

Creating a Language Rich Classroom

Background – my need to change

A change of school at the beginning of this year necessitated a change in my teaching style: I was back in a state school, back in front of students and back with a Year 9 English class for the first time in four years. It was a new beginning, an opportunity to regenerate. However, I did not want to abandon some useful practices and pedagogical approaches from my previous school, in particular, the focus on self-directed learning and the integration of e-Learning into my teaching and learning programme.

My school is a rural one with a roll of around 550 students and draws from a range of contributing country schools. The English department is well-organised and well-run with an enthusiastic group of teachers who are very creative in their approaches.

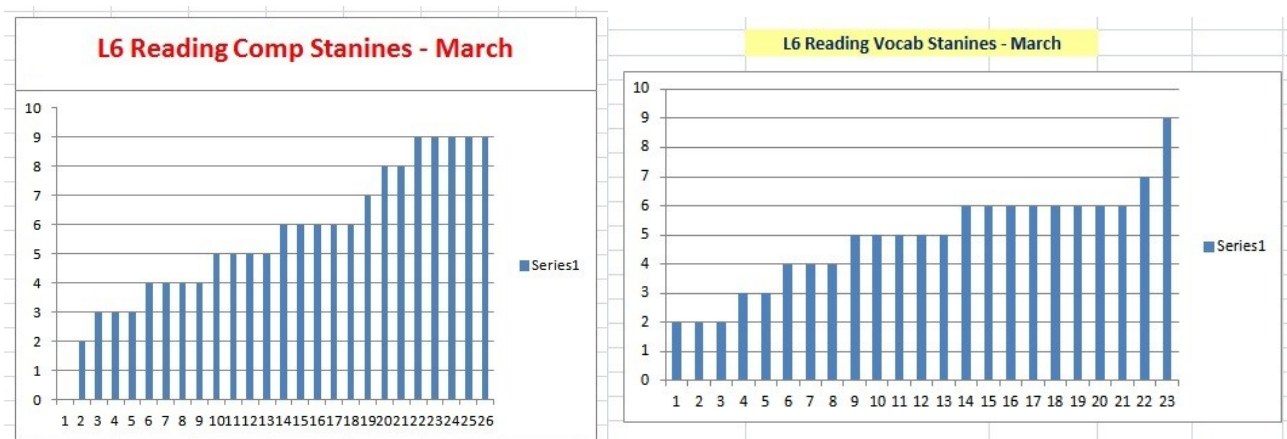
Rationale

Picking up on what Mindlab's Francis Valintine shared at an Education for Export conference in 2015: "Innovate with pedagogy; accelerate with technology" I wanted to explore what that might mean and how it might play out in the more traditional classroom of a device-friendly state school. Over the first few weeks the aims for my Teaching as Inquiry research settled into: integrate eLearning into a device-friendly school, create a language rich environment and assess the impact thereof.

One potential obstacle to this plan was only two students in this bright-eyed and bushy-tailed bunch of Year 9s had their own devices. Fortunately I had them on a Tuesday last period and the computer room was free, so I booked that out for the year. Happily we were also able to access the library for the first half of the period so that they could acquire books and then the students could have a sustained but manageable 20-25 minutes of e-Learning work on the computers.

