

An action research project on effective strategies used by teaching assistants to improve pupils' sentence structure

Rationale

In 2011, Higgins, Kokotsaki and Coe, on behalf of the Sutton Trust, created 'The Toolkit of Strategies to Improve learning' which provides schools with a meta-analysis and summary of educational research. By comparing the 'effect size' of each approach they have drawn conclusions as to the potential impact of teaching and learning strategies on attainment, their cost, and their applicability. Whilst some studies have shown impact on pupils' perceptions and attitudes, the use of teaching assistants was found to have little or, in some cases, negative impact on pupil attainment and that even in cases where they have a greater impact – those with a specific pedagogical role in intervention associated with training and resources – studies have shown that impact is still consistently less effective than with qualified teachers. The Sutton Trust also reported that low-attaining children seem to do less well with a teaching assistant. However, despite a lack of evidence of impact, OFSTED (20 Sept 2012) found that almost half of the schools they contacted had used the Pupil Premium fund to pay for new or existing teaching assistants. How can schools ensure that the support teaching assistants provide is effective in raising attainment?

This research project aims to identify strategies Teaching assistants can deploy when working with pupils to improve their writing skills. Working with a team of experienced Teaching assistants, I will explore a range of teaching and learning techniques and their effectiveness, with a particular focus on developing sentence structure.

The project is based in a large primary school with almost 300 pupils on roll. The school has a lower than average proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals and the proportion of pupils with special educational needs is lower than average when compared to national statistics. At the last inspection in 2011, OFSTED judged the school to be satisfactory and that pupils make satisfactory progress from KS1 to KS2. Attainment in English and Mathematics at the end of KS2 is in line with national averages. Inspectors identified that pupils' writing skills in particular are not developed effectively enough and pupils do not make good levels of progress across KS2 in writing. The work of teaching assistants and support staff was praised by inspectors when managing pupils' behaviour and relationships with others and that

support for pupils who have medical and/or emotional needs is particularly effective. However, in writing, whilst pupils are praised for their efforts, they are given insufficient guidance about how well they are doing and about how they can take their work to the next level. Sentence structure has been identified by the school as an area of weakness common amongst their lower-attaining pupils so this has provided a curriculum context for the work the TAs will be doing with each child or group of children.

I also hope to explore how effective working relationships between teaching assistants and class teachers can be developed and find out more about the role of the teaching assistant in leading and supporting learning.

The project will combine three main strands;

- subject knowledge – improving TAs' understanding of sentences, grammar and word classes
- pedagogy – developing and evaluating a range of effective teaching and learning strategies
- reflectivity – encouraging reflective working practices amongst TAs.

Building a knowledge base

Reviews and analysis of the effectiveness of teaching assistants have consistently (and frustratingly) found a contradiction in quantitative and qualitative evidence (Farrell, Alborz, Howes & Pearson 2010); (Sutton Trust 2011). Whilst some reviews do recognise that the presence of teaching assistants in a lesson leads to improved teaching and learning (HMI 2002; Woolfson & Truswell 2005) and there seems no doubt that their work is appreciated by classteachers, others have found their presence to have little impact or in some circumstances, a negative impact on the overall impact of the class (Webster, et al 2011).

Perhaps some of the difficulty in finding consistent results and evaluations is the fact that Teaching Assistants have an increasingly diverse and changing role (Wilson and Bedford (2008)). Whilst first employed as an adult to support individual pupils, for example those children with a statement of Special Educational Needs, their role was extended with the introduction of the National Literacy and Numeracy strategy to lead specific interventions and, in later years, following the classroom reforms to teachers' workloads, as a support to the classteacher. HMI (2002) recognized the time demands that occur as their roles shift from classroom administrative support to providing support to learners and where these demands are not well-managed the full benefit of teaching assistants cannot be appreciated. So, it is helpful, when considering the impact of their effectiveness to evaluate their impact against 4 categories;

- to provide administrative support to the classteacher;
- to support the behavioural and emotional needs of particular pupils;
- to lead specific, targeted interventions;
- to support the attainment of a particular class through non-targeted and non-specific interventions

In order to fully understand the potential impact of TAs on attainment, I considered the literature available on each category.

