mentor texts do not simply provide a style of language to mimic but 'model patterns for students to play with and then use in their own writing' (p.12).

With scholars noting how initiating learning through a form of language play, commonly leads to pupils enjoying and taking ownership over their classwork, a teaching strategy that utilises a process of imitation can be viewed as effective through its potential to motivate pupils. It is well established that motivation is an important factor in pupils' progress and achievement at school (Galloway et al., 1998). The concept of motivation can be summarised as involving 'an individual's choice to engage or not to engage in an activity, persistence in the activity, intensity throughout the activity, and results in an increase in the quality of the activity' (Hoang, 2007, p.789 – citing Maehr, 2001).

Hoang (2007) explains why creative tasks generate motivation: pupils perceive them as being a 'risk-free and control-free approach' (p.793) to learning. Creative tasks are, therefore, tasks that pupils are more disposed to view as ones in which they can be successful – they consider such tasks to pose little risk of failure. One of the central tenets of drive theory is that a key factor in pupils' motivation is how likely they feel they are to succeed or fail (Atkinson, 1964; Maehr, 2001). It can be argued that creative tasks are more likely to motivate pupils because pupils recognise the absence of a predetermined outcome expected by the teacher by which the success of their work will be measured. Furthermore, because creative tasks are 'open-ended, [they] allow students to explore their interests and be in control of their learning' (Hoang, 2007, p.794) leading to 'a sense of pride' (p.793) in their work. Such

tasks are, therefore, considered enjoyable by pupils, and it is this enjoyment that spurs them to feel 'a deep need to fulfil and complete the task' (p.790).

Galloway et al. (1998) summarise one aspect of Weiner's (1979) theories of motivation as representing 'the interaction of expectations and the value attached to those expected outcomes' (p.97). When considering this theory in regards to a pedagogical approach that initiates pupils in writing creatively and imaginatively in imitation of a mentor text, it could be hypothesised that pupils would feel confident, *expecting* that they are able to complete the task successfully due to its 'risk-free' (Hoang, 2007, p.793) nature. The *value* pupils assign to completing the task is an opportunity to express themselves creatively and, indeed, as cited above, a 'sense of pride' (Hoang, 2007, p.793) in fulfilling the task in a way of their own choosing. If imitative language play, as the literature suggests, motivates pupil engagement, it could be an effective mode of learning within the strategy of contextualising grammar in writing.

Returning to the concept of imitative play, other scholars echo Myhill (2011) in their belief that playing with language in contextualised grammar lessons translates to the imitation of linguistic patterns. Paraskevas (2006), for example, recommends that 'through sustained imitation, students internalize certain patterns of language, remember them as chunks and, ultimately, create a repertoire... that they can retrieve to create effective, eloquent sentences' (p.67). Arguably, when Zuidema (2012) describes encouraging pupils to experiment 'with the same kinds of grammatical maneuvers that they notice in the texts' (p.65) she is also describing a process of imitating linguistic patterns. Rhodes (2005) also, in explaining his belief in the efficacy of his method of 'playful imitation' (p.130) claims that pupils 'pick up set patterns of words that they directly practise applying to new material'

(p.137). Again, similar to Paraskevas (2006), although not as explicitly, Rhodes (2005) perceives a process of internalization of the patterns pupils identify and apply, as they naturally 'pick [them] up' (p.137).

In summary, according to the literature, imitation of grammatical structures leads pupils to assimilate those structures into their own writing, widening the grammatical choices they are able to make when writing, and developing their grammatical accuracy through reference to a mentor text. Being allowed a level of autonomy in how they imitate, pupils perceive this mode of learning as creative and exploratory, thus associating it with a form of structured play. Through this association, imitation generates motivation and grants pupils ownership over the grammatical structures they embed into their writing. For pupils, imitative learning is viewed more as an opportunity to play with patterns of language, rather than an exercise aimed at improving and extending their grammatical proficiency.

Hypothesis & Research Questions

The above review of the literature reveals the potential for imitative play within a contextualised approach to generate pupil progress in developing their use of grammar in their writing. The provision of suitable mentor texts as models for written imitation is intrinsic to this process of contextualisation. It is also clear that there is a need for further research into *how* such an approach can be put into practice. As Clark (2010) states, 'exactly how recontextualisations of grammar... translate into future classroom practice and teaching materials remains a challenge' (p.198). It is hoped that this project will contribute to existing

research in this area of education, exploring the efficacy of one possibility for the application of this pedagogical concept.

Through this project I sought to find a method of contextualising grammar that was effective in developing the written grammatical proficiency of the year 7 pupils' writing at Bowermount School. I hypothesized that through an intervention – regular provision of opportunities to play imitatively with a range of grammatical patterns – pupils would improve the sophistication and accuracy of grammar in their writing. As such, the following two research questions formed a criteria for assessment of the intervention's efficacy. The third research question was also posed in order to gain a broader perspective on the intervention's efficacy.

1] How did a contextualised approach to teaching grammar impact on the sentence constructions pupils produced?

2] How did a contextualised approach to teaching grammar impact on the accuracy of pupils' grammar?

3] How did other teachers perceive the efficacy of the contextualised approach?

Methodology

Method Overview

A controlled trial was conducted using two year 7 English classes in both the intervention and control groups. Following a baseline test that assessed both groups' use and range of sentence constructions and grammatical accuracy, the intervention group began every English lesson with a starter task that required pupils to imitate a complex sentence structure, creating their own imaginative examples of language in the same form as a given mentor sentence. At the same time, the control group's English teachers delivered lessons in their normal style, without a similarly sustained focus upon pupils' written grammatical proficiency. The intervention was administered for ten teaching weeks during the spring term.

Working with the hypothesis that this contextualised approach would be effective in developing pupils' written grammatical proficiency, I predicted that the post-intervention test's data would reveal the intervention group to have made significantly more progress in developing their use and range of sentence constructions and grammatical accuracy than the control group.

Alongside the controlled trial, interviews were held with the teacher with whom I collaborated as well as the English department as a whole in order to gain insight into other teachers' professional perceptions of the approach's efficacy. Interviews were also held with a focus group of pupils in order to gain insight into how the intervention had affected their development.

Definition of Terms

It is important to define the terms used in this project. The *range* of sentence constructions in pupils' writing relates to the degree to which pupils compose their writing with a variety of different syntactical structures: pupils who write with a narrow range of sentence constructions, for example, are likely to limit their written expression to simple single-clause sentence, often beginning sentences in the same way, such as using the pronoun 'I' followed by a verb. Conversely, pupils employing a wide range of constructions tend to balance their use of simple sentences with compound and complex sentences, providing variation in the way sentences begin, perhaps with fronted adverbials or conjunctions.

Pupils' *use* of sentence constructions relates to the degree in which pupils choose to write a particular sentence structure in order to create effect. Intended effects might include conveying a specific emotion of the narrator or a specific atmosphere. Although such structural effects are invariably dependent upon the ideas and content of an individual's writing, an example of using sentence construction for effect could be a long compound sentence with clauses repeatedly connected by the conjunction 'and' to imply a ranting narrator's frustration. For less-able pupils, the use of fragment sentences – interjections or exclamations – is often an accessible method of using sentence construction for a particular effect, usually conveying a character's sense of surprise or shock.

Lastly, in terms of definitions, pupils' grammatical accuracy can be defined as the degree to which pupils adhere to the standard rules of grammar. Pupils demonstrate their grammatical accuracy through features of their writing such as subject-verb agreement and verb tense consistency, as well as avoiding errors such as running sentences together and

comma splicing. During the collection of data, due regard was paid to instances in which it was perceived that pupils intentionally broke the rules of grammar for the purpose of creating effects.

Research Method

Since this practitioner research aimed at investigating an intervention's efficacy, the method of a controlled trial was chosen as the basis for the research. The controlled trial method is often cited as the most reliable and suitable research method when an intervention's effectiveness is the focus of the researcher's data analysis. Andrews et al. (2006) affirm the strength of this method in researching effective approaches to teaching writing when stating that 'if [researchers] are interested in effectiveness, they should design rigorous randomized controlled trials to determine such outcomes' (p.52).

The Myhill RCT that investigated the effect of contextualising grammar upon pupils' writing, holds an important position within the literature due to its provision of 'robust empirical evidence' (Jones et al., 2013, p.1257). Conducting my own controlled trial (albeit, without the randomization), in the hope of generating similarly reliable evidence, seemed logical: the strength of evidence relating to efficacy would carry weight in persuading Bowermount School's head of English and SLT of the intervention's potential to affect progress. As Goldacre (2013) reminds us, 'randomised trials are generally the most reliable tool we have for finding out which of two interventions works best' (p.8). This reliability can be attained in controlled trials through the comparisons researchers make between a control

and an intervention group. Torgerson (2009) explains that this reliability, which is borne out of the comparison, is what makes RCTs effective in initiating changes in policy and practice: 'Stakeholders... need to know *what would have happened* to children had they *not* been exposed to an intervention' (p.313, italics in original).

However, the controlled trial method is not without its critics. Rowe (2016), for example, argues that 'education... exists in an open system' (p.7) and so factors beyond the administration of an intervention can have a huge effect upon whatever a researcher is measuring – factors such as 'changes in learner motivation, and effects of other, non-intervention experiences that occur during the implementation of the intervention' (p.7). These kinds of factors, Rowe explains, are beyond the control and observation of the researcher and so it becomes 'almost impossible to identify how much of the intervention the learner actually 'receives', or to determine what the learner does with what the teacher provides' (p.7).

Rowe, also echoed by Berliner (2014), makes a compelling argument and it would be wrong to believe learning takes place in a vacuum. But, it would also be incorrect to believe that the way in which teachers teach does not have a significant impact upon pupils' learning. Furthermore, evidence from a single study is rarely conclusive and it is only when the results of multiple studies are synthesised and patterns emerge are we able to make increasingly confident conclusions.

If my hypothesis was correct, then producing robust evidence would be vital in seeking a wider application of the intervention in the future. Unfortunately, as shall be explained below, it was not possible to randomize the selection of groups, so naturally occurring groups (two classes for both the control and intervention groups) were used. Regardless of the

omission of randomisation, reliable evidence could still be obtained, and it was hoped that the results of my own controlled trial would contribute to the limited body of empirically generated evidence supporting the contextualisation of grammar.

While the controlled trial framework was central to the investigation's methodology, the research also featured a qualitative paradigm, meaning this was a mixed methods research project. Moore, Graham and Diamond (2003) argue that 'to undertake a trial of an educational or social intervention without an embedded qualitative process evaluation would be to treat the intervention as a black box, with no information on how it worked, how it could be improved, or what the crucial components of the intervention were' (p.684). Certainly, my main aim was to produce quantitative evidence of the intervention's efficacy, but embedding qualitative methods alongside the controlled trial enabled me to find out why the intervention was successful or not, how it could be developed further and helped to triangulate evidence.

Creative Writing Focus

As discussed above, this research used a mixed-methods approach with qualitative elements built around a controlled trial. It could be claimed that, broadly speaking, secondary school pupils' writing in English lessons can generally be categorised as either creative writing, requiring an imaginative response; or analytical writing, requiring a personal and informative response to a text.

The chosen genre of writing in which I investigated pupils' development of grammar was the former of these two – creative writing. Certainly, this genre of writing contains a multitude of sub-genres, but, arguably, it involves a greater emphasis on the way in which pupils express themselves. I decided that a focus on analytical writing was less suitable and GCSE mark schemes for such writing provide some explanation as to why: they rarely focus upon the grammatical fluency with which pupils discuss their ideas about texts, prioritising other features of their writing such as the depth of relevant understanding of a text, the inclusion of supporting textual evidence and pupils' ability to link discussions of a text to its contextual background.

Indeed, there remains a necessity for pupils to 'maintain a critical style' (Pearson, 2014a, p.5) which indicates that pupils will be rewarded for expressing their ideas coherently in a formal and suitably academic manner. A proficient use of grammar is instrumental for the creation of such a style. However, generally speaking, the content of what pupils write is of far greater importance than the sophistication and eloquence with which it is written. Conversely, with creative writing, again, using a GCSE mark scheme as indicative of the importance of grammatical proficiency for successful secondary school writing in that genre, it can be concluded that there is a greater necessity for pupils to use grammar accurately and effectively. For example, the more developed a pupil's grammatical proficiency, the more successful they will be in 'communicat[ing] clearly, effectively and imaginatively... adapting tone, style and register... using structural and grammatical features to support coherence and cohesion in texts... [and] us[ing] a range of... sentence structures for clarity, purpose and effect' (Pearson, 2014b, p.3).

Although the research focused upon improving the grammatical proficiency found in the creative writing of year 7 pupils, the significance of the effective use of grammar in GCSE mark schemes for creative writing affirms its salience in successful creative writing for all pupils at secondary school. For this reason, creative writing was selected as the genre of writing upon which the research would focus.

The Baseline and Post-intervention Tests

As is standard procedure in controlled trials (Torgerson, 2009; Goldacre, 2013), summative tests were conducted before and after the delivery of the intervention. The purpose of these tests was to measure the range and use of sentence constructions pupils were producing in their creative writing, as well as the overall accuracy of pupils' grammar⁶.

While Bowermount School fully supported the research project, there were unavoidable limitations placed upon the design of the research project through curricula obligations: essentially, lessons needed to follow the English department's existing schemes of work. The year 7 scheme of work for the spring term (when the intervention was to be administered) provided lesson-by-lesson learning objectives, each with a focus upon a particular section or feature of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* – a novel by John Boyne (2006). It was felt by the department that adding two extra summative assessments would be unworkable if classes were to complete the scheme of work. Moreover, it was also felt that

⁶ See later section for explanation of how these measurements were taken.

additional tests would create a scheme of work which was assessment heavy and deplete learning time; pupils were already completing two formal assessments each term – one reading and one writing assessment – which used up two whole lessons.

The solution was to use pre-existing writing assessments within the schemes of work as the baseline and post-intervention tests; for the control and intervention groups, their writing assessments were marked twice – firstly, for the school’s standard assessment requirements and then with an alternative grammar-focused mark scheme specifically for this research project.

A] The Baseline Test

The baseline test took place at the end of a scheme of work on Dicken’s *Oliver Twist* before the Christmas holiday. The test asked pupils to look at the image below (figure 1) and respond to the following instructions:

Imagine you are one of the ladies in this image. Based on this image of poverty in 19th century London and using your knowledge of what life was like for the poor at this time, write a diary entry as one of these women to show what your life was like. It should be as descriptive as possible.



Figure 1: Visual prompt for pupils' writing in the baseline test.

With this research project's analysis of data being centred on sentence construction as well as pupils' grammatical accuracy, the baseline test's instruction was not ideal: asking pupils to write in the voice of an impoverished and, quite probably, uneducated individual is not the best prompt for pupils to showcase their most extensive range of sentence constructions and, indeed, may even prompt pupils to intentionally (and rightly) thwart the grammatical rules of standard English in pursuit of an authentic voice. This had the potential to complicate the marking of the baseline requiring decisions on whether pupils were deliberately breaking the rules on grammar. Such decisions had to be made using my professional but subjective judgement. The assessment's instructions were seemingly unalterable due to an ethos within the department that necessitated strict observance of pre-planned schemes of work and directed resources. The extent, therefore, of pupils' intention to create an authentic voice through grammatical manipulation was factored into the collection of data.

B] The Post-intervention Test

The school's end-of-unit writing assessment, which doubled as the post-intervention test, was scheduled two half-terms after the baseline test. It was held after the intervention had been administered for ten teaching weeks – around 25 lessons. The test fell at the end of the scheme of work on *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*. The test provided the following instruction with the image in figure 2:

Write a piece of creative or descriptive writing using the title, The Fence. You may base your writing on this image connected to The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas, but this is optional.