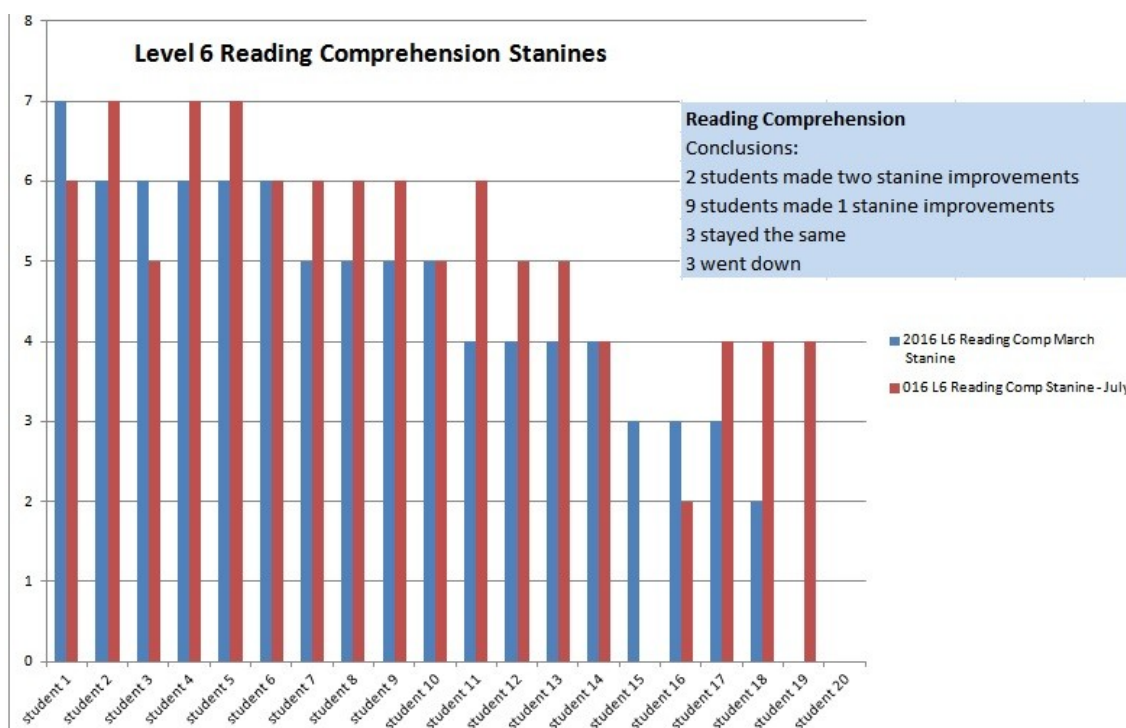
The Results

In terms of measuring progress, I settled on using the Year 9 PAT Reading Comprehension and Reading Vocabulary tests. My new school no longer used these assessments so borrowing these tests, I established some baseline data for most of the students in early March and then retested the whole class in the last week of Term 2. The trail thus lasted approximately five months. As you can see from the initial March results, there was quite a spread of results and ability levels. There are clearly some very good readers in the class, but this does not translate quite as well across to the Reading Vocabulary scores.