To provide administrative support to the classteacher

Easton and Brzyska (2011) asked teachers what could be done to give them more time for activities necessary for directly raising children's attainment and achievement. The most frequent response was further capacity in the form of skilled staff to undertake bureaucratic tasks or to help teachers in the classroom. Often, surveys of this type can provide skewed results – the teachers with time to fill in a

survey may not be those who are genuinely overburdened with bureaucratic tasks. In this case over 1,500 responses were received from a representational sample of schools and the writers concluded that teachers valued the joint responsibility for classroom management that working with a Teaching assistant can bring and saw TAs as an effective strategy to allow them to raise attainment.

To support the behavioural and emotional needs of pupils

When studying the pedagogical role TAs play in a classroom, Webster et al (2011) found that “TAs had a positive effect in mainstream classrooms in terms of reducing off-task behaviour and disruption, and allowing more time for the teacher to teach.” This fits with my experience that the majority of classteachers prefer to have another adult in the room and report that lessons with a TA are better than those without. This is particularly true when there are groups of pupils with specific emotional or organizational needs which may ordinarily disrupt whole class teaching situations. The findings of Woolfson & Truswell (2005), despite being inconclusive, suggest that Teaching assistants can also; “ ..widen the range of activities available to pupils and increase participation; boost pupils’ motivation, confidence and self-esteem; form excellent relationships with pupils; help to instil good behaviour; [and] be favoured by parents. “

To lead specific, targeted intervention

In a systematic review, Farrell et al (2010) concluded that TA intervention can help children to make significantly more progress than similar pupils who did not receive TA support when the TAs have been using a specific intervention for which they have received training. However, the findings were not conclusive and varied significantly from review to review and group to group. The impact was variable according to the training the TA received, the intervention programme chosen and the “high stakes” value placed on the support by the school. Both Farrell and Higgins et al (2011) also recognize that the impact may not have been as great if the interventions had been led by a qualified teacher rather than a Teaching assistant. It seems the combination of specific training, a proven and effective intervention programme (often time-limited) and a whole school ethos which values the intervention can lead to improved attainment by specific groups of pupils. However, the Teaching assistants I would be working with had not been asked to lead specific intervention, but to support learning within the normal day to day whole class lessons.

To support the attainment of a particular class through non-targeted and non-specific interventions

The evidence of impact when teaching assistants work within a classroom without a specific intervention is less positive. The mere presence of a TA in the classroom does not guarantee improved attainment when compared to classes without a TA (Farrell et al 2010). Any studies of this type are problematic – it is difficult to predict the rate of progress a class may have achieved without a TA's presence. In the main, studies tend to compare the number of TAs and look for patterns of progress. One might assume that those schools or Local Authorities with high levels of teaching assistant to pupil ratios would show greater gains than those with lower levels. This, however, has not been shown to be the case. (Farrell et al (2010); Brown & Hariss (2008)) Whilst Brown and Harris found strong association, there are too many variables (including expertise and training of TAs) to draw any strong conclusions. It is also true that the relationship between teaching assistants and teachers has a strong impact on the effectiveness of teaching assistants.

In order to identify the most effective methods of working for teaching assistants in non-targeted and non-specific intervention, then, it is necessary to explore examples of successful relationships between teacher and teaching assistant. Wilson and Bedford (2008) identified “the tensions around whether the relationship between teacher and teaching assistant is a hierarchical one or a genuine partnership between two equal adults in the classroom.” Bedford, Jackson & Wilson (2008) also drew attention to the need for teachers and teaching assistants to ‘relinquish part of their role to their partner’ in order to make best use of one another’s skills. In a study to identify effective models of working, Cremin et al (2007) explored three models of team organization and planning – room management, zoning and reflective team work. Feedback was gained from teachers about the perceived benefits of each model and all three led to significant improvements in pupil engagement. Although the findings are idiographic and so cannot be generalized, the fact that one did not prove to be any more successful than another does demonstrate that when the working relationship is a focus of time and training for both the teacher and teaching assistant, and additional time is given to discuss classroom organization and pedagogy together, significant improvements in engagement can be made and the contributions made by teaching assistants maximized.