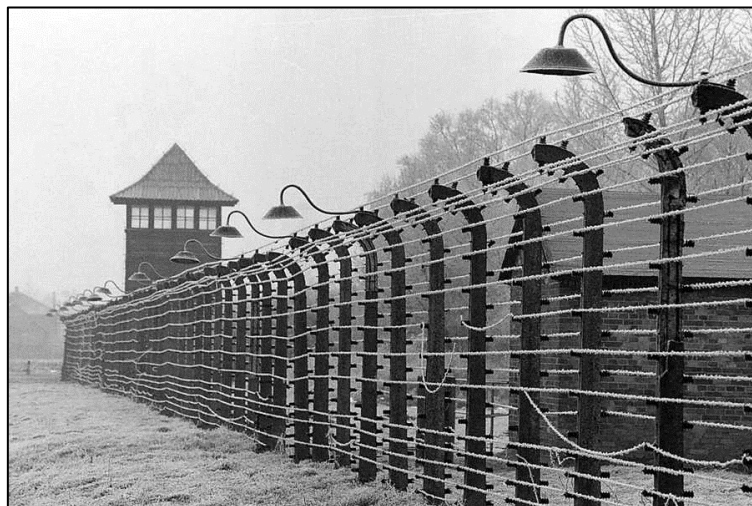


Figure 2: Visual prompt for pupils' writing in the post-intervention test.

The Intervention

The intervention was delivered in the form of starter tasks. The literature commonly recognises that starter tasks can serve a range of purposes such as mediating behaviour and reviewing prior learning (DfES, 2004; Stephens, 2014). In the case of the starter tasks that were designed to deliver the intervention, their main purpose could be described as an opportunity for pupils to practise and develop subject-specific skills ‘on a little-and-often basis... build[ing] knowledge, understanding and skills over a series of lessons’ (DfES, 2004, p.5).

The starter tasks followed a recursive pattern of instruction, requiring pupils to read and consider the grammatical structure of a single sentence, displayed on a PowerPoint slide. This sentence, often taken from *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, assumed the role of a mentor text for pupils. These sentences were, invariably, complex sentences that demonstrated how a sentence could be constructed with multiple clauses. Pupils were directed to write creatively while imitating the mentor sentence’s complex grammatical construction.

Certainly, the mentor texts described within the literature, while commonly referred to as short in length (Anderson, 2006; Myhill et al., 2011; Zuidema, 2012), were rarely described to be as short as a single sentence – only Paraskevas (2006) describes her practice of focusing pupils on such a short unit of text. I decided to limit the mentor text to a single sentence for two reasons: the normal limitations of lesson time to be spent upon completion of starter tasks; and provision of a single sentence would help pupils to focus upon its grammatical structure. A disadvantage to this was that the intervention did not develop pupils’ skills in structuring a sequence of sentences to create grammatically coherent extended

writing. Although this posed a disjuncture between the way the intervention required pupils to write and the style of writing on which they were assessed in the trial's tests, because of the reasons relating to time and focus stated above, I decided to uphold my decision to limit the mentor text to a single sentence.

Within the given mentor sentence, certain words, suffixes, and punctuation were highlighted with a different colour to the rest of the sentence that was left black. Pupils were asked to keep the highlighted parts of the sentence in order to retain the basic sentence structure of the original mentor sentence, and provide their own imaginative examples of language to replace the parts of the mentor sentence which remained black.

After pupils copied the lesson's title and date, the teacher introduced the mentor sentence to the class, identifying and describing its grammatical form, commonly using subject terminology, such as 'main clause', 'conjunction', or 'fronted adverbial' as a way of verbally reinforcing terminology and focusing pupils on the grammatical structure. As discussed in the literature review, contextualising grammar is often a two-step process of analysing grammatical choices in a mentor text, followed by pupils utilising those choices in their own writing (Paraskevas, 2006, Myhill et al., 2011; Zuidema, 2012; & Simmons, 2016). In the intervention's delivery, the teacher's brief introduction of the mentor sentence served as a practical short-cut around scholars' recommendation that pupils engage with the mentor text analytically; it was hoped that although the teacher was presenting an analysis of the mentor sentence's grammar rather than the pupils analysing it for themselves, they would understand the sentence's construction, thus enabling them to imitate its structure successfully and internalise its linguistic patterns.

While pupils worked on their creative imitations of the structure, the teacher monitored the class before initiating a brief opportunity for pupils to feedback their examples to the class. The duration of the task was around ten minutes.

In figures 3 to 5, three examples of PowerPoint slides that were used in the delivery of such starters are presented below in order to provide further illustration:

Title: Predictions

Can you complete numbers 2 and 3 with the same sentence style as number 1? Keep **the red** parts; **change** the black parts, **using your own ideas**.

1] **One** afternoon, **when Bruno** came home from school, **he was surprised to find Maria** standing **ing** in his bedroom, **pulling** all his belongings out of the wardrobe.

2] **One** stormy night, **when Bruno ...**, **he was surprised to find Maria -ing ...**, holding a gun tightly in her fist.

3] **One ...**, **when Bruno ...**, **he was surprised to find Maria -ing ...**, **-ing...**

Figure 3: First example of a PowerPoint slide providing the intervention's instructions.

Title: Pavel and Kotler - Analysis

Use the same sentence structure, creating your own original sentences.

'I expect you're unhappy about this too,' said Bruno, and Maria turned to look at him with an expression that suggested she didn't understand what he meant.

1] *'I expect you're worried about _____,' said John, and Lisa groaned with an expression that implied she _____*

2] *'I expect you're ...,' said John, and Lisa ... with an expression that ...*

Figure 4: Second example of a PowerPoint slide providing the intervention's instructions.

Title: Grandmother's Letter

When she turned back around **she** saw an empty chair **which** rocked to and fro.

1 **When she** opened her _____ **she** caught sight of _____ **which** _____.

Imitate the sentence structure to describe someone witnessing [1] a shark attack or [2] Santa riding on his sleigh. If you have time, do both!

2 ***When he/she... he/she... which...***

Figure 5: Third example of a PowerPoint slide providing the intervention's instructions.

The intervention was administered for two half terms – from the beginning of January to the end of March. With the school following a two-week timetable, year 7 pupils received seven English lessons per fortnight. However, two of these lessons were library lessons which were unsuitable for the intervention's delivery. The intervention was, therefore, delivered five times per fortnight and continued for ten teaching weeks.

The intervention's design, as described above, was intended to cue pupils into a mode of learning characterised by imitative play. In theory, this teaching strategy enables pupils to assimilate complex grammatical structures, internalising linguistic patterns that they are unaccustomed to implementing into their own writing (Paraskevas, 2006; Rhodes, 2005). Through modelling their own original sentences on a mentor sentence, it was hoped that pupils would gain confidence in writing with complicated multi-clause sentence structures, thus developing their range and use of sentence structure in other writing tasks. It was

similarly hypothesised that the close focus on and grammatical imitation of a mentor sentence would improve grammatical accuracy.

It was further theorised that the creative and playful nature of the intervention would also generate motivation and positive attitudes towards learning at the beginning of lessons (Gilbert, 1999; Hoang, 2007; Dean, 2011; Myhill et al., 2011), thus making it fitting as a starter task. Despite the focus upon grammar in each lesson being brief, the frequency of its administration was expected to help pupils retain and develop an awareness of their own grammatical proficiency. Perhaps the delivery of an intervention, based upon the virtues of imitative play through the medium of the starter task, echoes Anderson's recommendations for developing pupils' grammatical proficiency in writing:

Add quick daily doses of grammar and mechanics experiences with short mentor texts and editing so that students have ongoing, shared experience playing with and understanding grammar and mechanics.
(Anderson, 2006, p.32)

The Groups

Four classes were involved in the controlled trial – two in both the intervention and control group – with both groups comprised of a higher-ability class and a mixed-ability class. This enabled observation of the intervention's effect upon a range of pupils. While there were a total of six English classes in year 7, only one of those sets was classified as a lower-ability set, thus preventing the inclusion of lower-ability pupils in the controlled trial – an intervention group would not have had a control group for comparison. This was unfortunate because, in the analysis of the Myhill RCT, Jones et al. (2013) recognised that the intervention

had a neutral effect upon ‘learners whose baseline writing attainment was below average’ (p.1254), implying that contextualised grammar lessons were less effective on lower-ability pupils. Nevertheless, with Bowermount School being a comprehensive school, and the involvement of mixed-ability groups in the controlled trial, there was still inclusion of some relatively low-ability pupils in the research.

In the interests of producing accurate and reliable data based upon quantitative comparisons of pupil performance in the baseline and post-intervention tests, any data relating to pupils who were absent at the time of either test was excluded from the analysis.

Figure 6 details the class sizes:

Class:	Sample Size:
Intervention Group (Higher-ability)	28
Intervention Group (Mixed-ability)	25
Control Group (Higher-ability)	24
Control Group (Mixed-ability)	29

Figure 6: Table showing size of classes involved in the controlled trial.

As only one teacher within the English department – Mrs Swade – expressed interest in being involved with the research through administering the intervention to her year 7 set, it was not possible to select the intervention classes randomly. Naturally occurring groups were, therefore, assigned practically so that I and Mrs Swade would deliver the intervention. Torgerson (2009) advises a system of allocation in which all participants are randomly allocated into groups because ‘randomisation minimises selection bias’ (p.316). Furthermore,

Connolly (2017) warns that '[a]s soon as [the randomisation] element of the design is compromised then there is a strong likelihood that biases are introduced to the trial' (p.199). Unfortunately, due to a lack of volunteers to deliver the intervention, randomising the selection of classes was not possible. However, arguably, the necessity of having to assign the mixed-ability set that I taught, and the higher-ability set that Mrs Swade taught as the intervention groups would have minimised selection bias, albeit at a group level, rather than at an individual participant level.

With the use of naturally occurring groups, it is important to acknowledge variables within those groups that, theoretically, could have impacted the effectiveness of the intervention on each individual group, creating selection bias. For example, as it is commonly recognised that there is a 'performance gap between pupils from more and less advantaged backgrounds' (DfE, 2015, p.8), a relatively high percentage of disadvantaged pupils in one class might have a significant impact on the intervention's outcome. Such variations between classes complicates the analysis of data when making comparisons. It is, therefore, important to recognise and discuss the variations between classes involved.

Figure 7 is a summary of variations between the four classes in terms of gender, SEN and disadvantaged pupils:

	% Female	% Male	% SEN	% Disadvantaged
Higher-ability Intervention Class	54	46	18	29
Higher-ability Control Class	58	42	17	25
Mixed-ability Intervention Class	52	48	16	32
Mixed-ability Control Class	41	59	3	21

Figure 7: Table showing variations between classes involved in the controlled trial.

Interestingly, the higher-ability classes were, statistically, relatively similar with a maximum of 4% variation across all categories. Between the mixed-ability classes, however, there was a noticeable disparity, with the intervention class being comprised of 13% more SEN pupils and 11% more disadvantaged pupils. These variations were recognised and discussed within the analysis of data in consideration of the intervention's effect size and the reliability of conclusions.

Collaboration and Interviews with Teachers

In order to deliver the intervention to two year 7 English classes it was necessary to seek the assistance of another teacher within the department. Collaboration was essential in order to gain access to a wider student sample, allowing me to collect a greater amount of data which would serve to strengthen the conclusions at which I would arrive. Mrs Swade – who has already been mentioned above – was the teacher who volunteered to deliver the intervention to her higher-ability set.

Watson (2012) discusses how teachers often express ‘a lack of confidence in their ability to deal with grammar, both due to subject knowledge and to pedagogical issues’ (p. 29) and sometimes see grammar as ‘inherently uninteresting’ (p. 30). Luckily, Mrs Swade was very keen to investigate a pedagogy that, in theory, would be engaging for pupils and effective in developing their grammatical proficiency. In discussions with her about the intervention she demonstrated a high level of confidence in her grammar subject knowledge through her ability to analyse the grammar of proposed mentor sentences. She attributed her knowledge to having taught for over twenty-five years.

I designed the PowerPoint slides for the starter tasks that were the vehicles for the delivery of the intervention, and provided Mrs Swade with electronic copies. We agreed to begin each lesson with the starter task, aiming for a ten minute duration. Naturally, with another teacher delivering the intervention, issues surrounding fidelity need to be acknowledged – as Jones et al. (2013) point out in consideration of the Myhill RCT, it is ‘neither possible nor ethical to attempt to achieve identical implementation’ (p. 1250).

Indeed, during an interview with Mrs Swade, it was noted that I had provided my mixed-ability set with more support through modelling the starter task; Mrs Swade, in contrast, was able to let her higher-ability set attempt the task relatively independently. Although the intervention was, therefore, delivered slightly differently, the pedagogical outcome remained the same with pupils imitating complex grammatical structures, creating their own original examples of language with sentence structures they were unused to crafting. We both adapted our delivery of the intervention to respond to contextual factors, and while this could raise issues surrounding fidelity, with identical learning resources, processes and outcomes, I believe that there remained a high level of fidelity in the intervention's implementation.

The approach of the control classes' teachers to developing pupils' written grammatical proficiency was also somewhat coordinated as both teachers directed pupils to correct and improve grammatical issues in their writing when reflecting on pieces of marked or peer-assessed work. However, this was an area of English that received less sustained attention in the control classes than in the intervention classes.

Mrs Swade provided further assistance during the investigation through moderation of the marking of the baseline and post-intervention tests, providing a higher degree of reliability in the method of data collection. The process of marking these tests is discussed in greater detail below.

A semi-structured interview was held with Mrs Swade in order to explore her perceptions of the intervention's efficacy, thus addressing in part my third research question: *how did other teachers perceive the efficacy of the contextualised approach?* The interview's audio was recorded to allow for a detailed analysis of the discussion, and was held three

weeks after the intervention had begun. Conducting a semi-structured interview to address this research question was an appropriate choice of method as it maintained focus upon the research question, but allowed for discussion, providing 'freedom to digress' and 'probe' (Berg, 2009, p.107).

The level of detailed insight that was gained from this interview would not have been possible with a structured interview or with a questionnaire. The interview, therefore, gave me an opportunity to explore Mrs Swade's thoughts on the intervention, including how effective she thought it was and why, and how its design could be improved in order to enhance its efficacy. The 'holistic snapshot' (Alshenqeeti, 2014, p.39) of Mrs Swade's professional viewpoint of the intervention and its efficacy proved to be valuable in helping me reflect upon and develop the intervention's design.

Finally, to broaden the collaborative dynamic of the research project, the basic findings of the investigation were presented to the English department during an after-school meeting and their reactions were also analysed in relation to the third research question. The audio of this presentation and the discussion it generated from the department was also recorded to allow for a more detailed analysis. The unstructured format of this data collection method allowed for a relaxed and informal atmosphere which was more conducive to generating honest and critical reactions than the formality of a structured or semi-structured interview may have, creating what Alshenqeeti (2014) describes as an 'open situation through which a greater flexibility and freedom is offered to both sides' (p.40). With five participants, including myself, the unstructured format allowed the teachers to discuss the intervention's efficacy amongst themselves with fewer interjections from me.

The purpose of including this final unstructured interview in the research project was twofold: firstly, it meant that data relating to my third research question was not solely drawn from an interview with a single teacher, providing a wider perspective on teachers' perceptions of the intervention's efficacy; and secondly, it was hoped that the presentation and resulting discussion would impact upon the practice of the other teachers, generating interest in the intervention as a strategy that could be utilised by the whole department.

Quantitative Data

In order to generate quantitative data, the baseline and post-intervention tests were marked using a purpose-made mark scheme⁷, awarding scores out of eighteen to each pupil's test. The scores reflected pupils' level of grammatical accuracy and the range and use of sentence constructions within their writing. Other aspects, such as spelling, vocabulary, paragraphing, style or content, had no influence upon their score – the mark scheme was designed to focus solely upon their grammatical proficiency.

Certainly, pupils' use of punctuation was, to a certain degree, a determining factor in the score awarded, but only when its use, or misuse, impacted upon pupils' grammatical accuracy. For example, comma splicing or the absence of full stops and capital letters reflected a lack of grammatical control in sentence construction.

