

A great idea revived!

Mary Mason thought her innovative language project was dead. Here, she describes her amazement and delight when, after publishing the details of the course in this journal, one secondary school decided to test it out on their students – with excellent results.



I've known for many years that this journal is a wonderful vehicle for sharing well-researched and innovative practice among school teachers. However, the truly transformational power of Creative Teaching and Learning magazine was revealed to me only the year before last, when teachers not only read about my work in this journal but immediately timetabled it into Years 7-10 of a secondary school!

'Death of a great idea' was the title of the article I wrote for the March 2012 issue of this journal¹. It described the birth, short life and sudden death of the Wigan Language Project (1983-91). Its demise was shocking, as the project had had the effect of doubling the percentage of pupils at Shevington High School in Wigan gaining five GCSE grades A-C².

The title of the article was the inspiration of the editor, who added: 'Twenty years on from its launch, smothered by the establishment, Mary Mason explains why the Wigan Language Project failed to shake the status quo of English language teaching.'

The course had proved its worth in terms of GCSE results in 1991, and for the

next ten years or so, I gave in-service days up and down the country about the theory and practice of the Wigan Language Project. My lectures and workshops were always well, even enthusiastically, received, and some schools adopted trial schemes and kept in touch with me for a while. However, there were too many other demands on timetabled time for the schemes to be given priority, and, since I heard no more, I take it the enthusiasm fizzled out, as the focus in schools changed from teaching to testing.

The resurrection begins!

My article appeared in March 2012 and, by September of that year, the Wigan Language Project was no longer dead, but very much alive! Geraldine Norman, one of the deputy heads at Matthew Moss High School in Rochdale, read my article and passed it on to Fran Clay, the school's head of learning support. With over half of their students speaking a different language other than English at home, they recognised that this course was exactly what they needed, and, with the support of the head and the English department under Jill Miller, the school enthusiastically embraced the course. Lindsay Sladen was given the overall responsibility for implementing it.

I had made my course (now called Breakthrough to Learning) freely available on the internet at www.breakthrough-to-learning.co.uk. The school downloaded it, printed it and timetabled it into every class in Years 7-10, starting in September 2012. By August 2013, every pupil in the school had completed either the first book of the three year course or the whole of the fast-track version.

The fact that the head and staff of MMHS recognised at once that BtL (as it is known at the school) met the language needs of secondary school pupils and, even more unusually, valued its efficacy as measured by objective testing, points to the fact that this is no ordinary school³.

I could not believe at first that my decision to make my course freely available on the internet in 2011 had borne fruit so quickly and completely! Teachers from the school contacted me in



April 2012 and sent a small delegation to visit me in May. I paid a two-day visit to the school in October and have since been in constant communication with the teachers responsible for implementing the project.

Because of my 11 years as a teacher of English, plus 14 years in teacher training, I know a lot about schools. MMHS is unlike any comprehensive school I have ever been to.

Where to begin? First, it is uncannily quiet for a school full of teenagers. At lunchtime, there is none of the noise of released energy roaring from the playground. As we moved about the school between lessons, staff and students walked quietly and without jostling or hurrying, chatting quietly to one another. For one used to the hurley-burley of secondary schools, it was like having died and gone to heaven!

A place for learning

Geoff Petty has cogently pointed out that, in spite of the scientific advances in psychology, sociology and neuroscience (and I would add, linguistics), most of

what passes for education in our schools and colleges is based on custom and practice – much of which dates from before the invention of printing.⁴

MMHS is different. In accordance with the school's view of itself as a place of learning, the theory and practice of education itself comes under scrutiny. At MMHS, I was told, they do nothing which is not based on sound research. There is an 'Education Library' containing the books on educational theory and practice which the school bases its philosophy on. The teachers at the school read these books and debate their implications for practice.

MMHS has not only considered the intellectual development of its learners – it recognises that learning can only take place in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere, free from fear. New teachers to the school are given a booklet explaining the ethos of MMHS. Here are two quotations from that booklet:

'We are about learning. We are unusual in that... we do know quite a lot about learning as a community. We achieved this by making it the focus of all we do, by consulting with the foremost experts in the subject, by reading and by thinking.'