This raises a strong argument for teachers and teaching assistants to be involved in joint training; a situation that is not possible within this study. So, it poses a question around whether working in isolation with teaching assistants will lead to improved

and more effective working or whether, in order to successfully change practice, both teachers and teaching assistants need to be involved. Working as an external consultant with the school, my influence has limitations and the scope of work can only be within that which has been requested. So, as I work through the project, I will need to find ways to ensure strong communication links and, where possible, concrete links between the classteachers and teaching assistants. This will be discussed further in the enquiry plan and evaluation.

So, whilst classroom organisation and teacher/TA relationships will be difficult to observe and amend in this study, the interactions between the pupils and teaching assistants will provide a focus for the professional development and observations. The school had identified that interactions between teacher and pupil and teaching assistant and pupil were different and, whilst this difference is sometimes helpful, it can sometimes lead to a dependency culture. This is inline with the findings of Rubie-Davies et al (2010) who recognised that the presence of teaching assistants in the classroom leads to a change in the way pupils interact with the classteacher;

‘Systematic observations also showed that pupils had very different types of contact with teachers and TAs. With teachers, they were more likely to be one of a crowd, and this applied particularly to the pupils who did not have learning support needs, while with TAs they tended to be the main focus of attention and have more active and sustained interactions with them. As pupils had more contact with TAs, they had less interaction with teachers. In practice, therefore, TAs do not provide additional support but alternative support.’

(Rubie-Davies, Blatchford, Webster, Koutsoubou & Bassett 2010 p430)

Furthermore, their observations showed two differences in the way teachers and teaching assistants interacted with pupils;

‘First, teachers were more focused on learning and understanding, while TAs focused on completing tasks. In this study, it was found that teachers’ interactions with pupils were more likely to stimulate pupils cognitively and facilitate pupil learning engagement in thinking...A second overall difference between teachers and TAs was that teachers appeared proactive and in control of lessons, while TAs were in a reactive role ..[and] were on frequent occasions providing pupils with answers to questions or tasks, meaning that pupils did not need to do the thinking for themselves.’ (Rubie-davies et al 2010 p443)

It will be necessary, therefore, when designing the professional development aspect of this study, to consider the pedagogical role the teaching assistants have been asked to play, and how best they can support pupils' learning and avoid dependency.

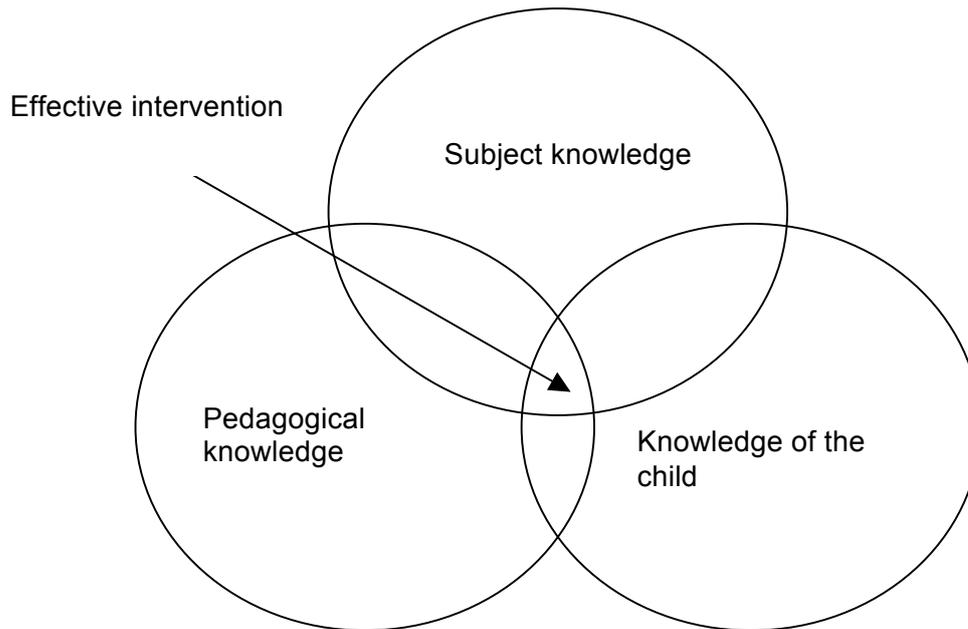
Designing the Enquiry plan

In light of the reading and research, alongside the information provided by the school, it was consequently necessary to design an enquiry that would explore a number of strands. Firstly, the taught sessions should provide professional development for the teaching assistants to improve their subject knowledge in order that they can be proactive in their role rather than reactive, enabling them to recognise what a child needs to learn rather than focussing on the tasks they needed to complete.