Although the tests were marked by me, a system of moderation was implemented: for both tests, Mrs Swade selected five pupils' tests randomly and marked them blind. Our

⁷ See appendix 2

marks were compared and differences were discussed. Discrepancies of more than two marks meant that we both had to agree a mark together and an extra test had to be selected randomly for moderation. With only one example of such a discrepancy found during the marking of the baseline test and none during the marking of the post-intervention test, Mrs Swade and I were satisfied with the level of accuracy in my marking. This procedure of moderation was implemented in order to produce data that was as reliable as possible.

Following the collection of this data, mean averages were calculated for both groups in order to analyse the extent to which each group had made progress. The mean averages for different subgroups from within the intervention group were also calculated for further scrutiny - the subgroups included female, male, disadvantaged, lower-, middle-, and higher-attaining pupils. (The last three of these subgroups were defined by pupils' performance in the baseline test.) An analysis of the progress of SEN pupils was considered but the sample size for this subgroup was so small ($n = 9$) and the different types of SEN were so varied (some of which would have had no impact upon a pupil's learning in English) that it was decided against – such a set of data would not lead to any valid conclusions.

With more substantial sample sizes for boys, girls and disadvantaged pupils, I decided it would be worth observing the effect of the intervention on these subgroups in the interests of evaluating whether the strategy of playful imitation could be considered an effective pedagogical approach to closing the attainment gap. As is well established, there is an attainment gap that is identifiable both in the UK and across OECD countries between boys' and girls' literacy (Martino & Kehler, 2007; DfE, 2012; Disenhaus, 2015) with girls being 'more likely to outperform boys in the development of writing skills' (Bourke & Adams, 2011, p.249).

Another attainment gap similarly exists between 'pupils from more and less advantaged backgrounds in England [and] is one of the largest among OECD countries (DfE, 2015, p.8). Again, literacy is a key area in which the attainment gap is identifiable (Sharples et al., 2011). Through an analysis of the quantitative data pertaining to gender and socio-economic backgrounds, I intended to evaluate whether the intervention would be an effective strategy that might, in part, address the literacy element of these attainment gaps.

The intentions behind analysing the performance progress of the lower-, middle- and higher-attaining pupils were different: since the Myhill RCT revealed the contextualisation of grammar had had a neutral effect upon pupils who had achieved a below average score in the baseline (Jones et al., 2013), a comparison between the effects of my particular style of intervention on this subgroup and Myhill's warranted attention.

The Focus Group Interviews

In order to gain a greater depth in understanding of *how* the intervention impacted on pupils' grammatical proficiency, four pupils from the intervention group were selected for interview. Interviews were conducted using selections of their writing in the tests as stimulated recall. While their work and the progress they had made may not have been representative of all pupils in the intervention groups, the interview method was intended to provide qualitative data, revealing how and why the intervention had made an impact upon pupils' sentence construction and grammatical accuracy. This allowed for exploration of how the intervention may have worked psychologically to engender the observed improvements. As Kvale (1996) points out, events or developments that occur at a psychological level are not

often observable without discussing them. The focus group interviews, therefore, were intended to provide information regarding the efficacy of the intervention that the quantitative data could not.

Two pupils – a girl and a boy – were selected from both the intervention group's higher-ability and the mixed-ability class. These four pupils were selected after the post-intervention test had been administered and selected by purposive sampling. It was decided that randomly selecting these pupils could potentially leave me with a focus group that would not yield as much rich data as could be harvested. As such, pupils were selected who had shown an improvement of at least 3 marks (16.67%) in their post-intervention test. Although these pupils' performance was not representative of all pupils' or even the average pupil's performance in the post-intervention test, I decided that interviewing these pupils would, hopefully, provide the best insight into how and why the intervention *could* impact upon pupils' grammar in their writing.

Pupils were interviewed using semi-structured interviews and in pairs. It was decided to interview them with their classmate as they may feel more comfortable speaking in front of someone with whom they were relatively more familiar, than with pupils whom they were less likely to socialise. Furthermore, one-to-one interviews were also deemed unfavourable in case the pupils felt intimidated by the lack of peer-support. Interviewing the pupils in this way, therefore, was designed to elicit honest responses and generate more reliable data. Figure 8 summarises the selected pupils' profiles:

Name	Intervention Class	Gender	Baseline Test Score (out of 18)	Post-intervention Test Score (out of 18)	Notes
Leo	Higher-ability	Male	8	11	
Jean	Higher-ability	Female	10	13	Pupil Premium
Sandra	Mixed-ability	Female	8	13	
Chris	Mixed-ability	Male	8	11	Pupil Premium

Figure 8: Table showing profile of pupils participating in the focus group interviews.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to work commencing on the research project, ethical approval was obtained from the Central University Research Ethics Committee. As part of this process, the formal consent of Bowermount School's head teacher was also obtained, allowing the research to be conducted.

The British Education Research Association (BERA, 2011) states the importance of voluntary informed consent that informs participants of their right to withdraw. For this reason, written consent from all the English teachers was sought before their participation with the research project⁸, at which time they were also notified of their right to withdraw at any point prior to the submission of the investigation's report. They were also informed of the measures being taken to ensure their anonymity within the investigation's report – the

⁸ See appendix 3 for an example of the consent form

standard procedure of replacing all names of pupils, teachers and the school with pseudonyms has been employed in order to protect confidentiality.

Interviews with pupils were held during tutor time so that they were not deprived of their lunch or break time. As with the English teachers, pupils were informed of their right to withdraw from participation in the research project. Verbal consent for participation was also sought from the pupils and a parent.

The relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee can raise ethical issues relating to power – if the interviewer is in a more powerful position of authority, the interviewees can, perhaps subconsciously, feel obligated to give the answer that they believe the interviewer expects. Arguably, this was not an issue when interviewing Mrs Swade as I did not hold any position of authority over her and we had both joined the school at the same time.

As for the other teachers in the department, either due to seniority in the school, or the longevity of their careers, their responses during the final interview are unlikely to have been affected by any perceived issues regarding power. Nevertheless, the relaxed atmosphere evoked through the unstructured nature of the interview was intended to elicit honest opinions from all members of the department.

In regards to the interviews with the focus group the issue of power was more pertinent but, as stated above, pupils were interviewed in pairs with their classmate for the purpose of creating an environment conducive to discussing their thoughts freely and honestly.

Ethical issues surrounding confidentiality were similarly given due consideration. In addition to the use of pseudonyms, digital files and non-digital records holding data relating to pupils' work and collaboration with other members of staff were retained only until they were no longer of value, at which point they were permanently deleted or destroyed.

It could be argued that there is an ethical issue surrounding the use of pupils' creative writing as data to be discussed and analysed. Such creative writing can sometimes be of a personal nature and using this writing as part of a research project exposes this personal expression of language to a wider audience than the child would have expected or intended. It is understandable that a child may feel uncomfortable with the premise of their work reaching a wider readership. However, with only extracts from children's writing being featured in this report, and anonymity being maintained through not only pseudonyms but by typed transcripts of their work, the identity of the children remained safely confidential.

Lastly, it could be argued that it is unethical to deliver an intervention to some pupils and not to others, if it may benefit all. However, the intervention was conceived under a theoretical premise, meaning that I could not have been absolutely certain of its efficacy. Furthermore, if the intervention were proven to be effective, it could subsequently be delivered to the control group as well as other pupils, leaving them at no disadvantage.

Results and Discussion

Introduction to Results

The variety of quantitative and qualitative data that was collected allowed for a critical evaluation of the intervention's efficacy and of both pupils' and teachers' perceptions of its impact. Below, I provide an evaluation firstly of the quantitative data gathered from the controlled trial, followed by an analysis of the focus group's views on how and why the intervention affected their own use of grammar. The chapter concludes with an evaluation of Mrs Swade's perceptions of the intervention as well as the English department's responses to a presentation of evidence regarding the intervention's efficacy.

Quantitative Data Analysis

The statistical data gathered from the controlled trial suggests the intervention had an overall positive effect. Trends in the data are considered through comparisons between the intervention group's progress and that of the control group. This is followed by further analysis of the progress made by subgroups within the intervention group.

A] Overall Effect

With the baseline and post-intervention test being marked out of eighteen, pupils' scores were converted into percentages and their progress was measured by calculating the percentage difference between the two tests. Mean averages for the progress of the intervention and control groups were then calculated, finding that the intervention group's average progress was 5.35% while the control group's average progress was -1.07%. The line graph (figure 9) and bar chart (figure 10) below provide visual representations of this difference in progress.

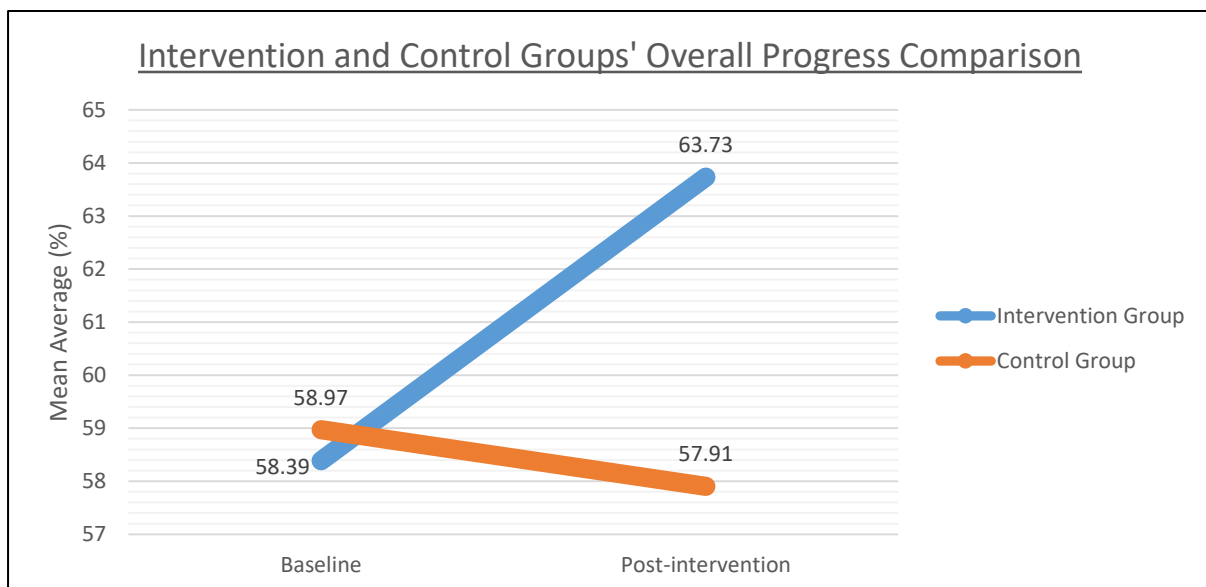


Figure 9: Line graph comparing the progress of the intervention and control groups.

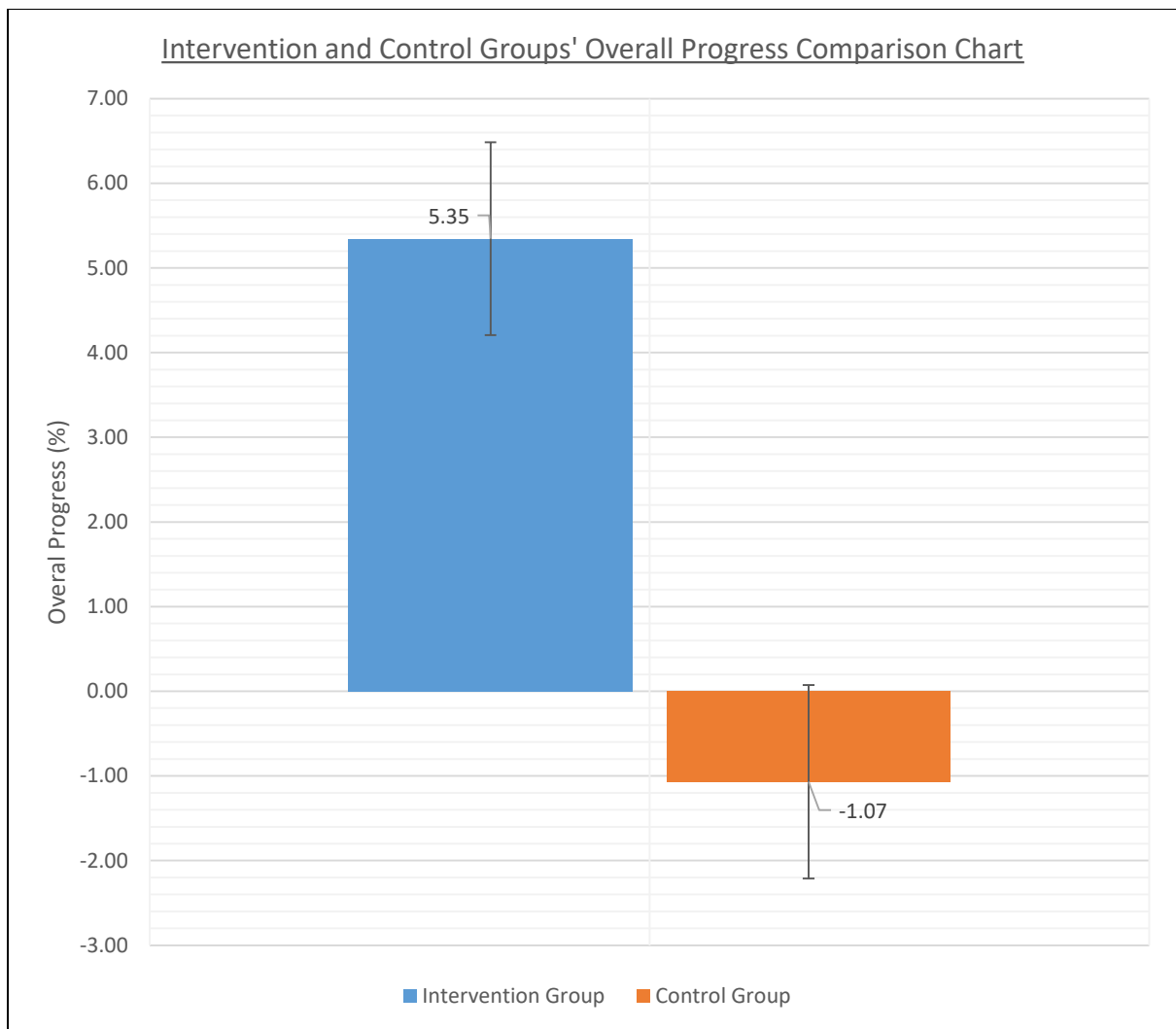


Figure 10: Bar chart comparing the progress of the intervention and control groups.

By dividing the standard deviation for each group by the square root of the sample size, the standard error of the mean (SEM) was calculated. The error bars in figure 10 relate to the SEM for each group. As the error bars do not overlap at any point, they imply that, even when variability in the data is taken into account, there is strong evidence that the differences in the groups, as portrayed by the bar chart, is statistically significant.

By separating the intervention and control groups into their English classes – the higher-ability and mixed-ability classes – we can observe the progress each class made between the tests. Figure 11 below provides presents this progress in the individual classes.