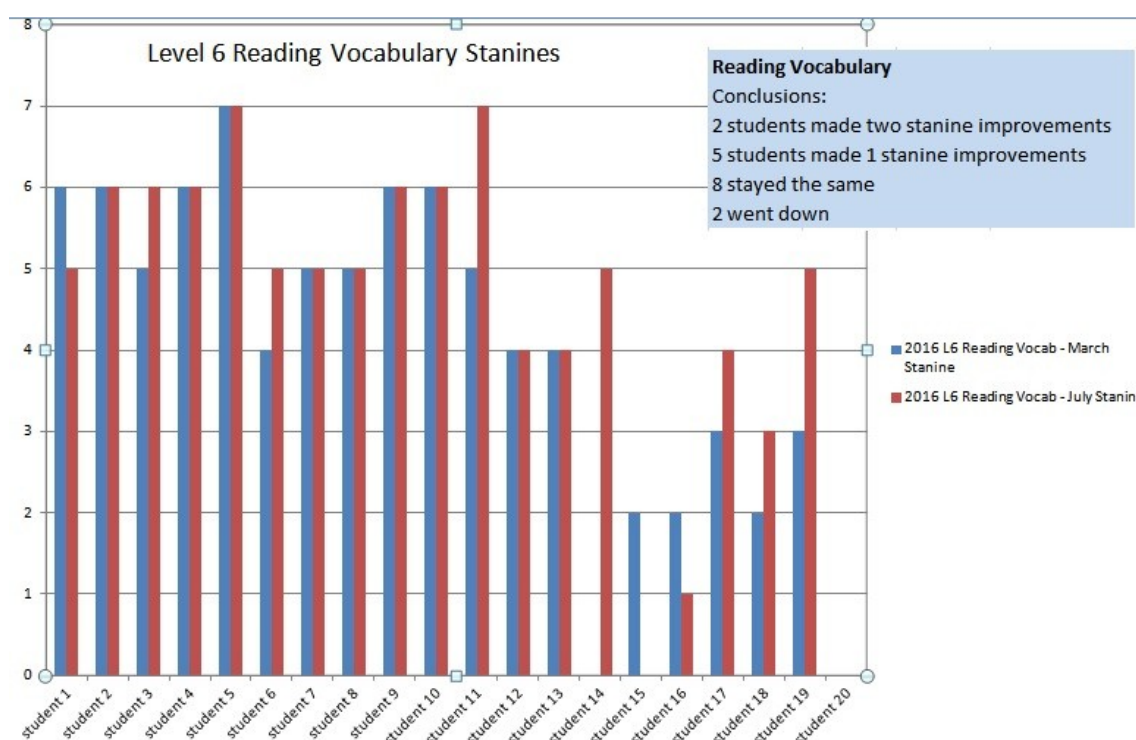


For the July retest, I just used the same test papers, but made the mistake of giving the top few students the Year 10 test, and so their results were invalidated. For the remaining 19-20 students (some of whom only completed one of the tests), there were some interesting results. In Reading

Comprehension, as you can read on the chart below, 17% of the students stayed the same, 64% improved.



Whereas in the Reading Vocabulary tests, improvements were less dramatic: with almost 50% of the students staying at the same level and 40% improving.



The Enrichment Programme

The English Department uses the previous school's records of the incoming students and e-asTTle assessments, so there was some data to show those students who needed help and those that needed extension work or were in the Gifted and Talented category. So what did we do as a class?

a. Reading. The department runs a Buddy Reading programme for less able or reluctant readers

where they are paired up with senior students each week. Secondly, regular reading in both English classes and during the longer afternoon form time is actively encouraged. In addition, each term there is a class competition for recording the number of books read on the library Reading Wall each term. The title, author and students' names are written on strips of paper and affixed to each junior class's reading chart. Six word bookmark summaries advertising each book are also written by the students and placed within the book covers. My class, of course, were close in Term 1 and nailed it in Term 2, reading 437 books across the two terms and averaging around 15 books per student.

b. Vocabulary enrichment. As part of my regeneration process, and partly due to approaching dotage, I decided to play more games than I had ever done before.

- I intentionally discussed words, their meanings and origins as they arose in class work and discussions about the book we were reading.
- Dingbats. Most periods I would draw some on the whiteboard and get the students to work out the idiomatic expression they represented. Students were invited to come up with their own.
- Letter squares. Senior teachers were regularly giving their senior students 5 minutes to come up with as many words as they could from the 9 letters in the square, so we started doing that as well.
- Word snake. The students suggested this game so in teams, each student would rush to the whiteboard and add a word that began with the last letter of the previous student's word (key – yacht – toe etc) It was chaotic but great for filling in the last 3-5 minutes of a period.
- Scrabble
- Class dictionary. As part of our study of Roald Dahl's *Boy – Tales of Childhood* and their writing of their autobiography, we discussed personality types and traits, listed them, created a Class Dictionary of these words with definitions and examples on a Google spreadsheet, and had regular spelling tests of these words and others we discussed in class. Of particular significance was a discussion of the links between perfectionism and procrastination, and the realisation that the fear of failing to get it perfect was often behind this problem.

c. e-Learning. The self-marking program, Livewire Learning, was a core component of the language enrichment programme. The Year 11 program had produced significant gains for the Level 1 and 2 Unfamiliar Text standards at St. Catherine's College in Wellington, so I was keen to assess its impact at Year 9. We started with a week long competition in early March to see how many questions students could answer from the Vocabulary Development folder with its modules on homophones, prefixes and suffixes. Prizes and certificates were awarded at the end of this. Subsequently, students were assigned further class-related work on punctuation revision, reading comprehension passages, poetic devices and latterly word classes. Sometimes a flipped classroom approach was undertaken so that students could explore learning for themselves; at other times we worked through sections of the Arranging Words workbook and reinforced the learning with the online exercises. In all over 12,000 questions were answered (QAC) correctly which meant that students averaged 429 QAC each, and the highest scoring student answered 1526 questions correctly.