'Nobody thrives in an atmosphere of fear and if individuals live in fear, a community is doomed to fail. We do not want you to fear retribution for failure. We want you to learn from failure – or experience, as you may wish to call it!' I borrowed books from the staff library and began to understand the theoretical foundations for the impressive practice I had witnessed.⁵

I observed several Breakthrough to Learning lessons and rejoiced to see how the pupils, in accordance with the ethos of the school as a place for learning, were working through the materials in pairs or small groups with the teacher as facilitator. The lesson in Year 7 was structured by the teacher in terms of when the learners moved on to the next exercise, but by Year 11, the learners were used to working through the materials at their own pace. It was clear, from chatting to them, that they felt responsible for their own learning.

What is BtL?

The full course is aimed at Years 7-9 and demands an hour a week for three years. It is self-access and pupils are encouraged to work through the course in pairs or small groups. The teachers' role is that of facilitator. The course is comprised of:

- **Book 1:** Language Awareness – examines the grammar of the clause (nouns, verbs, adjectives etc.), the Latin and Greek roots of many academic words, interesting facts about language (e.g. languages of the world, different writing systems, dialect ...)

Available to download from the TeachingTimes website here: library.teachingtimes.com/articles/breakthroughtolearningbookone

- **Book 2:** Reading for Learning – the tasks set in this book are reading tasks, but the real content of the book is based on linguistic analysis, showing the student how abstract words (the key to academic thought) are made out of concrete words by nominalisation and/or metaphor.

library.teachingtimes.com/articles/breakthroughtolearningbooktwo

- **Book 3:** Writing for Learning – the tasks in this book are writing tasks, but the substantive content of the book is linguistic, featuring the basic discourse structures of academic texts, namely, problem/solution, general/particular, compare/contrast, time and space ordering.

library.teachingtimes.com/articles/breakthroughtolearningbookthree

Students can also complete the 'fast-track' programme, a condensed one-year course designed for older (16+) students, cutting out most of Book 1.

library.teachingtimes.com/articles/btl-fast-track-booklet

Breakthrough to Learning at MMHS

Breakthrough to Learning fits into MMHS without friction. This is because the school has developed its ethos as the community centre for learning over a period of 20 odd years.

In the academic year of 2012/2013, Years 7-9 completed Book 1 of the course and Year 10 completed the fast-track course. An experimental group in Year 11 also completed the fast-track course, while another group – our control group – completed the normal English program for Year 11.

MMHS made the course their own – they appointed two full-time research assistants, who spent a lot of time adding fun elements such as games, cartoons and jokes to the sober, workmanlike books available for download from my website. These have been very much appreciated by the learners!

It is a big job just to churn out sufficient copies for the whole school and the BtL team chose to do it in modules of eight chapters. This has the advantage of making the learners feel a sense of achievement as they finish a manageable section of the course. The learners' answers are written in the books, so the books belong to the pupils.



What did staff and students think?

It is typical of the academic approach of MMHS to innovation that, from the beginning, they monitored the reactions of both pupils and staff to BtL. Here are the general impressions gleaned from a sample survey of 36 students in Years 7-9:

- Many pupils found it fun, could see the link with other subjects in school and liked the games/puzzles element.
- Some thought it could be a little more interactive and weren't that keen on the amount of reading and writing involved.
- Learners most enjoyed the partnered element of BtL.
- Most thought it would help improve English language skills and their grammar and spelling.
- When asking what improvements could be made, learners suggested more physical/practical tasks, more puzzles and games, more reflection at key moments in the lesson, the use of 'BtL Experts' to help those struggling and more time for each chapter.
- Some of their comments include:
 - 'We are learning things we haven't heard of before.'
 - 'The tasks get your brain going!'
 - 'Sometimes it's frustrating because it's hard.'
 - 'It makes you think, as you have to understand the learning which expands your knowledge.'
 - 'I'm not sure how relevant it is.'

The school kept up a journal/diary as suggested and these are some of the reflections made throughout the year by staff:

- 'Learners seem to love the interactive game and liked doing it as a whole class with one leader, rather than in their pairs.'
- 'We let the learners use their mobile devices for working on BtL and this was a real success, as they found it interesting and got much further with it. Would consider doing this again.'
- 'Concern: It appears one or two students have misinterpreted the notion of 'working in pairs' and are using it as an opportunity to simply copy the ideas of their partner. Had an extensive discussion with group about what pair work should look like.'
- 'Students enjoy additional videos and say they are fun and help them to learn.'
- 'They are enjoying their new booklets so far, and think they get more appealing and interesting as they go along.'

Testing the effectiveness of BtL

Nothing shows more clearly the commitment to scholarship of the teachers at MMHS than the fact that they set up a controlled experiment to test the effectiveness of the BtL program in its first year in the school.