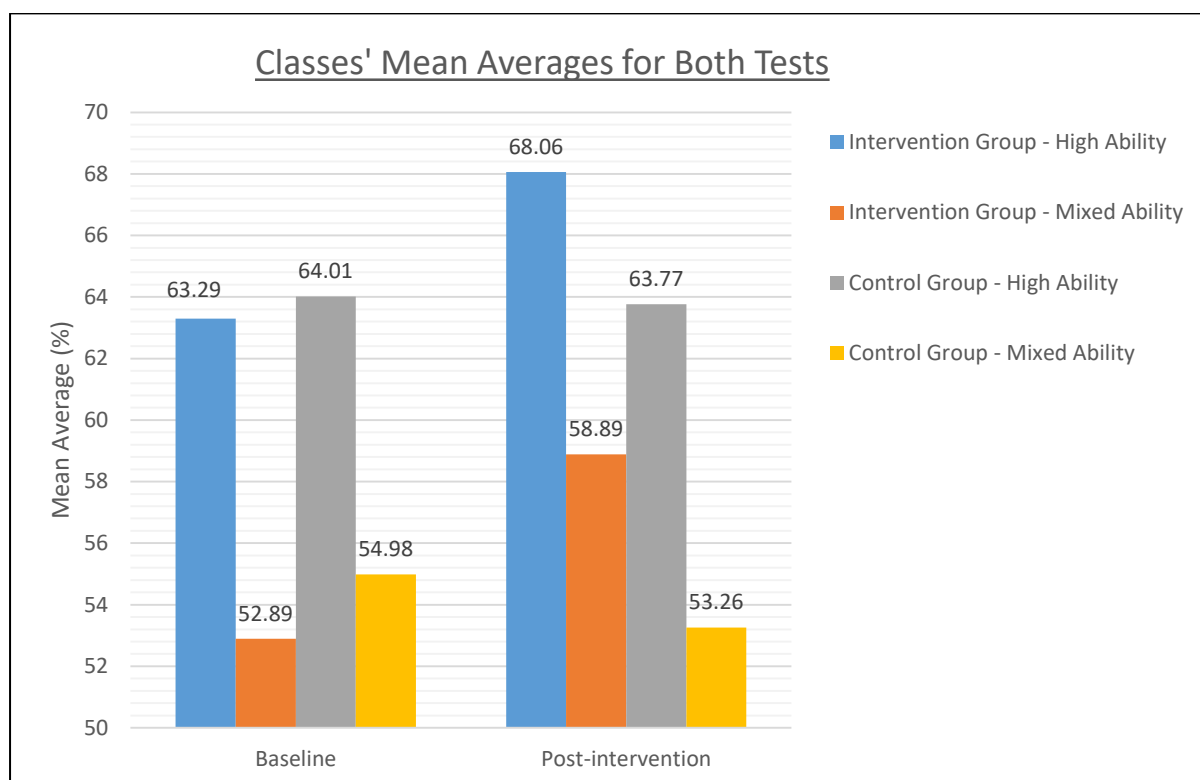


Figure 11: Bar chart showing average test scores for individual classes.

Looking at figure 11, according to the mean averages calculated for each class, the mixed-ability intervention class (which had the highest percentage of disadvantaged pupils) made the most progress with a percentage increase of 6.00%. The higher-ability intervention class made the next most progress at 4.77%. Both the control classes showed an overall negative progress with the mixed-ability class averaging a -1.72 decline and the higher-ability group averaging a less severe -0.24 decline. Figure 12 below summarises these differences in progress.

Class	Percentage Progress
Mixed-ability Intervention Class	6.00
Higher-ability Intervention Class	4.77
Higher-ability Control Class	-0.24
Mixed-ability Control Class	-1.72

Figure 12: Table showing individual classes' progress.

B] Discussion of Overall Effect

The statistical data suggests that the intervention had an overall positive impact upon the range and use of sentence constructions pupils formed in their writing, and their grammatical accuracy. The quantitative data, therefore, does appear to add validation to scholars who claim that imitation of linguistic patterns in mentor texts leads to an internalisation of grammar, raising the grammatical proficiency of pupils' writing (Rhodes, 2005; Paraskevas 2006; Dean, 2011; Myhill, 2011; Zuidema, 2012).

It is important to map the intervention group's 5.35% overall improvement back onto the scale of the mark scheme⁹ in order to qualify what that progress actually means. It must be remembered that using the mark scheme, pupils were scored for each test out of eighteen. The mark scheme is divided into six bands, each of which contains a score range of three marks. For example, if a pupil was judged to fall within band two, the pupil would have been

⁹ See appendix 2

awarded a score of either four, five or six marks. The decision regarding which of these three scores pupils were awarded was based on my professional judgement on whether they were showing emerging, developing or secure skills within each band.

When mapping the intervention group's 5.35% improvement onto the mark scheme's scale, we can see that a difference in one mark out of the eighteen marks available produces a 5.56% change. Using this figure for reference, we can see that pupils in the intervention group, on average, rose up the mark scheme by *almost* a whole mark.

The negative progress made by the control group is troubling and implies that the pupils' grammatical proficiency in their writing actually declined. However, such a conclusion is not statistically sound when consideration is paid to the error bar in figure 10 – the upper limit of the error bar based on the SEM shows that, when variability is taken into account, the control group's average could fall within the range of a positive outcome. Nevertheless, the position of the error bar does imply that an overall negative outcome would be probable.

However, again, when mapping the control group's mean average of -1.07% progress onto the mark scheme's scale, we can see that the measured decline was only equivalent to a fraction of a single mark out of the eighteen marks available. Indeed, the control group's average scores out of eighteen for the baseline and the post-intervention test were 10.62 and 10.42 respectively. The fall of 0.2 marks could be considered to be relatively negligible. The negative result for the control group does, however, imply that perceptions of pupil progress as a linear model of learning, at least in terms of grammatical proficiency in writing, are overly simplistic.

The effect size of the intervention was calculated using Cohen's formula¹⁰ (Cohen et al., 2007) in order to enable a statistical comparison to be made between the significance of the effect of this research project's intervention, and that of the Myhill RCT (Jones et al., 2013; Myhill, 2011; Myhill et al., 2011). Effect sizes are useful because they quantify 'the size of the difference between two groups' (Coe, 2002), such as an intervention and control group. This provides a statistic that allows for comparison between different studies (Coe, 2002). While there are many differences between this project and the Myhill RCT – for example, the scale, duration and intervention design, but to name just a few – both projects measured the effect of teaching grammar in context upon pupils' progress in writing. As Myhill (2011) points out, 'there has been very little robust empirical research' (p.12) into contextualising grammar, and so the Myhill RCT was the study with which a statistical comparison seemed most logical.

The effect size of this research project was calculated to be 0.78 which could be considered a moderate effect in comparison to the 1.53 effect size of the Myhill RCT which she describes as 'a very strong effect size for an education intervention' (p.13). While the effect size of this project's intervention is roughly half of that of Myhill's, in terms of educational research, as implied by Myhill's comment above on the strength of a 1.53 effect size, it is still of a significant size.

¹⁰ See appendix 4 for formula

C] Progress of Subgroups

The data from the controlled trial was analysed further to investigate how different subgroups within the intervention group had shown progression. The subgroups included in the following analysis are girls, boys, disadvantaged pupils, and subgroups of differently attaining pupils in the baseline test.

➤ Gender

The mean average progress was calculated for boys and girls within the intervention group. As before, the SEM was calculated for both subgroups so that variability error was taken into account when evaluating the differences in progress. Figure 13 presents this data:

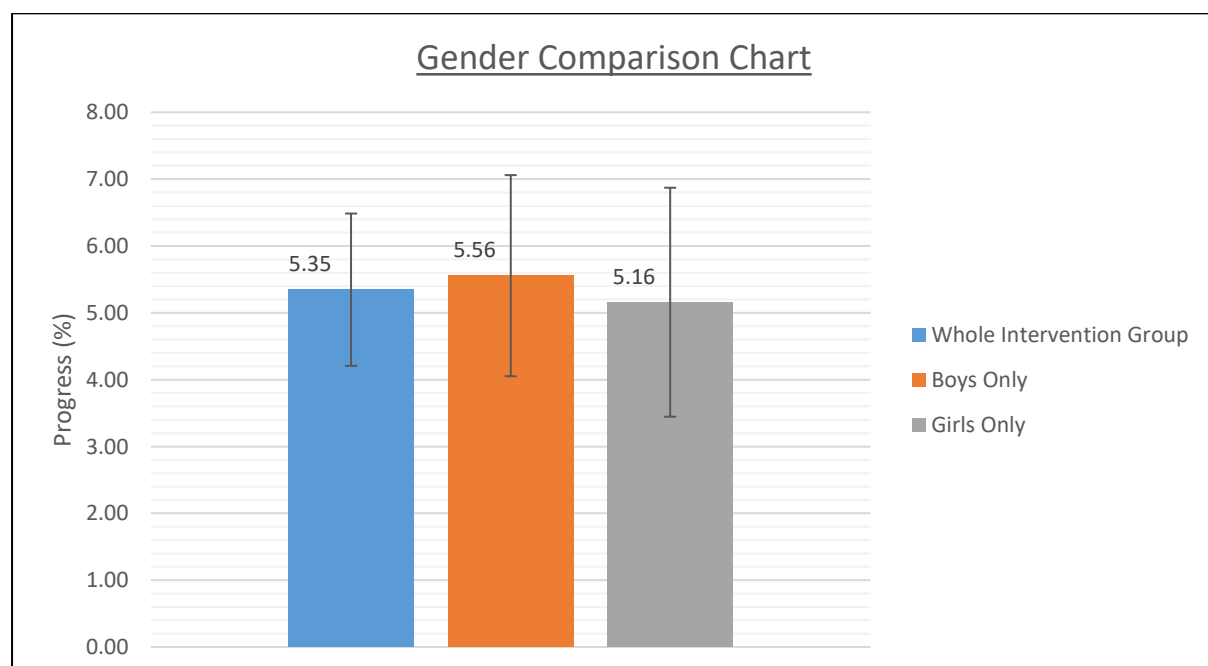


Figure 13: Bar chart showing the average progress of boys and girls in the intervention group.

Figure 13 shows that, on average, with a 0.4% difference boys made slightly more progress than girls. With 25 boys and 28 girls in the intervention group, the sample sizes for each gender were comparatively even. Interestingly, the standard deviation for both genders (boys: 7.52; girls: 9.06) shows a slightly wider spread of results in terms of progress attained for the girls. Although, according to the mean averages, there is a minute difference in progress between the genders, because of the overlap between the error bars, there is statistically strong evidence that the efficacy of the intervention was no different for either boys or girls.

Since the data implies that the intervention's effect was largely similar in developing the grammatical proficiency in boys' and girls' writing, it could be argued that the strategy of engaging boys in creative imitation of short mentor texts may help in addressing the attainment gap between boys' and girls' literacy (Martino & Kehler, 2007; DfE, 2012; Disenhaus, 2015). Certainly, the intervention does not appear to generate more significant progress in boys than girls, but it might be considered a strategy that may prevent an attainment gap from widening. Before any strong conclusions can be made about the benefits of creative imitation on boys' progress in writing more research needs to be conducted.

➤ Disadvantaged Pupils

Through the same procedure, the progress of disadvantaged pupils was analysed and compared to that of non-disadvantaged pupils. For the purposes of this project, disadvantaged pupils were identified as those registered for the pupil premium at Bowermount School. Figure 14 presents the relevant data:

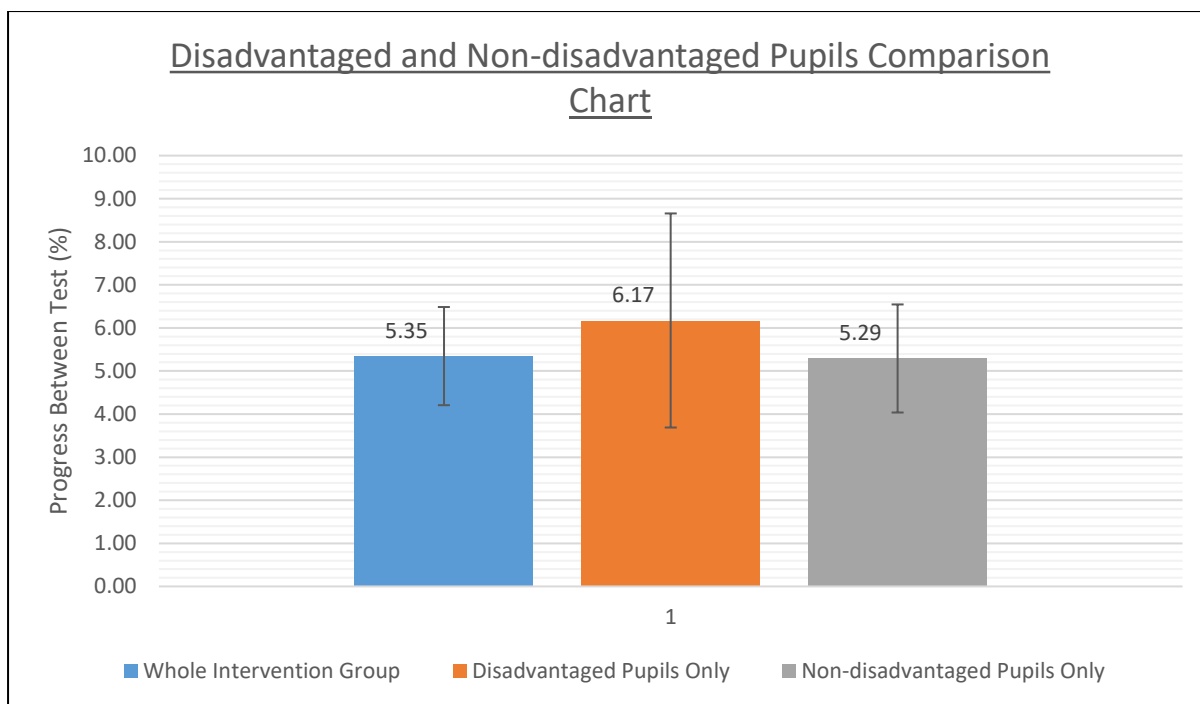


Figure 14: Bar chart showing the average progress of disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils in the intervention group.

As shown in figure 14, the mean average for progress of the disadvantaged pupils was slightly higher than that of the non-disadvantaged pupils with a 0.88% difference in progress between the two subgroups. The small difference could imply that the intervention was slightly more effective for disadvantaged pupils. However, the disparity between the sample sizes (16 disadvantaged pupils and 37 non-disadvantaged pupils) accounts for the height of the error bar for the disadvantaged pupils' subgroup. The overlap between the error bars of the two subgroups, including both subgroups' mean averages, therefore, reflects how there is statistically strong evidence that the efficacy of the intervention was no different for either subgroup.

As was discussed with the analysis of the intervention's impact upon the different genders, the data points towards a possibility that creative imitation may have some value in preventing the attainment gap between more and less advantaged pupils (Sharples et al.,

2011; DfE, 2015) from widening. Again, more research would need to be conducted with larger sample sizes before such conclusions can be made. Nevertheless, the results of this project imply that this particular contextualised approach was at least as effective for disadvantaged pupils as it was for non-disadvantaged pupils.

➤ Attainment Subgroups

As explained in the methodology chapter, I was unable to include lower-ability classes in the controlled trial. Consequently, in order to investigate the effect of the intervention upon pupils of differing attainment levels I split the data gathered from pupils in the intervention group's mixed-ability and higher-ability classes into three subgroups, each roughly a third in size. One subgroup was comprised of pupils who attained the lowest scores in the baseline test. Another subgroup was comprised of pupils who attained the highest scores in the baseline test. The final subgroup contained pupils whose attainment fell in between these two groups. Figure 15 provides a summary of these attainment subgroups.

Subgroup Name	Range of Scores in the Baseline Test (out of 18)	Number of Pupils in Subgroup
Lower-attaining Subgroup	5-8	16
Middle-attaining Subgroup	9-12	20
Higher-attaining Subgroup	13-16	17

Figure 15: Table summarising the attainment subgroups' profiles.

Data was analysed in order to compare and evaluate the three subgroups' progress achieved in the post-intervention test. The results are presented below in figure 16.