Secondly, the sessions will need to provide pedagogical knowledge in the form of a range of strategies teaching assistants can use to stimulate pupils to think for themselves rather than giving answers too readily. In addition, there should be opportunity for the teaching assistants to observe children learning to develop their own skills of reflectivity and evaluation. I hope that this will enable them to confidently and pro-actively manage children's learning rather than work reactively which can lead to a reliance on tasks rather than learning. This ability to 'step back' and assess learning will be crucial for them when providing non-targeted, non-specific support within the classroom – the area shown by the research as being least effective in most classrooms.

Lastly, the project should provide them with opportunities to reflect on the way they work together as a team with their classteachers and how they are deployed within the classroom. Whilst it is clear from the research that great gains can be made by collaborative working, the teachers will not be present at the training sessions. This could potentially lead to conflict and will need to be handled with professionalism and ethically on all parts. I will need to consider carefully how teaching assistants will be able to talk openly and have the opportunity for them to reflect on their efficacy without making criticisms of individual teachers or pupils.

In my experience, the most effective intervention takes place when teaching assistants bring all of their expertise to bear, blending knowledge of subject, pedagogical knowledge and understanding of the child's learning and emotional needs:



Therefore, each session will also need to support the teaching assistants in reflecting on the needs of the children they are working with. In order to make this most effective in the short period of time we have together, it will be helpful to focus on one particular child who is known to the teaching assistants and would benefit from particular support with developing sentence structure. No other child will be excluded from the group however, so that the teaching assistants can continue to work in as normal circumstances as possible during the study period.

The professional development sessions will take place over four consecutive weeks. Between each taught session, the teaching assistants will participate in peer observations. This will serve several purposes. Firstly, on a practical level, it ensures that the members of staff make sufficient effort to trial new strategies and give time to develop their own skills. Secondly, it gives time for teaching assistants to watch a child learning – a useful professional development situation in itself, but also to observe children’s responses to the teaching strategies and begin to identify what worked and why. Lastly, by providing opportunities for the teaching assistants to work together and observe one another at work I hoped to develop a collaborative attitude. This will serve to empower the teaching assistants and help them to develop a team-efficacy. This should help to avoid the dependency and lack of self-reliance which can develop when an external consultant is brought in to ‘deliver training’. The notion of peer observations will be new to the teaching assistants and be seen as potentially threatening so some time during the first session will be spent discussing the purposes and agreeing protocols – see Appendix 1. Ethical practices

(anonymity for staff and children, confidentiality and the right to withdraw) will also be discussed.

Therefore, the sessions will form a pattern, thus;

Taught Session 1

- Develop an aspect Subject knowledge
- Reflect on children's writing and identify next steps
- Introduce a teaching strategy
- Introduction of peer observation model and agree protocols

In-class session 1

- Peer observation of strategy and child's response

Taught session 2

- Responses to peer observation
- Evaluation of strategy
- Identify next steps in child's writing
- Develop an aspect Subject knowledge
- Introduce a teaching strategy

In-class session 2 – as 1

Taught session 3 – as 2

In-class session 3 – as 1

- Peer observations

Taught session 4

- Responses to peer observation
- Evaluation of strategy
- Evaluation of sessions – identify personal learning and next steps

The study aims to achieve the following success criteria;

- Teaching assistants will feel more confident when teaching sentence structure. This will be a self-assessed criteria, where their perception of their own efficacy will be sought through interviews and any changes in self-belief identified.

- Teaching assistants will know more about a variety of sentences, including terms such as verb, noun, adjective, adverb, complex, compound, subordinate and clauses. This will be recognised through the taught sessions, using assessment for learning practices to identify what has been learned and what is still to be understood.
- Pupils' use of a variety of sentence types will increase in written work, both in intervention sessions and independent writing, identified through work scrutiny carried out before, during and after the study period.
- Teaching assistants will become more reflective and self-efficacious. Through self-assessment I intend to identify where changes have occurred from the beginning to the end of the period. Evidence will be gathered through interviews. Evidence will also be sought through interviews with classteachers and senior school leaders.
- TAs will deploy a wider range of teaching and learning strategies. Success will be identified through the adoption of strategies following the professional development period.