All Year 11 pupils take GCSE English Literature and two parallel un-streamed Year 11 classes were chosen for this purpose. The experimental group was timetabled to work through the whole of the BtL fast-track course in a double period every week. The control group followed the normal English program for Year 11.

It is again typical of this school as a centre of learning that it sought expert help from outside. It was exceptionally fortunate in finding an applied linguist to analyse the results of the experiment. Jessica Coupe, a graduate in English and Psychology, having spent three years teaching English as a Foreign Language in Japan, had enrolled at the University of Liverpool in 2012 for a one-year course leading to an MA in Applied Linguistics. Part of this course was a 15,000 word dissertation and Coupe decided to do an original and genuine piece of research by analysing the results of the experiment with the Year 11 students at MMHS. This was a more technical linguistic analysis than anyone in the school could perform.

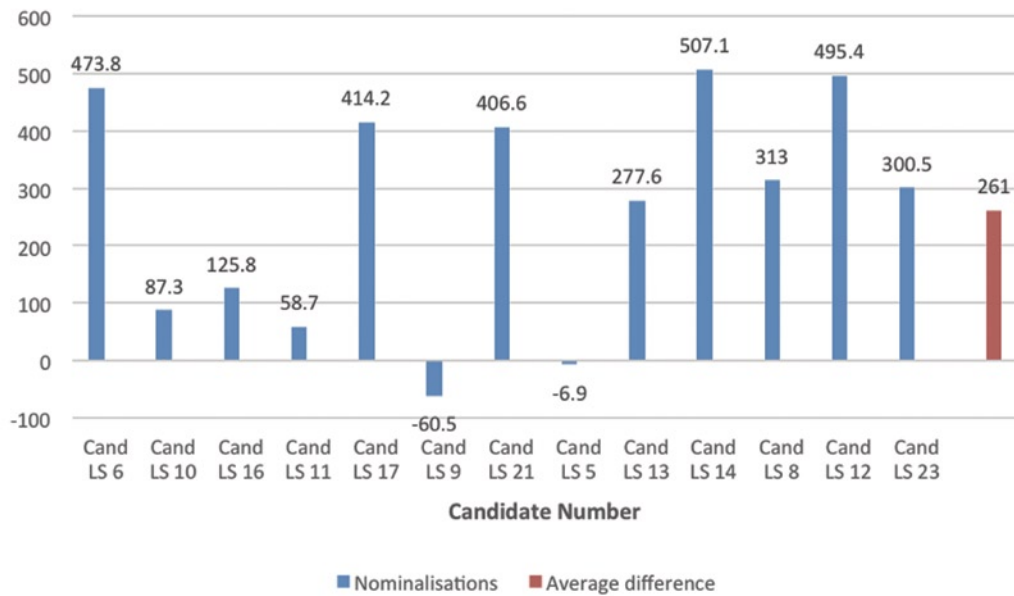
Coupe first checked that the two groups were matched in terms of age, gender and verbal reasoning scores. The groups were small (13 in the experimental group and 7 in the control group), being greatly reduced by such factors as students being absent from one of the tests. She analysed many linguistic features of the students' academic writing, using texts answering GCSE exam questions in both science and English literature. The literature questions were the most productive, as they gave the students the opportunity to write continuous original prose, whereas the science questions were restricted by the language of the questions themselves. The essays on English literature were written in September 2012 (before the experimental group studied BtL) and in June 2013 (after BtL).

Coupe's research was different in kind from the statistics we had used to validate the course in Wigan. We had used the percentage increase in GCSE results in successive years to show the overall effectiveness of the course. Jessica's understanding of the language system enabled her to track how some of the specific linguistic features taught in BtL were actually absorbed by the experimental group and entered into their own academic writing.