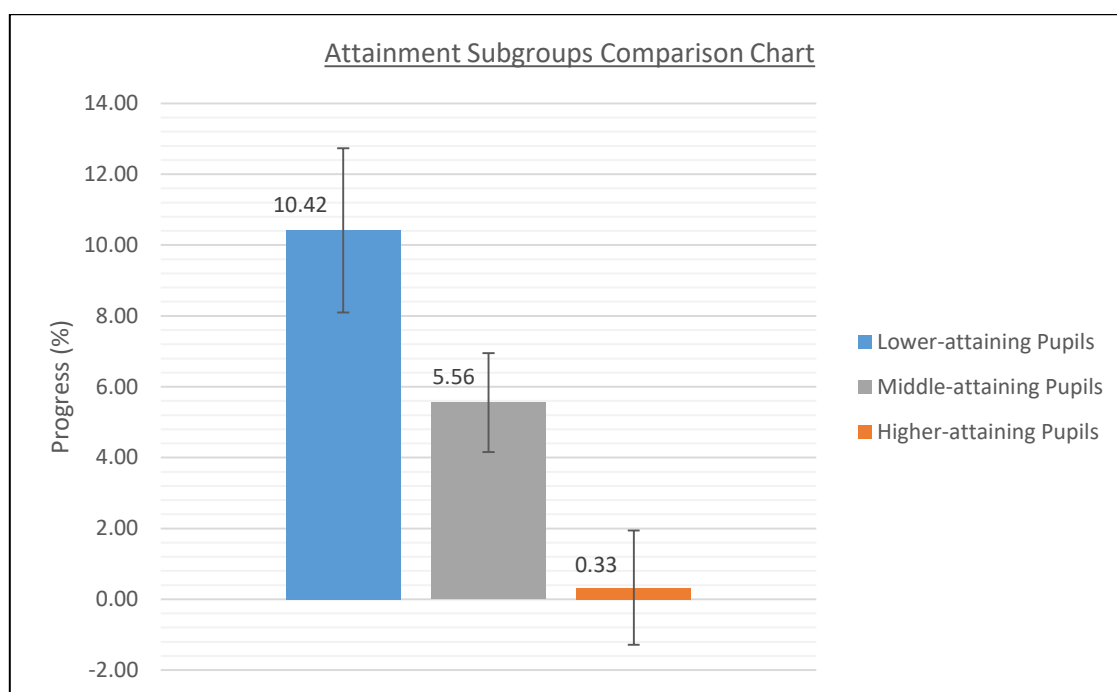


Figure 16: Bar chart showing the progress of attainment subgroups within the intervention group.

As figure 16 shows, interestingly, the mean averages of progress for these subgroups reveal that the pupils who scored the lowest marks in the baseline test showed the greatest amount of progress in the post-intervention test with the reverse being true for the higher-attaining pupils. The mean average of progress for the middle-attaining pupils also lies relatively equidistant from the mean averages for the lower- and higher-attaining subgroups which implies a trend - in general, the lower a pupil's grammatical proficiency in writing at the time of the baseline, the more progress they made.

While the sample sizes for these subgroups are small (between 16-20 pupils in each subgroup) the error bars based upon the SEM for each subgroup suggest that, because they

do not overlap, there is strong statistical evidence that the differences between the groups cannot be assigned to chance. This could imply that a strategy of creative imitation is more conducive to generating progress in the grammar of lower-ability pupils than higher-ability pupils. Alternatively, it could imply that the design of the intervention in this particular project was more conducive to generating progress in lower-ability pupils.

A comparison between this outcome and the outcome of the Myhill RCT demands to be made here as the analysis of her research found that ‘overall..., more able writers in the intervention group improved significantly more than less able writers who received no significant benefit from the intervention’ (Jones et al., 2013, p.1254). It is, therefore, notable that the reverse was true for this research project. But, as already stated, while both studies sought to improve pupils’ writing through contextualising grammar, both studies were inherently different in a myriad of ways. A conclusion that could be tentatively made from this disparity, however, is that contextualising grammar can be effective in generating progress in the writing of most pupils, but pupils of different abilities are responsive to different approaches of contextualisation.

D] Distribution of Progress

As already stated, the intervention appeared to have an overall positive affect on the intervention group which showed a 5.35% improvement while the control group showed a -1.07% decline. Both groups, however, produced a wide distribution of results for progress, including pupils that made negative, neutral and positive progress. The standard deviation for

both groups was relatively equal with $\sigma = 8.29$ in the intervention group and $\sigma = 8.24$ in the control group. The spread of progress for both groups is shown in figure 17:

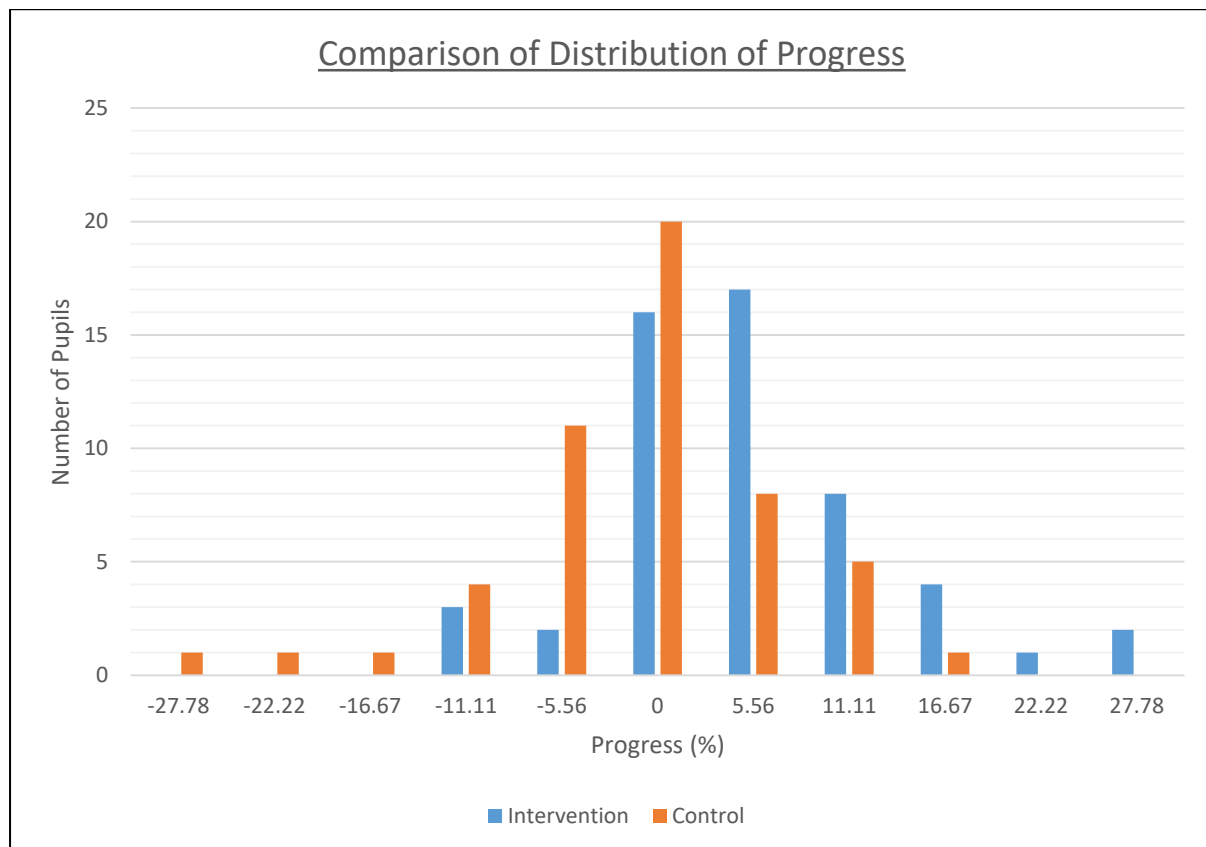


Figure 17: Bar chart showing the spread of progress in the intervention and control groups.

Figure 17 shows that 16 pupils from the intervention group displayed neutral progress and 5 pupils displayed negative progress. Together, these pupils account for almost 40% of the intervention group ($n = 53$) – a sizeable minority that cannot be ignored. For these 21 pupils, their results in the post-intervention test implies that the intervention had a limited effect upon the development of their range and use of sentence construction and their grammatical accuracy.

When the previous analysis of the lower-, middle- and higher-attaining subgroups is taken into account (see figure 16), it can be argued that it was the higher-attaining pupils on which the intervention made the least impact. Why the intervention had a far greater impact upon the lower-attaining pupils cannot be determined by analysis of the numerical data but possible reasons will be discussed as part of the quantitative data analysis. Although the pupils who did not make any identifiable progress were a minority, at 40% the size of this minority is significant and reminds us of scholars that are critical of the efficacy of contextualising grammar (Sams, 2003; Gorlewski & Annable, 2012), adding credence to their claims of having experienced a limited effect upon pupils' grammatical proficiency when employing a contextualised approach to teaching grammar.

The overall positive results of this research project's controlled trial support scholars' claims that creative imitation of short mentor texts can be an effective teaching strategy in developing pupils' written grammatical proficiency (Rhodes, 2005; Paraskevas 2006; Dean, 2011; Myhill, 2011; & Zuidema, 2012). But the results also suggest that further research needs to be conducted in order to discover how such an approach can engender progress in a wider range of pupils than it has in this research project.

Focus Group Interviews

As previously discussed, four selected pupils were interviewed¹¹ in pairs in order to gain a greater insight into *how* they perceived the intervention to have affected the grammatical proficiency in their writing. It also enabled me to explore *why* the intervention might have been effective in generating this progress in their writing.

Jean and Leo from Mrs Swade's higher-ability class were interviewed first; Chris and Sandra from my mixed-ability class were interviewed the following day. All four pupils were provided with an individualised transcription¹² of a selection of three sentences from their writing in both the baseline test and the post-intervention test. These sentences were provided as stimulated recall. The sentences from the baseline test were selected to exemplify the kinds of grammatical errors, including issues with sentence structure, which they had made in that test. The sentences from the post-intervention test were selected to exemplify the progress they had shown in grammatical accuracy and sentence structure in the post-intervention test, generally typified by being grammatically accurate complex sentences. In order to avoid distraction away from the topic of grammar, spellings had been corrected in each transcription, but, otherwise, these sentences were exact transcriptions. The transcriptions were given to the pupils at least a day prior to the interview so that they could think about how and why they had shown improvement. Pupils were also provided with copies of three examples of the intervention tasks¹³ to aid the discussion.

¹¹ See appendix 5 for the interview's questions

¹² See appendix 6 for these transcriptions

¹³ See appendix 7 for a copy of this document

A] Pupil Perceptions of the Intervention's Impact

During the interview both Leo and Jean viewed their grammatical errors in the baseline to have stemmed from their writing's lack of punctuation, rather than issues pertaining to their syntactical or grammatical proficiency:

Jean: I just write all my sentences down as I think of it. I don't bother to actually punctuate.

Interviewer: Leo – how about you?

Leo: Same with Jean. I write it down and then forget to punctuate.

As previously discussed, issues with punctuation can, indeed, have an impact upon the grammatical clarity of sentence structure. But when discussing how the selected sentences from the post-intervention test exemplified an improvement in their writing, both Jean and Leo struggled to identify the improvement as one that was related to their grammatical proficiency:

Interviewer: What do you think is better in the example sentences from the 2nd test?

Jean: I still don't even use much commas. I didn't even use a comma in this one [pointing at the third example]. But, at least, the first two aren't as long, like the others. It's a little bit more broken down.

Interviewer: Broken down?

Jean: Yeah.

Leo: Yeah. It's easier to understand the sentences and read them. These [pointing at the first test's sentences] are a bit jumpy and miss out words. But this is better to understand.

Interviewer: What do you think makes them better to understand?

- Jean: They're the same – they still don't have any punctuation.*
- Interviewer: But they make more sense, don't they?*
- Jean: This one's a bit long but it's got better words in it.*
- Interviewer: Would you agree they make more sense, even if they don't use commas?*
[Jean doesn't respond]
- Leo: I think they're more detailed – it gives you more information.*

This excerpt from the interview exemplifies how Jean barely recognises that her grammar was more sophisticated in the post-intervention test. Her comment about her sentences being 'broken down' could be construed as a cursory acknowledgement that she demonstrates a certain level of control over beginning and ending sentences appropriately, making her sentences syntactically sound. But her later insistence that the sentences are 'the same' as those from the baseline belies this acknowledgement. Indeed, Jean appears to judge her writing by other factors such as the range of punctuation included and vocabulary choices – 'It's got better words'.

Leo comes closer to recognising a grammatical improvement by alluding to the clarity of expression that the development in his grammar has granted. As he puts it, they are 'better [or easier] to understand'. It was unclear, however, if Leo understood that his use of grammar in the post-intervention test was largely responsible for making his expression more 'detailed' and 'easier to understand'.

In the interview with the mixed-ability class' pupils, Chris appeared reluctant to speak about how he thought his writing had shown improvement in the post-intervention test. Sandra, however, provided some revealing statements:

*Interviewer: What do you think is better in the example sentences from the 2nd test?
...Chris?*

Chris: Don't know really... [long pause]

Sandra: I couldn't believe it when I saw those sentences.

Interviewer: Which ones?

Sandra: Them ones. [pointing at the sentences from the post-intervention test] I can't believe that was me. I didn't know I could write like that.

Interviewer: Write like what?

Sandra: It just sounds so good.

Interviewer: Good in what way?

Sandra: Like I can write properly.

Interviewer: How does it make you feel?

Sandra: Good. I'm going to show my mum.

Arguably, Sandra's use of the word 'properly' implies that she feels she demonstrated adherence to the rules of grammar in her writing. It could possibly also imply that she considered her writing in the test communicated a level of sophistication of which she previously thought she was not capable. Her pride in her achievement is communicated through her intention to share her progress with her mother, but her surprise in her progress also suggests that she had been previously unaware of the improvements she had been able to make in her grammatical proficiency.

The interviews, therefore, revealed that some pupils were not able to clearly identify that the progress they had made was, in many respects, related to their grammatical proficiency: Jean was unable to commit to recognising she had made any improvement at all; and Leo seemed to sense that an improvement in his grammar had led him to communicate his ideas more clearly, but was not able to identify the improvement as being grammatical. However, Sandra's surprise at the improvement she had made and recognition of a

developing sophistication in her style of writing does imply an understanding that this improvement was grammatical, but, perhaps in the same way as Leo, she does not appear to have a firm grasp of the concept of grammar to be able to articulate it as such. Indeed, at no point during the interviews did any of the pupils actually use the word 'grammar'.

All four pupils, however, did, indeed, demonstrate significant improvements in their grammatical proficiency. So, the question must be posed, why were these pupils unable to articulate or, at least in the case of Jean, recognise it as such? One possibility is that pupils comprehended the intervention as an exercise that was undertaken simply for the purpose of practising their skills in imaginative writing – unaware that the objective of these starter tasks was, in fact, to develop the grammatical proficiency of their writing. If we assume that the intervention is responsible for these pupils' progress, it could infer that the process of pupils 'creat[ing] a repertoire... that they can retrieve to create effective, eloquent sentences' (Paraskevas, 2006, p.67) can occur subconsciously, with pupils unaware that they are learning and demonstrating how to use grammar with more sophistication.

A further, but not necessarily contrary explanation is that pupils like Sandra and Leo simply have never been taught the linguistic concept of grammar, and, as such, are unable to discuss their writing using this terminology. There is, therefore, an argument to be made for teachers discussing grammar explicitly with pupils, so as to equip pupils with the conceptual understanding and terminology necessary for them to reflect effectively upon their own work. Such practice would echo Myhill (2011) who asserts that 'teaching contextualised grammar can improve children's writing when... there is explicit teaching of grammatical features of texts' (p.13). Arguably, while Mrs Swade and I spoke about the grammatical constructs of the

mentor sentences to the pupils, we did not engage in discussions about grammar with pupils, which may have limited their engagement with the learning objective.

B] Pupil Perceptions of the Intervention's Design

The interviews with pupils provided enlightening evidence as to why the intervention might have been effective. A reason that was implied was that the starter tasks evoked positive emotional attitudes towards writing:

Interviewer: What did you think of these starter activities?

Sandra: It was good because you can write it yourself and you don't have to do the same as everyone else.