3.2 Implementation

The following chapter gives a summary of the content of each session and a brief overview of outcomes. A detailed evaluation can be found in the final chapter.

Taught session 1

Each teaching assistant brought to the first session samples of their identified child's writing and we discussed what the child does well and where they needed to improve – with a focus on sentence structure. Through discussion, the teaching assistants identified the following points;

TA1	Child A	Y4	Over use of 'and' to join sentences. Needs to develop a wider range of sentence structures.
TA2	Child B	Y3	Tenses are muddled with past and present used in the same piece of writing. Needs to maintain consistent tense.
TA3	Child C	Y6	Over reliance on short, simple sentences. Needs to use a variety of sentence lengths.
TA4	Child D	Y4	Writing is in sentences but sentences are not

			punctuated. Needs to punctuate.
TA5	Child E	Y3	Over reliance on dialogue within story writing. Needs to develop narration and description.

A selection of sentence building activities were shared with the group (see Sentence Construction Games in Appendix 2).

The teaching assistants also identified in themselves the need for new strategies to elicit answers. They discussed the fact that, on many occasions, the children they were working with were reticent to answer or did not seem to know the answers to questions in discussion. This meant they felt it was difficult to move the learning forward or to achieve the expected outcomes. I shared the notion of increasing 'Wait time' (Black et al, 2001); (Appendix 3).

In-class session1

Peer observations were carried out by the group. We discussed together how it went, what happened and what they had learned. Given the choice of sentence construction games to use, they all chose to use Stack up. They all also tried to give extended thinking time both after asking a question and before giving a response.

The following observations were made by the teaching assistants;

TA1	Stack up was successful as Child A came up with some interesting vocabulary changes which surprised Child and TA. Wait time was tried it was particularly effective after his initial response as he would go on to improve and/or amend his first answer.
TA2	Five seconds thinking time seemed very long, but the child did answer within that time and also added to her response in the 5 seconds. Stack up was effective in creating new sentences, but she's not sure this will be applied in independent writing.
TA3	The session was carried out in an unfamiliar classroom and the child was understandably nervous. TA3 felt that this led to an unsuccessful session.
TA4	Five second wait time was hard to maintain but Child D did respond. Child D enjoyed the Stack up activity although the one to one situation made him nervous.
TA5	Child E was nervous so the session was tried a second time to better effect. Stack up was successful and the conversation revealed that Child E enjoyed writing and often wrote at home.

Taught session 2

Following last week's discussion, where Teaching assistants recognised that in some cases they were not confident about the learning outcome when working with groups of children, I shared some key questions with the Teaching assistants that they might use when preparing for a lesson;

- What is the intended learning in this session?
- What is the expected outcome?
 - Is there a 'must-have' concrete outcome e.g. a paragraph? and/or
 - Is there a concept they need to grasp?
- So, how will you spend most of your time?
 - explaining to the pupil?
 - listening to the pupil?
 - helping the pupil with a task?
 - prompting the pupil to complete the task themselves?

I hoped this might form a conversation with the classteacher and avoid the teaching assistant's frustration in 'getting children to finish a task'. It was also recognised that the time teachers and TAs spend together in preparing for a lesson was often not adequate, leaving Teaching assistants unsure of what to do and, crucially, why they were doing it. This reflected the finding of Bedford et al (2008) where TAs and teacher highlighted the importance of '...having clear mutual expectations of what they required from pupils.' (2008, p18)

We discussed progress so far with learners' sentence structure. I suggested the use of voice recorders to support oral rehearsal of sentences. Oral rehearsal has long been recognized by practitioners, although little research exists (Fischer, 2010), as a powerful tool to support effective composition.

'By asking children to orally rehearse a sentence or phrase before writing it, you are also reducing the cognitive load because the child has to retrieve the ideas and vocabulary and shape them into a syntactically appropriate form before attempting the challenge of transcription' (Fischer, 2010, p69)

The availability of digital voice recorders in schools has made oral rehearsal an even easier tool. The TAs had not used the whole range of voice recorders available at the school and they had not been used by class teachers to support oral rehearsal before.