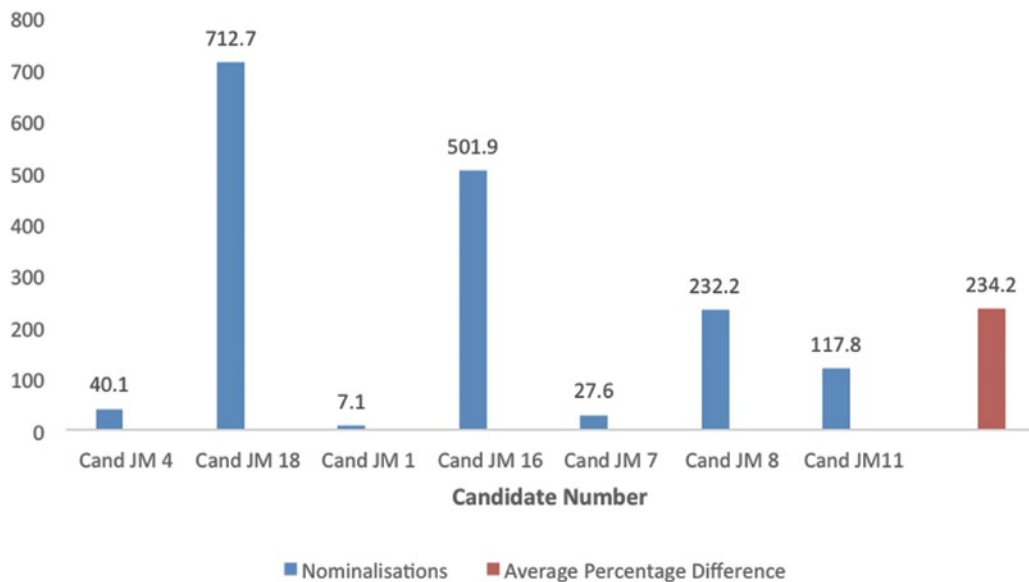
Mastering abstract language

Coupe decided to limit herself to the crucial factor in Book 2 of the course, namely the training in the use of the abstract language which provides the framework of ideas of every academic subject. The most important linguistic mechanism which turns concrete words into abstract words is nominalisation (turning verbs and adjectives into nouns).

The results for the occurrence of nominalisations in the two groups can be seen in Graphs 1 and 2.



Graph 1: The percentage difference in the frequency of nominalisations in the experimental group from the pre-BtL test to the post-BtL test and the overall average percentage difference.



Graph 2: The percentage difference in the frequency of nominalisations in the control group from the pre-BtL test to the post-BtL test, plus the average percentage difference overall.

It can be seen that there is a great deal of individual variation in the use of nominalisation within both groups. Both groups show an increase in the use of this crucial feature over the period of the experiment. However, there is a more consistent increase in the experimental group, indicating that BtL speeds up the process of mastering abstract language.

A similar difference between the experimental and control groups was found in the increased use of the passive voice.

The conclusion that can legitimately be drawn from the average percentage difference between the two groups is that BtL does indeed facilitate the absorption of the important linguistic features of academic language.

Coupe herself adds in her conclusion: 'This indicates that BtL has taught academic skills, not in a decontextualised and ineffective way (a criticism of traditional grammar programs), but... in a way which has familiarised the students with abstract concepts. Evidently, these abstract concepts have been absorbed by the students.'

Jessica Coupe was awarded her M.A. in Applied Linguistics by the University of Liverpool, with a distinction for her dissertation.

Additional evidence of success

The school further tested the efficacy of the BtL programme in the Year 11 experiment by comparing the actual marks gained in the GCSE English Literature exam in 2013 with their predicted grades. The experimental group (23 pupils overall) had done the fast-track BtL course, while the control group (24 pupils) had followed the traditional programme.

The predicted grades of both groups were compared with their actual grades. In both classes, there was an improvement in the number of pupils gaining grades C and above. However, this improvement was only modest in the traditional class (from 62.5 per cent to 75 per cent) and was not statistically significant. In the BtL class however, the improvement in the number of pupils



gaining grades C and above was dramatic (from 48 per cent to 87 per cent). This was statistically significant at the 0.5 per cent level.

It is interesting that, in a year when the government had moved the goal posts in order to depress the results and most English departments were licking their wounds over their GCSE results, the English department at MMHS were very happy with the increase in achievement. This has reinforced their commitment to BtL.

Further developments

The BtL team was strengthened this year by the addition of the school's head of modern languages. Together, the team planned an ambitious programme to draw all the subject teachers in the school into Breakthrough to Learning, giving them the opportunity to use its insights in their own teaching.

This scheme opened with an inset day for the whole staff on 6 January 2014, to which I was very happy to be invited. The day began with a plenary session of less than an hour – Mark Moorhouse, formerly deputy head and now head, explained the main idea of the course (abstract language) using a brilliant **video clip** made the previous year. I outlined the success of the Wigan Language Project, Jill Miller described the implementation of the course in the school and Lindsay Sladen shared with her colleagues the brilliant results of Jessica Coupe's research.