Chris: And it gets you to start the lesson and keep your brain working further into the lesson. And it makes you feel like you can do it.

Interviewer: That's interesting – what does it make you feel like you can do?

Chris: You know, write like that, with those long sentences.

Sandra: And it isn't just writing about one thing – you can make yours different to everyone else's, so it's fun.

Interviewer: So you enjoyed it?

Sandra: Yeah.

Interviewer: How about you Chris?

Chris: Yeah. You can write whatever you want so sometimes you can make it funny. So I think that's what gets people more into it.

Sandra: Yeah – you can make it more fun because you can do your own thing.

Although both Sandra and Chris expressed a positive reaction to the intervention, they communicated different reasons for the enjoyment they felt in completing the tasks. In the above excerpt Sandra repeatedly expresses how her enjoyment in the tasks stemmed from

the freedom the task provided her to write imaginatively – producing a unique text that was ‘different to every else’s’ made it ‘fun’. Chris reiterates this view when he agrees that ‘you can write whatever you want’ which gave him the opportunity to write for the purpose of being humorous.

However, Chris’ responses also imply that part of the reason for his enjoyment was that the tasks evoked a sense of confidence in his ability to produce writing that uses more sophisticated grammatical forms than he is normally inclined to use: when Chris says, ‘it makes you feel like you can do it’, and qualifies the outcome to which he is referring as one that is related to his use of more complex sentence constructions, he is conveying how completion of the tasks aroused a gratifying sense of achievement, raising his confidence in his writing skills.

Interestingly, the interview with Leo and Jean highlighted another aspect of the intervention which pupils found enjoyable – the process of feeding back their writing to the class:

Interviewer: What did you think of these starter activities?

Leo: I enjoyed it where you can write your own sentence and put the stuff in, because then you could share it with the class.

Interviewer: Did you like sharing it with the class?

Leo: Yes. And you could hear other people’s ideas. And then, I learnt off of other people’s ideas, like words I didn’t know before, and stuff like that.

Interviewer: What about you, Jean?

Jean: I don’t feel I learnt from other people. I just liked writing my own sentence and sharing it with the class and that. And hearing other people’s.

Interviewer: Why?

Jean: They were funny.

Interviewer: Did Mrs Swade ask for hands up?

Jean: She picks.

Interviewer: It seems like you enjoyed it. Do you think the class as a whole liked doing it?

Leo: Some people don't like English. You know, they just like other subjects and not English. But they were fun. And you can make them funny.

Both Leo and Jean affirm that they liked writing their sentences, adding further support to Sandra and Chris' testimony that the process of creative imitation was enjoyable for pupils. But, for these pupils it was not simply the writing itself that was gratifying but the opportunity to share their writing with the class. This, it seems, was what motivated Leo to complete the task: his drive to complete the task can be attributed to the value he attached to sharing his writing with his peers – he wrote '*because then [he] could share it with the class*'. In the above excerpt, Jean similarly shows that she attached value to sharing her work and hearing others' writing.

It is interesting to note that pupils appeared to value the opportunity to write humorously: Chris liked to '*make it funny*' – a phrase that Leo repeats in his interview – and Jean enjoyed hearing his classmate's work because '*they were funny*'. It could be suggested that some pupils became motivated to engage with the intervention because they were using it as vehicle for seeking approval from their peers through humour. Indeed, while delivering the intervention, it became noticeable that many pupils were eager to share a sentence which they had written with comical intentions. However, whether or not this social phenomenon of seeking peer-approval through laughter was occurring, the interview revealed that different pupils valued and enjoyed the opportunity to feedback to the class for different reasons – Leon claims he '*learnt*' from his peers (although, significantly, he doesn't identify

such learning as related to grammar), while Jean states that she enjoyed being amused by her peers.

As we know, motivation is a key factor in pupils' progress at school (Galloway et al., 1998). The interviews assisted in identifying why the intervention's design was disposed to generating pupils' motivation, thus making it effective. The creativity of the tasks was what pupils cited as one aspect that was, in itself, enjoyable. Such creative tasks generate motivation because they engender a sense of ownership that keeps pupils engaged (Myhill et al., 2011). It seems that pupils did, indeed, view the tasks as a 'risk-free and control-free approach' (Hoang, 2007, p.793) to learning because of the creative freedom they were afforded in their writing, at least within the confines of the mentor sentence's grammatical structure. Furthermore, as discussed, the process of imitative play helped some pupils with their confidence in their own writing abilities – Chris was, 'as it were, a head above himself' (Vygotsky, 1978, p.130) when recognising that he had stretched his grammatical proficiencies in sentence structure.

But the valued outcome for Chris, as well as others, was not simply one of a sense of achievement, but an opportunity to engage with others through the medium of humour. By being able to make one another laugh during feedback, pupils attached value to the task, creating a social dimension to the intervention. Perhaps returning to the summary provided by Galloway et al. (1998) of one aspect of Weiner's (1979) theories of motivation might add clarification: motivation represents 'the interaction of expectations and the value attached to those expected outcomes' (p.97). It could, therefore, be argued that some pupils held an expectation that completion of the task would lead to an opportunity to amuse their peers and the value attached to doing so may have been a sense of social approval. Possibly, pupils

may not have been more receptive to the intervention's purpose in developing their grammatical proficiency because their motivation to engage with the starter tasks was bound up with their desires to write comically in order to impress their peers. This may have offset any explicit reference I or Mrs Swade made to the intervention's grammatical learning objective, hence the focus group's difficulty in recognising their progress as being grammatical.

Interview with Mrs Swade

A semi-structured interview with Mrs Swade was conducted after the intervention had been delivered for three weeks. The questions¹⁴ sought to discover what Mrs Swade perceived to be the intervention's strengths and weaknesses and potential improvements in its design. The interview was purposefully conducted at this time so that it was possible for improvements to be made to the intervention's design with over half the intervention's term remaining.

A] Motivation

During the interview, Mrs Swade frequently indicated that pupils found the starter tasks enjoyable and liked beginning lessons in this way, thus corroborating the findings of the

¹⁴ See appendix 8 for the questions

focus group interviews. However, Mrs Swade believed that it was sometimes the topic which pupils were asked to construct their sentences around that engaged pupils – this was another reason for pupils’ enjoyment of the intervention that was not identified in the focus group interviews. The example she cited was when pupils were asked to imitate a mentor sentence’s construction to rant about the drawbacks to secondary school life – see figure 18 below.

Title: Bruno Becomes Annoyed

Bruno goes on a rant in chapter 5:

*'Karl's not here **and** Daniel's not here **and** Martin's not here **and** there are no other houses around us **and** no fruit **and** vegetable stalls **and** no streets **and** no cafés with tables outside **and** no one to push you from pillar to post on a Saturday afternoon.'*

As you can see, Bruno uses the connective '**and**' a lot when he is angry and going on a rant.

Can you imitate this style of sentence to rant about secondary school life? Please use the connective '**and**'.

Figure 18: PowerPoint slide with the intervention’s instructions, asking pupils to write a rant.

With the understanding that pupils were responding well to being asked to imitate sentence structures while writing about *engaging* topics, we agreed that capitalising upon this would be worthwhile in the design of subsequent tasks.

When asked if she thought her pupils were enjoying the tasks, the significance of pupils’ participation in feedback was identified as key to their enjoyment:

- Mrs Swade: Yeah, I think they're enjoying them. I did a little, quick question at the end of today's lesson, and they've said that they like them. It's difficult – I'm getting to the point where, sometimes, I've got so many with hands up, I can't get through everyone who wants to volunteer their own examples. So it's definitely something that grabs their attention.*
- Interviewer: Why do you think they're so keen to feedback?*
- Mrs Swade: There's an element of pride in what they've done. But some are also trying to impress their mates by making their sentences a bit explicit.*
- Interviewer: What – sexual? Violent?*
- Mrs Swade: Violent mostly. Nothing too bad though – they're only year 7.*

Mrs Swade indicates a high level of motivation surrounding the opportunity for pupils to feedback their writing to the class which correlates with data from the focus group interviews. She acknowledges that pupils are keen to feedback as a way of seeking peer-approval, and sheds light on what kind of writing pupils from the focus group may have categorised as 'funny' – writing with violent content. It was not simply the creative nature of the intervention that motivated pupils (Hoang, 2007), but a social aspect that manifested during feedback.

Mrs Swade's affirmations that the intervention generated pupil motivation triangulates with the focus group interviews, and her perceptions regarding engaging topics for pupils to construct their sentences around, initiated a further development in the intervention's design, maximising its potential to motivate. Motivation is an important factor in generating progress (Galloway et al., 1998), and the interview, therefore, triangulated with other evidence to imply the intervention was effective because of its tendency to motivate pupils to write and share their writing.

B] Scaffolding

Mrs Swade expressed how a strength of *some* of the starter tasks was how they were scaffolded to help guide pupils towards imitating the mentor sentence's construction accurately. Conversely, the lack of scaffolding for other examples of the intervention, was identified as a weakness. An improvement she advised was, therefore, to provide tasks that were consistently scaffolded to provide pupils with appropriate support and guidance. An example of a task that she thought was effectively scaffolded is presented in figure 19:

Title: Predictions

Can you complete numbers 2 and 3 with the same sentence style as number 1? Keep **the red** parts; **change** the black parts, **using your own ideas**.

1] **One** afternoon, **when Bruno** came home from school, **he was surprised to find Maria** stand**ing** in his bedroom, **pulling** all his belongings out of the wardrobe.

2] **One** stormy night, **when Bruno ...**, **he was surprised to find Maria -ing ...**, holding a gun tightly in her fist.

3] **One ...**, **when Bruno ...**, **he was surprised to find Maria -ing ...**, **-ing...**

Figure 19: PowerPoint slide exemplifying effective scaffolding of the intervention.

In figure 19, the model sentence (no. 1) is followed by a scaffolded task (no. 2) that provides some examples of how the same construction can be changed while allowing pupils some limited freedom to complete it creatively. Mrs Swade liked, for example, how a different fronted adverbial had been provided for pupils in order to demonstrate the kind of language

that was appropriate to use before they attempted number 3. Mrs Swade suggested that the scaffolding developed pupils' confidence in writing their own examples, which helped to maintain their engagement with the task:

- Mrs Swade: It made it easier to follow – taking bits away. And by the time they got to doing their own one they knew what to do... I think they liked the idea of scaffolding it like that and building up to their own sentences – made them a bit more comfortable with it.*
- Interviewer: So what kind of problems did you have when it wasn't scaffolded like that?*
- Mrs Swade: Oh, you know – the usual; some of them saying they don't know what to do, even though I'd talked through the sentence they had to imitate, of course.*
- Interviewer: Do you think they didn't know how to imitate the sentence?*
- Mrs Swade: Not really – after doing it a couple of times they should've known what to do. I think it was just a case of them being a bit startled by a long sentence. So sticking in that scaffolding helps to ease them into the task.*

The above transcript shows how Mrs Swade recognises the effect of scaffolding on pupils' confidence – the scaffolding provides pupils with guidance that helps pupils to feel 'comfortable' and 'ease them into the task'. As we know, if pupils feel they are likely to be successful in a task, the more likely they are to feel motivated to complete the task (Atkinson, 1964; Maehr, 2001). Arguably, with the extra guidance where the task was scaffolded, pupils became more confident that they could successfully complete the task, which raised their motivation. The discussion with Mrs Swade also highlighted that the process of creative imitation is not one that all pupils find straightforward and the transition to writing 'with the same kinds of grammatical maneuvers that they notice in the texts' (Zuidema, 2012, p.65) might require some guidance, perhaps including some modelling from the teacher. In

recognition of some pupils' need for extra guidance, subsequent tasks were more consistently scaffolded.

Interview with the English Department

The unstructured interview with the English department was conducted following a presentation¹⁵ that provided a brief summary of the intervention's design and the headline data that emerged from the controlled trial. The discussion that was recorded continued for almost 45 minutes, and so provided an extensive amount of qualitative data, revealing how other teachers perceived the efficacy of the intervention. For practical purposes, two excerpts from the discussion which I consider to be particularly significant are discussed below.

The first excerpt reveals other teachers' perceptions regarding the process of internalising sentence structures. It also provides ideas regarding how the intervention could be developed to make it more effective in targeting specific grammatical issues:

Mrs North: What kind of issues did students commonly have with their grammar and sentence formation?

Interviewer: From my general observations, I'd say there were lots of students that had trouble with running their sentences together – a lot of them are not very good at ending their sentences. And, perhaps, because the intervention gets them to focus on one sentence only, I'm not sure it's great for addressing that.

Mr Field: But, I suppose, if you are thinking of getting the commas and clauses in the right place in the middle of a sentence, you're probably more likely to take care over where that sentence ends.

¹⁵ See appendix 9 for the presentation's PowerPoint slides

Mrs Devon: Yeah – it's a bit like what you were saying about internalising a sentence pattern. So, if you've kind of got that sentence pattern in your head, your head is going to tell you where the end of that pattern is. And you start getting it right across the rest of your writing.

Mr Field: As a professional, I don't know about you guys, but I know that I couldn't talk someone through, using all the jargon and terminology, about how a sentence is constructed and why it should end in a certain place. I could notice the error and correct it, but I wouldn't necessarily be able to explain the error. But I think what you are doing is getting them to get a feel for sentence structure, rather than understand it, which makes more sense for developing their writing.

Mrs Devon: It's demonstrating rather than instructing, isn't it? So, if we wanted to target comma splicing or running sentences together, we could have two or three sentences as a cluster to imitate, maybe not complex ones necessarily, to make them more aware of where to end sentences.

The discussion above shows Mr Field and Mrs Devon's perceptions of how the intervention might be effective. Interestingly, in the above excerpt, Mr Field's perception of how the intervention might affect progress is presented differently at the different times at which he speaks: at first, in talking of pupils 'thinking of' producing more accurate grammar and 'tak[ing] care' with their sentence construction, his language implies a view that the intervention could prompt pupils into actively reflecting over their grammatical choices – imitation could generate an internal cognitive discourse.

However, the next time he speaks, Mr Field talks of pupils getting 'a feel for sentence structure, rather than understand[ing] it'. Here, he seems to perceive the intervention as something that develops pupils' intuition for grammar – a departure from the view of it as engendering cognitive reflection on their writing's grammar. While the latter of these two viewpoints correlates with data from the focus group interviews, where pupils seemed unaware of how their writing had developed grammatically, perhaps the two perceptions need not be mutually exclusive. This returns us to the question of how useful it might be to

be explicit about the grammatical learning objective when using the teaching strategy of creative imitation – would a more explicit approach (Myhill, 2011) be more likely to generate cognitive discourse in addition to developing pupils' intuitive use of grammar?

Mrs Devon ends the excerpt by considering how the intervention could be adjusted in order to respond to pupils whose writing is characterised by run-on sentences; she envisages a way of differentiating the process of creative imitation in order to respond to the needs of the school's pupils. Her proposal of having 'two or three [mentor] sentences as a cluster to imitate' seems theoretically sound as it may enable pupils to internalise the grammatical procedure of ending sentences. However, interestingly, with her suggestion that this might be effective, even if more basic sentence structures are utilised, the purpose of the intervention could be diverted away from getting pupils to 'create effective, eloquent sentences' (Paraskevas, 2006, p.67) of a structurally complex nature, to writing that is simpler in form but grammatically accurate over a number of sentences. Certainly, the basic hypothesis of prompting pupils to use 'the same kinds of grammatical maneuvers that they notice in texts' (Zuidema, 2012, p.65) would still stand, but such a development in the design and nuance in purpose conveys how Mrs Devon perceives the intervention could be developed and differentiated for effective targeting of specific needs.

The discussion transcribed below was in response to the data that evidenced how the lower-attaining pupils had shown a higher average progress (10.42%) than the higher-attaining pupils (0.33%). I asked the department why they thought the intervention might not have had as great an effect upon the higher-attaining pupils.

Mrs North: Maybe they'd already peaked?