In-class session 2

Concerns had been raised to staff that one TA in particular felt uncomfortable with the last peer observation, the purpose of the observation was elucidated once more - it is not an observation of the TA, but the strategies and the child's responses to them. The post-observation discussion is not feedback to the TA but a joint discussion about how the child responded and why they think that is. All TAs were happy to plan another peer observation. However, due to a disrupted timetable, only 2 peer observations were carried out.

TA1	Use of voice recorder was disruptive to others in the class but Child A found it useful to prepare sentences. Continued use of 'wait time' led to improved answers – especially when the TA waited after a response.
TA2	Continued to use Stack up and extended this to using thesaurus to find synonyms. There was no peer observation this week. When asked 'can you describe need?' Child B came up with 'desperate'.
TA3	Due to other timetable commitments, no sentence work was undertaken this week.
TA4	Five second wait time was continued with success with Child D giving more responses. Child D was introduced to connectives on cards which he was able to use successfully to build new sentences.
TA5	Absent.

Taught session 3

During this session, we explored 9 steps to improving sentences based on an idea from Green's language intervention (cited in Improving Descriptive Sentence Writing in Elementary Students, Diliberto, (2004)) (Appendix 4).

Following on from their successful use of wait time, we discussed a range of Improvement prompts which can be used orally to develop and improve a child's response in a differentiated way (Appendix 5).

In-class session 3

Although all TAs tried out different strategies from session 2, several did not get time to do any paired observations or specific work with their individual children. However, given the option to discontinue with peer-observations, they all felt strongly that they would like to continue and said they had found it useful to have some time to work

together. With concerted effort, they all managed to complete at least one observation. They all agreed they would like to try improving the same sentence – using The girl ate chocolate in their sessions.

TA1	9 steps strategy was used and the TA was pleased with the resulting sentence: The girl ate chocolate was transformed into At half past three the ugly girl gently ate minty chocolate while she gobbled her tea on a missile shaped bed. Child A found having connectives on cards useful and enjoyed making choices and 'playing' with the cards to make new sentences. He knew which ones made sense and which didn't.
TA2	Tried out the 9 steps to improving a sentence. Child B found the strategy useful and continued to use it independently in class written work. TA2 decided to create a step by step guide which Child B will refer to when writing.
TA3	There was no separate time available for sentence work, so sentences were incorporated into regular spelling work. Child c is gaining in confidence and correctly punctuated his sentence.
TA4	9 steps strategy was used, resulting in the sentence: The girl ate chocolate was transformed into The teenage girl crumbled the caramel chocolate over the wrapper
TA5	9 steps strategy was used to create The selfish girl gobbled the crunchy bar in the playground. Child E enjoyed the steps and created her own sentences at home.

Taught session 4

TAs asked to discuss behaviour management in the final session. They were unclear about the school's behaviour management policy and were unsure whose responsibility it was to deal with off task behaviour in the classroom. Cremin et al (2005) evaluated three models of teaching assistants working within the classroom. A number of roles taken from this research were shared with the group; Individual helper, Activity manager and Mover. The TAs recognized their predominant role as that of Mover and/or Individual helper ie. they mainly concentrate on working with an individual or group on a teaching activity, until there is a disruption which they then deal with. We also discussed the notion of 'zones' within the classroom as a way of defining who is doing what, where and with which children. This was a new concept

to the TAs. They recognised that they mainly fulfilled a 'roaming and visiting' role, moving around a set pattern of tables.

They all agreed that the identification of an 'enforcer' would give them more confidence in dealing with disruptive behaviour or understanding when to ignore it and continue with their focus group. Whilst in most cases the teacher and TA share this role, there are times when some TAs are not sure when or how to intervene with off-task behaviour in the classroom.

We also explored different seating arrangements and how to arrange the furniture for different pupils at different times.

Each TA was able to share their learning across the period with the rest of the group, which helped to form the evaluation of the project. They have each identified next steps in their own performance management and requested that they would particularly benefit from continued peer evaluations.