The rest of the morning was spent by the staff working in pairs using the online language course, The Language of Ideas (www.languageofideas.co.uk). This was a programme commissioned in 2007 by Birmingham City University (BCU) to rewrite BtL as a short course for older students (16+). It had been extensively used by BCU on some of their own first year courses and also as their prize-winning Widening Participation programme. However, this was the first time it had been used for in-service work with secondary school teachers.

It worked beautifully. The teachers moved to the three computer rooms and completed the first section of the course in less than an hour. It was enjoyable because they were working in pairs with their colleagues, calling on the BtL team and myself for further discussion when required.

After refreshments, they returned to the main hall, where they sat at tables in faculty groups to apply the insights to texts and exam questions in their own subjects. The first section of the Language of Ideas is on the difference between the concrete language of everyday life and the abstract language of ideas that constitutes the framework of all academic subjects. After lunch, the pattern was repeated with the staff working on the next section of the programme.



This article was written with the help of Jessica Coupe; Bob Mason, headteacher of Shevington High School, Wigan, from 1972 to 1991, where Breakthrough to Learning had the effect of doubling the percentage of students gaining five or more grades A-C at GCSE across the curriculum; and Lindsay Sladen, a member of the English department at Matthew Moss High School, Rochdale, and the teacher responsible for the school's implementation of BtL.

The author would also like to thank the other members of the BtL team at MMHS – Fran Clay, Jill Miller and Graham Simms – and the subject teachers working with her on the linguistic analysis of GCSE questions and answers.

References

1. Mason, M. (2012). Death of a great idea. *Creative Teaching and Learning*, 2(4), pp.28-34.
2. Mason, M., Mason B., Quayle, T. (1992). Illuminating English: how explicit language teaching improved public examination results in a comprehensive school. *Educational Studies*, 18(3), pp.341-353. Available online at: www.breakthrough-to-learning.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/Article.pdf [Accessed 05/02/2014].
3. Matthew Moss High School. Why we are different – Our learning agenda. [online] Available at: www.mmhs.co.uk/we-are-different#our-learning-agenda [Accessed 18/02/2014].
4. Petty, G. (2006). Evidence-based teaching. Cheltenham: Nelson Thornes.
5. Berger, Ron (2003). An ethic of excellence: Building a culture of craftsmanship with students. Portsmouth: Heinemann.

It was a challenging day and has been followed by a further whole-staff session spent working through the third section of the programme. The BtL team are collating the staff's ideas and I look forward to seeing what the next stage will bring.

Another very promising development has taken place as a result of questions raised by subject teachers at MMHS. Last year, Jane Miller of the Science Faculty sent me GCSE questions with sample answers – excellent, ordinary and poor – for linguistic analysis. It was clear that the difficulty with the poorer answers lay in a failure to grasp the abstract ideas of science. Moreover, the discourse structures of BtL were very powerful in illuminating the structure of ideas underpinning both questions and answers.

I was also able to clear up a problem in French papers for the MFL department, and discussions have begun with the Head of Humanities, one of MMHS' history teachers, and a physics teacher new to the school. I hope that together we shall be able to throw light, not only on how to answer exam questions, but also on the structure of knowledge.

A promising future

All this is the result of this journal publishing my article two years ago. As a consequence, my course in academic language has been taken up by a comprehensive school, underprivileged in economic terms, but extraordinarily rich in its forward-looking philosophy. The course fits seamlessly into the school, which is training its pupils in how to learn, not the out-of-date knowledge of a past age, but whatever the 21st century has in store for them. I look forward to sharing the results of the work we are doing on the structure of knowledge with readers of this journal in 12 months' time.

Meanwhile we are confident that the GCSE results will steadily improve, as the pupils who have studied Breakthrough to Learning come up to Year 11. Even more important for the future of these young people is that the philosophy of Matthew Moss High School will ensure that both teachers and pupils retain the love of learning for its own sake.

Mary Mason is the author of Breakthrough to Learning. She was Senior Lecturer in English, then Research Fellow, in the Faculty of Education of the University of Central England (now Birmingham City University).

Knowledge trails

- 1) **Death of a great idea** – Mary Mason describes the birth, short life and sudden death of the Wigan Language Project, pre Matthew Moss High School.
<http://library.teachingtimes.com/articles/ctl24deathofagreatidea>
- 2) **Mind your language** – Mary Mason examines the importance of abstract academic language.
http://library.teachingtimes.com/articles/ctl_2_1_mind_your_language