Mrs Swade: They've probably already got quite a range of sentences that they already use, and they probably feel fairly confident doing their writing and using those sentence structures. So they feel comfortable just using what they already know, rather than experimenting with something new from the starters.

Mrs Devon: I think that maybe because they are more able, they're more sort of self-sufficient, and they might take to being directed to do something less well than those who aren't as confident. They might have that belief that, 'I know what I'm doing so I'll just do what I already know'. Whereas the lower ones, they've got, actually, less confidence. So if you're telling them, 'if you write like this it's going to make your work better,' they might be more open to actually trying it and developing their skills.

Both Mrs Swade and Mrs Devon suggest that the higher-attaining pupils may have viewed the intervention as a task that was less relevant to themselves than other pupils. The teachers argue that such pupils prefer to write in a way that is less experimental and a way in which they are more accustomed, thus perhaps attaching less value to the intervention's tasks. In questioning how the intervention could be redesigned in order to move such pupils on from writing within their comfort zone – away from feeling that they have already *peaked* – we inevitably return to the concept of differentiation.

Perhaps, by making the mentor sentence (or sentences) more challenging for these pupils, the process of creative imitation may stimulate a greater 'sense of pride' (Hoang, 2007, p.793) in their writing, thus initiating the internalisation of linguistic patterns (Rhodes, 2005; Paraskevas, 2006; Myhill, 2011; Zuidema, 2012) and further application in their own writing. It could be argued that if pupils do not attach significant value to the outcome of such tasks (Weiner, 1979; Maehr, 2001, Hoang, 2007), then they are less likely to internalise the patterns they imitate.

Conclusion

The Intervention's Efficacy

With the intervention group's average progress at 5.35% compared to the control group's -1.07% average progress, the results of the controlled trial imply an overall positive impact upon pupils' use and range of sentence structures and grammatical accuracy. The effect size of 0.78, in comparison with the Myhill RCT's effect size of 1.53, conveys how the intervention could be seen as having had a moderate effect upon pupils' grammatical proficiency in their writing.

The pupils who had scored the lowest in the baseline made significantly more overall progress (10.42%) than the pupils who had scored the highest (0.33%), which is interesting when compared to the results of the Myhill RCT where the reverse is true. Both research projects examined the effect of a contextualised approach to teaching grammar upon pupils' writing, but the strategy of creative imitation in this research project could, at least in the manner in which it was implemented here, be more effective for pupils whose grammatical proficiency is relatively low.

60% of the intervention group showed progress in the post-intervention test, while 40% showed neutral or negative progress. Although the overall effect was, indeed, positive, this sizeable minority of pupils, on which the intervention appeared to not have had an effect, raises questions regarding how the intervention could be differentiated to be effective for a wider range of pupils. The interview with the English department prompted ideas for adjustments in the intervention's design in order to target pupils who commonly display issues with run-on sentences. Furthermore, possible explanations for the limited effect on

higher-attaining pupils were provided relating to challenge, which leads to the question of how the intervention might be differentiated for this ability group.

It was acknowledged by pupils and Mrs Swade that pupils commonly enjoyed the intervention starters. That enjoyment was a result of the creative nature of the tasks, and, in some cases, was connected to its potential to raise confidence in writing with complex grammatical structures. But pupils' enjoyment also stemmed from the opportunity to share and listen to each others' writing during feedback. Many pupils viewed feedback as an occasion to impress and seek approval from their peers through choosing to write in a way that they viewed as comical. While this increased motivation and engagement with the intervention, leading pupils to complete the tasks successfully, it may have diverted pupils' attention away from recognising the grammatical learning objective of the tasks. Nevertheless, the enjoyment pupils found in engaging with the intervention may well be seen as integral to pupils' motivation to complete tasks successfully, and, therefore, key to its efficacy.

During Mrs Swade's interview, ways in which the intervention's design could be developed were identified (greater consistency with scaffolding and engaging topics on which pupils were asked to write) to increase pupils' confidence and engagement with tasks. These developments were implemented for the purpose of raising pupil motivation further with the intention of increasing the intervention's efficacy. It must be acknowledged that without the kind and voluntary assistance of Mrs Swade, through her willingness to deliver the intervention, as well as her help in moderating marking and in developing the design of the intervention, the intervention may well have not been as effective, and the reliability of the results would not have been as strong.

Finally, the research project raised questions concerning how explicit teachers should be in communicating the objective of creative imitation tasks as being to raise pupils' grammatical proficiency. For example, during the focus group interviews, pupils were either unaware of how the improvements in their writing were grammatical in nature, or unable to articulate it as such. Although the data from this research project cannot answer the question as to why that was, the issue has been discussed in relation to the explicitness with which grammar is taught as a possible factor. Possibly, because of time constraints, the lack of discussion with pupils about the use of grammar in the mentor sentence may have meant that pupils were less likely to recognise the tasks' grammatical objective. Perhaps this reveals why scholars so often advocate a two-stage process of contextualisation that begins with contextualising grammar in pupils' reading, before contextualising it within their writing (Paraskevas, 2006, Myhill et al., 2011; Zuidema, 2012; Simmons, 2016). Arguably, if pupils had been able to identify, analyse and discuss the grammar in the mentor sentence, they may have been better equipped to recognise and discuss the improvements they had made as being grammatical. However, the question remains, if pupils were to hold a better understanding of the concept of grammar, would the intervention have been more effective due to heightened cognitive engagement with the use of grammar in their own writing?

Limitations and Implications of the Research

Although the results of the controlled trial suggest that the intervention had an overall positive effect on pupils' grammatical proficiency, the relatively small sample size means that conclusions surrounding its efficacy must be made tentatively. It must also be restated that

‘education... exists in an open system’ (Rowe, 2016, p.7) and so it is impossible to completely attribute pupil progress to a single intervention. Although the results do imply that the intervention was effective, more empirical research needs to be conducted into teaching grammar in context, and also into the strategy of creative imitation as one approach that falls within the territory of teaching grammar in context. Certainly, this research project adds validity to claims of this strategy’s efficacy in maturing the grammatical proficiency of pupils’ writing, and adds to a growing body of empirical evidence that supports scholars’ advocacy of contextualised approaches.

If the research project were to be repeated, inclusion of lower-ability sets within the controlled trial would provide a greater understanding of how effective the strategy of creative imitation can be across a wider range of pupils. Other aspects of the controlled trial could also be improved, such as ensuring that the style of the baseline and post-intervention test are more concordant. External marking of the tests would also add greater reliability to results by eliminating the possibility of researcher bias.

As for my own teaching practice, what I have learnt about a contextualised approach to teaching grammar has equipped me with an effective strategy with the power to engage my pupils and develop their writing skills. The collaboration with other professionals has helped me to recognise the strategy’s potential to be adapted and differentiated to meet the needs of a range of pupils, perhaps within a myriad of school contexts. The research that I have carried out has also caught the attention of my head of department who is seeking to incorporate opportunities for creative imitation within future schemes of work, utilising it as an essential strategy in developing pupils’ imaginative writing skills. In Bowermount School, I and now others, are recognising how the strategy of creative imitation can be effective and

instrumental as part of our efforts to address the issue of a year group that struggles with literacy.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

A report from a member of the English department for the school's SLT, documenting the issue of year 7's overall reading age. The names of groups have been redacted to protect anonymity.

Data Summary

Year 7 - September 2017

Overall 68% of Year 7 have reading age that is below the age of 11

Whilst 42% of Year 7 have a NCL Reading score between 2 – 3

Group	Reading Age Below age 11		NCL Reading 2 – 3	
██████████	10/30	33%	3/30	10%
██████████	12/26	46%	6/26	23%
██████████	22/29	76%	13/29	45%
██████████	26/30	87%	17/30	57%
██████████	17/19	89%	12/19	63%
██████████	13/ 14	93%	12/14	86%

Staggeringly over two-thirds of Year 7 have a reading age below 11! Even in the top group a third have a reading age below 11 whilst in the second group the figure is almost 50%!

The implications of this are immense.

Appendix 2

The mark scheme used for assessing the baseline and post-intervention tests.

0	No Writing/illegible Writing that is limited in quantity (under 50 words) will also be given the score of zero.
1-3 Band 1	Writing is characterised by a lack of grammatical control throughout, at phrase and sentence level, obstructing reader's understanding
4-6 Band 2	Writing is characterised by some limited grammatical control at phrase level but no control at sentence level, providing reader with some limited understanding of meaning
7-9 Band 3	Writing is characterised by sound grammatical control at phrase level but no control at sentence level, providing readers with some understanding of meaning. The writing may communicate a lack of understanding of when it is appropriate to end and begin sentences.
10-12 Band 4	Writing is characterised by having sound grammatical control at phrase and sentence level, providing reader with understanding of meaning. But constructions are basic (simple and compound) and may be repetitive. Grammatical errors may still be common.
13-15 Band 5	Writing is characterised by having developed grammatical control at phrase and sentence level. Constructions are varied and occasionally demonstrate use of complex sentence constructions. Sentence construction may be used for effect. Grammatical errors are infrequent.
16-18 Band 6	Writing is characterised by having developed and masterful control at phrase and sentence level. Constructions are varied and demonstrate confident use of complex sentence constructions. Sentence construction is confidently used for effect. Grammatical errors are rare.

Appendix 3

An example of the consent form for teachers involved in the project:

Declaration of Consent

RESEARCH PROJECT TITLE:

How Does Playing with Grammar Impact on Pupils' Writing? – A Mixed Methods Research Project into the Efficacy of Contextualised Grammar Tasks

RESEARCHER:

Laurie Ashwell

I agree to the following:

- I understand that my participation in the research project will be recorded (audio only) and I consent to use of this material as part of the project.
- I understand that my participation will be anonymised in the project's final report.
- I understand that if I decide at any time that I no longer wish to take part in this project, I can notify the researcher and withdraw immediately.
- I understand that withdrawing my participation is only possible before September 15th 2018 when the final report will be submitted.

PRINT NAME: _____

SIGNATURE: _____

DATE: _____

Appendix 4

The effect size was calculated by using the following formula taken from Cohen, L. Manion. L. and Morrison, K. (2007) *Research Methods in Education* (London: Routledge.), page 521.

$$\text{Effect Size} = \frac{(\text{mean of experimental group} - \text{mean of control group})}{\text{pooled standard deviation}}$$

Appendix 5

The following questions were used for the focus group interviews:

1. *What do you think is wrong with your sentences from the first test?*
2. *What do you think is better about your sentences in the second test?*
3. *What's your reaction to the difference between the sentences you wrote in the first test and the sentences you wrote in the second test?*
4. *Do you think you did anything in lessons that helped you write with more complex sentence constructions and more accurate grammar?*
5. *What did you think about the starter activities we did? (There are 3 examples are on the third sheet I've given you to help you remember.)*
6. *How do you think these starters might have helped you produce better writing in the second assessment?*
7. *How enjoyable would you say these starter activities were for you and the rest of the class?*
8. *Is there a way in which you think these starter activities could be improved?*

Appendix 6

The following four documents were provided for each pupil of the focus group to aid as stimulated recall.

LEO

Writing Assessment 1: (Before Christmas)

You had to write a diary entry with the voice of a lower class woman from the 19th century. Here are 3 sentences that you wrote.

- *So I let them play for an hour with their friends they looked like tramps and they were thirteen.*
- *It's hard to walk here because it is too crowded but the kids have found jobs one is a cress seller and the other I'm not allowed to say but it starts with 'P'.*
- *The children went to Sunday school they said they learned how to count up to twenty but they had been hurt by their teacher.*

Writing Assessment 2: (Before Easter)

You had to write a descriptive piece with the title, 'The Fence'. Here are 3 sentences that you wrote:

- *He was a boy that liked to learn in primary school but since he had gone to a bigger school things started to get different.*
- *He was in the lowest set and never got to work as he was always late to school and when he would arrive he had bloody cuts and bruises and when he finished school he was worse with a black eye or even a broken bone.*
- *I had to go and ask him what was happening to him but when I encountered him he had his head facing to the ground and only nodded.*

Please Note: I have corrected spellings but the grammar and words are yours.

JEAN

Writing Assessment 1: (Before Christmas)

You had to write a diary entry with the voice of a lower class woman from the 19th century. Here are 3 sentences that you wrote:

- *I bet you can't guess what happened next, well I'll tell you, on the way to the shop barging through with my multiple kids there was crowds of millions down are crammed full all fighting over an expensive watch a rich man had dropped passing by.*
- *After we got past the heap of bustling people we finally arrived at our destination, just for the day to more worse.*
- *Seconds later, that joy faded, I had a letter and a lock and the letter said I was evicted and to gather all mine and my family's belongings I was shocked.*

Writing Assessment 2: (Before Easter)

You had to write a descriptive piece with the title, 'The Fence'. Here are 3 sentences that you wrote:

- *Hitler had removed all the Jews from their homes and put them all in a camp where they couldn't escape.*
- *Scared by what was going to happen to them many of them tried to escape over the skyscraper fences wrapped with barbed wire.*
- *These camps were very well hidden in the woods without any German village close by so no one could see the gassed out bodies and the screaming of the Jews laying down in their muddy little wooden huts.*

Please Note: I have corrected spellings but the grammar and words are yours.

SANDRA

Writing Assessment 1: (Before Christmas)

You had to write a diary entry with the voice of a lower class woman from the 19th century. Here are 3 sentences that you wrote:

- *After that I had to knock upstairs to ask if I can see if my clothes are dry.*
- *No they wasn't great I had to wait longer even though I had to do other things, it means I have to wait to do my second load.*
- *He started choking on one so I had to do a couple of back blows unfortunately he died.*

Writing Assessment 2: (Before Easter)

You had to write a descriptive piece with the title, 'The Fence'. Here are 3 sentences that you wrote:

- *It was half term for his school so his mom and dad said they were going to stay at a cabin for a few days.*
- *When they got there it was quite dark so they had a snack and went to bed at 00:23.*
- *Standing tall and sharp in front of Freddie was a fence with barbed wire around it.*

Please Note: I have corrected spellings but the grammar and words are yours.

CHRIS

Writing Assessment 1: (Before Christmas)

You had to write a diary entry with the voice of a lower class woman from the 19th century. Here are 3 sentences that you wrote:

- *In the workhouse it is horrible we have to share beds and work all day.*
- *My job is cleaning I am the oldest so they recommended me to clean the warehouses and the streets, however I absolutely hate my job.*
- *Basically what I do I have to get a cloth from the warehouse and I scrub all the windows and ceiling and it is so boring.*

Writing Assessment 2: (Before Easter)

You had to write a descriptive piece with the title, 'The Fence'. Here are 3 sentences that you wrote:

- *On a scary Sunday afternoon there were these two boys called Charlie and Callum and Charlie and Callum were best mates.*
- *The fence had barbed wire along the top to make sure no one jumped over it.*
- *So Callum followed Charlie and he was amazed when he saw the fence.*

Please Note: I have corrected spellings but the grammar and words are yours.

Appendix 7

This is a copy of the document with three examples of the intervention tasks that was provided for pupils during the focus group interviews in order to aid discussion.

Title: Predictions

Can you complete numbers 2 and 3 with the same sentence style as number 1? Keep **the red** parts; **change** the black parts, **using your own ideas**.

- 1] **One** afternoon, **when Bruno** came home from school, **he was surprised to find Maria** standing in his bedroom, **pulling** all his belongings out of the wardrobe.
- 2] **One** stormy night, **when Bruno ...**, **he was surprised to find Maria -ing ...**, **holding** a gun tightly in her fist.
- 3] **One ...**, **when Bruno ...**, **he was surprised to find Maria -ing ...**, **-ing...**

Title: Pavel and Kotler - Analysis

Use the same sentence structure, creating your own original sentences.

'I expect you're unhappy about this too,' said Bruno, and Maria turned to look at him with an expression that suggested she didn't understand what he meant.