d. Newsela. A latecomer to the programme was an interactive non fiction reading program called Newsela. Current news items are added regularly but using the Lexile Framework as a measure of comprehension difficulty, articles were modified so that there were four to five versions of the text (which students could self-select) all pitched at a range of difficulty levels. Students were asked 4 comprehension questions and scored accordingly. I was delighted to rediscover this system, because I had introduced Scholastic's version of this reading and comprehension measurement system at

Southland Boys' High School in 2000 as an integral part of our Whole School Approach to Reading. It produced impressive improvements in attitudes to reading and actual results. My research at the time had indicated that Year 9 students should be reading at around 900 Lexiles, Year 10 s at 1000+ Lexiles and so on.

My Year 9 students enjoyed the variety of texts and while, at times, they chose levels that were too difficult for them, they gained an idea of their reading comprehension level. The same student (student 11), who gained the two stanine improvement in reading comprehension and reading vocabulary, read and answered 14 passages and quizzes, averaged a score of 75% correct, and had an average Lexile level of 1016.

Responses

Here are some summarised snapshots of student responses to the programme:

Student 21

Reading Comp: March L6 – stanine 9; July L7 – stanine 7

Reading Vocab: March L6 abs; July L7 – stanine 6

Livewire QAC: 1526

Books Read: 34

Spelling: 100%

Newsela Lexile: 1035 (75% average) - 91st percentile

Comments:

Livewire: *Was good for practising things we were learning in class.*

Newsela: *I'm sure it would be great but we didn't do it for very long.*

Library: *It was good to be able to get to the library and take out books. I don't always have time to read after school.*

Spelling: *Was helpful because we didn't do it at my previous school.*

Dingbats: *Cool but couldn't ever figure them out.*

Games: *We should play more.*

Student 11

Reading Comp: March L6 - stanine 4; July L6 - 6

Reading Vocab: March L6 - stanine 5; July L6 - 7

Livewire: QAC: 620

Books Read: 19

Spelling: 86%

Newsela Lexile: 1016 (75% average) - 83rd percentile

Comments:

Livewire: *A great resource tool to help with any areas you need help with.*

Newsela: *Helps with developing your language vocab and makes you think about what you have just read.*

Library: *Not really helping you with anything.*

Spelling: *Good because it helps you with great vocabulary.*

Dingbats: *Fun and makes you want to learn more stuff.*

Games: *More games because hands on, in my opinion, helps you learn.*

Student 18

Reading Comp: March L6 - stanine 2; July L6 - stanine 4

Reading Vocab: March L6 - 2; July L6 – stanine 3

Livewire QAC: 194

Books Read: 5, on Buddy Reading programme

Spelling: 48%

Newsela Lexile: 872 (75% average) – 75th percentile

Comments:

- Livewire: *To help us learn more and to see what we need to work on.*
- Newsela: *Helped me see how good my reading was.*
- Library: *The reading helped, even when I had buddy reading, and now I'm better at reading than I was at the start of the term.*
- Spelling: *Helped me sound out the tricky words.*
- Dingbats: *It didn't really help me because half of the time I didn't get it.*

Conclusions

In terms of my original aims, I was able to successfully integrate two e-Learning programs and create a language-rich classroom. I was very pleased overall with the results and feedback from the students. It is clear that reading mileage and the other parts of the programme had a significant effect on reading comprehension levels, but there is more work to be done to help the students acquire vocabulary and meanings in context. There is the challenge of lifting the mid-band students as well.

On my to-do list for the start of Term 3 were the following:

- conference with each student about their results and create an individualised plan
- facilitate some extra support for the two students whose results decreased
- maintain the programme in Terms 3 and 4
- retest the class at the end of the year

Unfortunately part of this plan did not eventuate due to absence from illness throughout most of Term 3. However, the data did accurately inform me about student achievement in a way that encouraged, challenged and empowered me because it gave me access to data that I would not normally have had. My hope is that it will have the same benefits for the students as well.

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