1] *'I expect you're worried about _____,' said John, and Lisa groaned with an expression that implied she _____*

2] *'I expect you're ...,' said John, and Lisa ... with an expression that ...*

Title: Grandmother's Letter

When she turned back around **she** saw an empty chair **which** rocked to and fro.

1] **When she** opened her _____ **she** caught sight of _____ **which** _____.

Imitate the sentence structure to describe someone witnessing [1] a shark attack or [2] Santa riding on his sleigh. If you have time, do both!

2] **When he/she... he/she... which...**

Appendix 8

The following questions were used for the interview with Mrs Swade:

1] Which of the starter activities so far do you think have worked best and why?

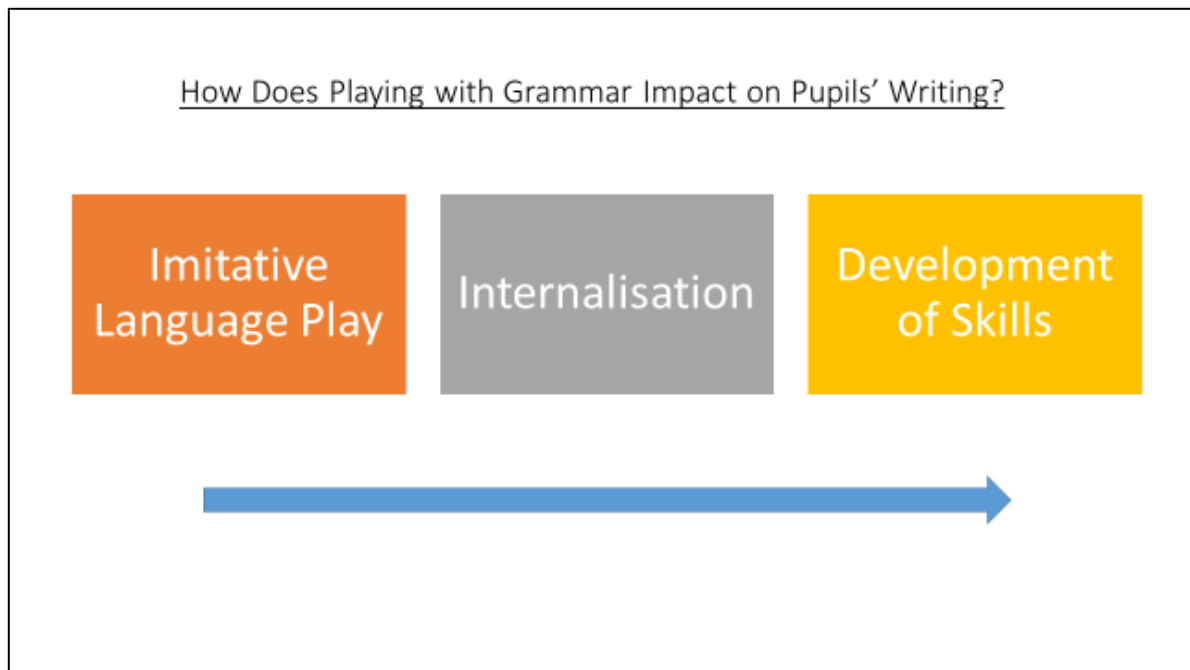
2] Which of the starter activities so far do you think haven't worked so well and why?

3] How might these starters be improved?

4] How do you feel about the way pupils are responding to these tasks?

Appendix 9

The following PowerPoint slides were used for the presentation of headline data to the English department before the unstructured interview.



Focus:

- 1] How did the intervention impact on **pupils' sentence construction**?
- 2] How did the intervention impact on **the accuracy of pupils' grammar**?

Title: Predictions

Can you complete numbers 2 and 3 with the same sentence style as number 1? Keep **the red** parts; **change** the black parts, **using your own ideas**.

1] **One** afternoon, **when Bruno** came home from school, **he was surprised to find Maria** standing in his bedroom, **pulling** all his belongings out of the wardrobe.

2] **One** stormy night, **when Bruno ...**, **he was surprised to find Maria -ing ...**, holding a gun tightly in her fist.

3] **One ...**, **when Bruno ...**, **he was surprised to find Maria -ing ...**, **-ing...**

Title: Pavel and Kotler - Analysis

Use the same sentence structure, creating your own original sentences.

'I expect you're unhappy about this too,' said Bruno, and Maria turned to look at him with an expression that suggested she didn't understand what he meant.

1] *'I expect you're worried about _____,' said John, and Lisa groaned with an expression that implied she _____*

2] *'I expect you're ...,' said John, and Lisa ... with an expression that ...*

Title: Grandmother's Letter

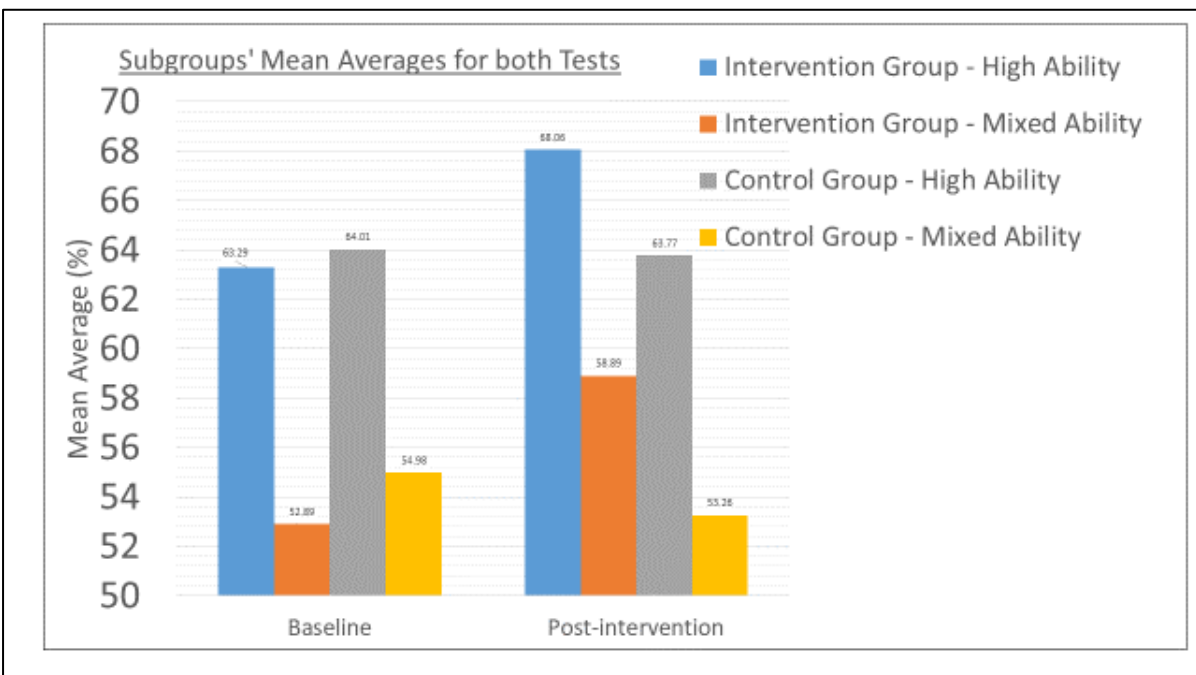
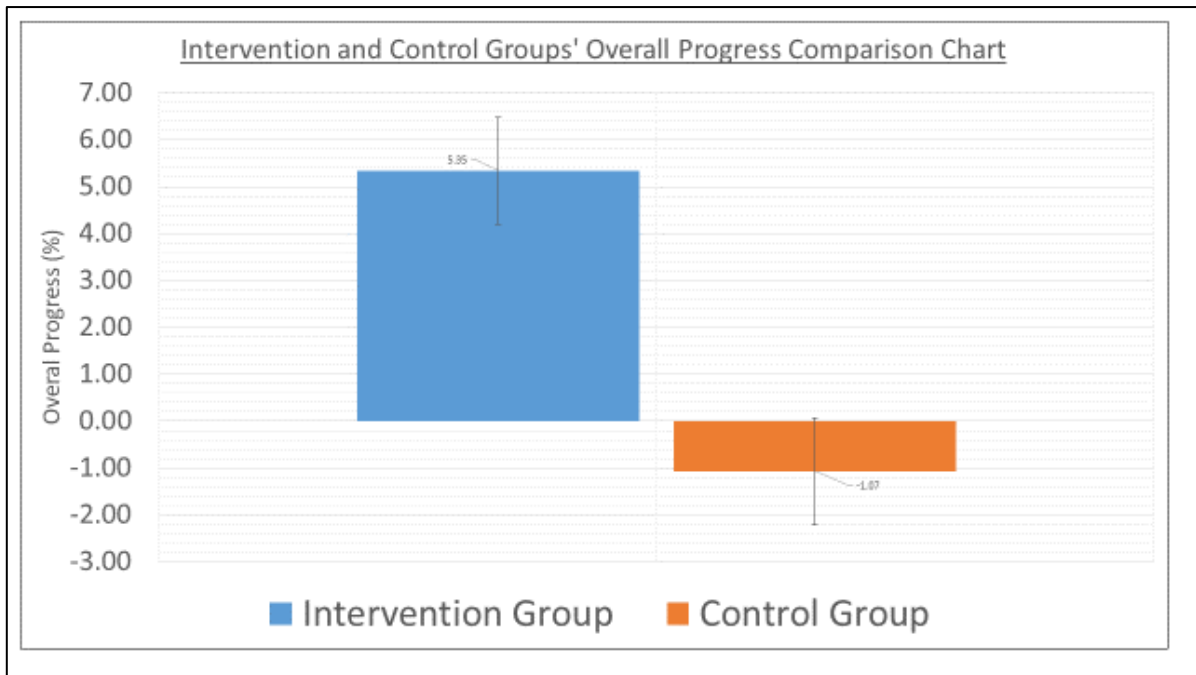
When she turned back around **she** saw an empty chair **which** rocked to and fro.

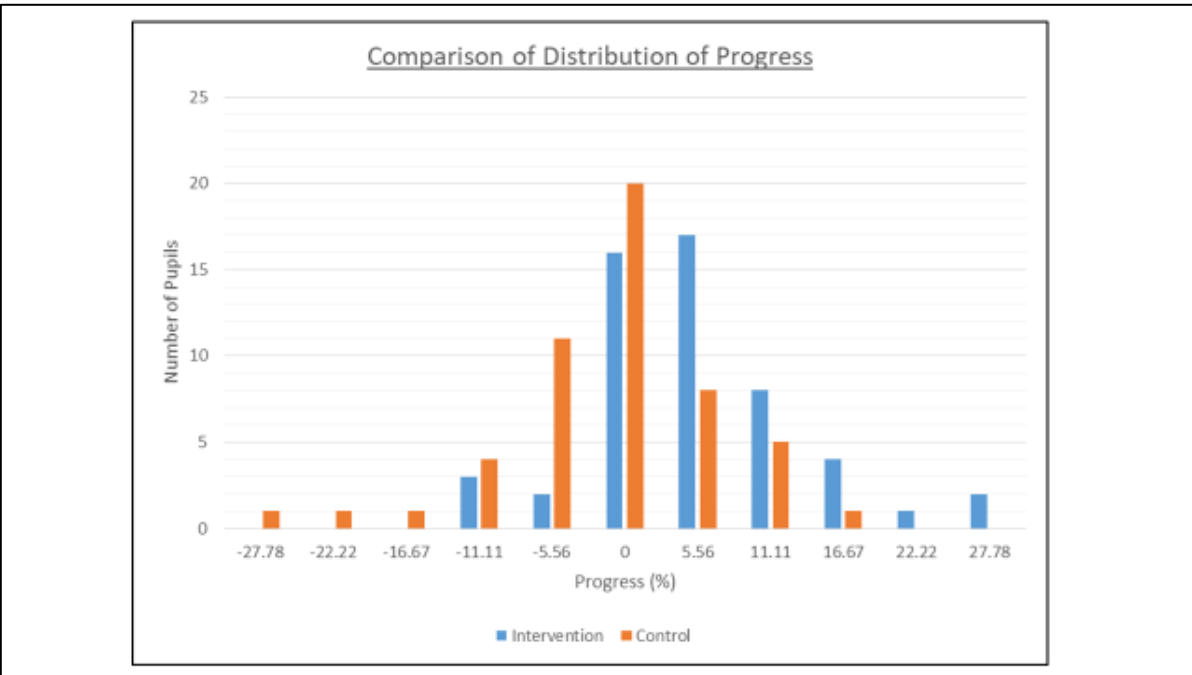
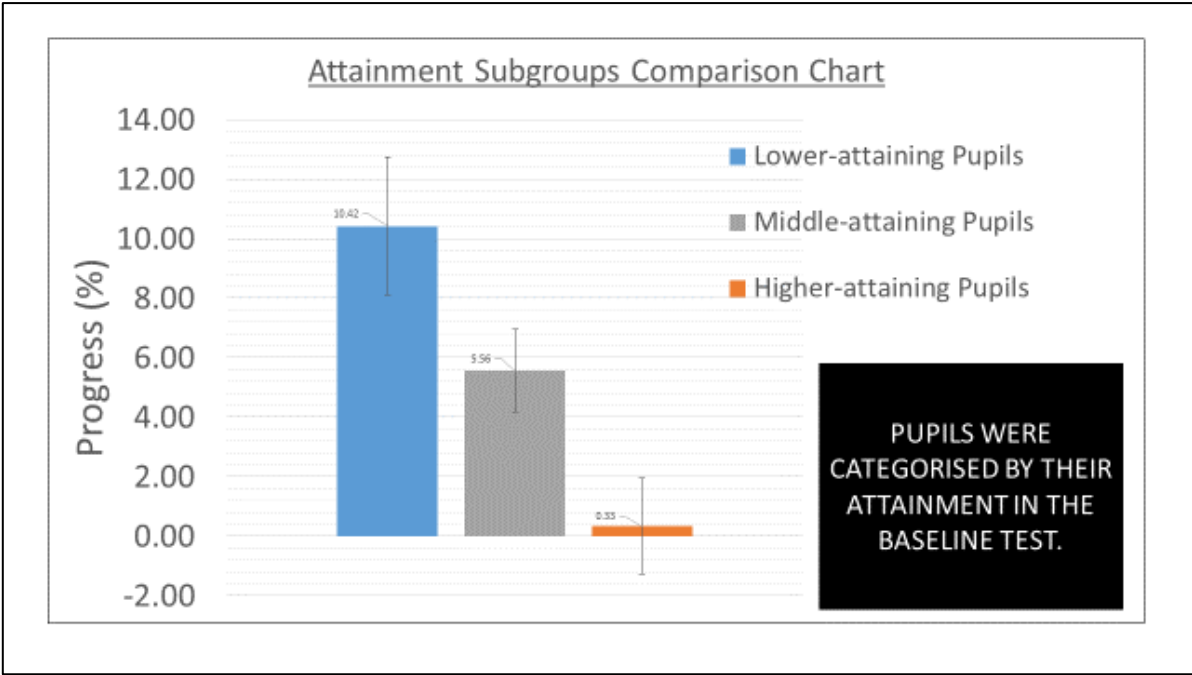
1 **When she** opened her ____ **she** caught sight of ____ **which** ____.

Imitate the sentence structure to describe someone witnessing [1] a shark attack or [2] Santa riding on his sleigh. If you have time, do both!

2 ***When he/she... he/she... which...***

Statistical Results from the
Controlled Trial





Example of where the intervention appears to have had an impact:

One Student from the Mixed-ability Group:

BASELINE

- *After that I had to knock upstairs to ask if I can see if my clothes are dry.*
- *No they wasn't great I had to wait longer even though I had to do other things, it means I have to wait to do my second load.*
- *He started choking on one so I had to do a couple of back blows unfortunately he died.*

POST-INTERVENTION

- *It was half term for his school so his mom and dad said they were going to stay at a cabin for a few days.*
- *When they got there it was quite dark so they had a snack and went to bed at 00:23.*
- *Standing tall and sharp in front of Freddie was a fence with barbed wire around it.*