4 Presentation of outcomes

4.1 Analysis of findings

The project had four intended aims. In this chapter I will use induction to evaluate the project in relation to each of these aims. Data to support induction was gathered in three different ways;

- interviews and informal conversations with teaching assistants and staff.

This was a useful way of gathering evidence throughout the taught sessions and during return visits. The informal nature of the conversations led to relaxed and open discussions. However, it should be considered that, when talking to me, the interviewees may well have been more positive than honest.

- questionnaires to teaching assistants and senior school leaders.

These were sent out several months after the project had been completed. This was designed to see how well the teaching strategies had become embedded in day to day practice. It is easy to assume that all effective strategies have been adopted, but my experience of delivering CPD shows that much can be forgotten rather than becoming normal classroom routine. Whilst it may be true that a confidential questionnaire may lead to more candid responses than a personal interview, respondents may also feel the need to reply positively rather than honestly. The questionnaire was intended to be open and allow respondents to reply to questions in detail, rather than give numerical responses so that I might

better understand their point of view. Therefore, direct comparisons or statistics will not be possible.

- pupil work scrutiny.

A comparison was made between independent writing carried out before the project, during the project and several weeks after the project. The focus of comparison was to identify any improvements on sentence structure and use of descriptive language. The difficulty with any comparison of pupils' writing is the impact of context – a child may have written well due to an interest in the subject matter, confidence in genre and/or effective whole class teaching. In order to truly recognise the impact of the teaching assistants work, scrutiny of whole class pieces should be compared to those benefitting from teaching assistant support. However, the scope of this project means time and access to whole class writing samples is limited, as well as ethical considerations involved in limiting teaching assistant input to target pupils alone. So, pupil work scrutiny alone would not give evidence of the impact of the project. However, in combination with teachers, senior leaders and teaching assistants comments it was hoped that some evaluation could be drawn.

Aims 1 & 2 : Teaching assistants will feel more confident when teaching sentence structure and will know more about a variety of sentences, including terms such as verb, noun, adjective, adverb, complex, compound, subordinate and clauses.

Teaching assistants reported an increase in confidence during the sessions. Although they were still hesitant to explain more complex terms such as subordinate clause and conjunction, they became confident in recognising parts of speech such as nouns, adjectives and adverbs and could recognise the differences and effects of complex, compound and simple sentences. The team of TAs cascaded their new knowledge to the wider team which helped to deepen their own understanding, recognised in the questionnaire responses by senior leaders;

“Training had impact on whole school as TAs delivered session to TAs which was great for their own professional development”.

This increased understanding and confidence was still evident in their questionnaires, several months after the project ended.

“I am more confident and engaging more in the writing lessons. Actually I feel that I know more now about what is expected from children writing. I'm not saying I know everything now, but at least I feel confident enough to sit with the children and help them with their writing. I gained lots of useful

information about the sentences and Literacy terms.”

TA 2

Whilst there was some variance in the degree of understanding, all responses demonstrated an increase;

“[TA3]’s subject knowledge needs to be further developed but I have noticed her using terms such as connective, verb etc more confidently when working with children.” Classteacher

“I think the aims of the training were met and teaching assistants all developed professionally to different degrees and in different areas.” Senior leader

Aim 3: Pupils’ use of a variety of sentence types will increase in written work

All teaching assistants, when interviewed, felt strongly that pupils written work was improving due to the strategies they were implementing. ‘Stack up’ and ‘9 steps’ strategies were identified as being particularly helpful in supporting learners in extending and altering sentences. However, it should be considered that all adults, when working with children, are focussed on seeing positive improvements and this is not necessarily indicative of a genuine, lasting improvement in a child’s understanding or competency. Evidence from scrutiny showed that, whilst there was improvement during the period of intervention, with Teaching assistant support, only small improvements were evident after the study period in independent writing. For example, an indicative pre-study sentence from Child A reads;

“If you go in the car too much it is making global warming. It is bad for your health and it will melt the ice and the polar bears need ice.”

When working with a teaching assistant, Child A was able to improve some non-fiction sentences about Rhinos to;

“The smelly rhino crunches long grass. Gently the dirty rhino slowly crunches the long green grass. Their large grey feet are like stumpy fat tree trunks.”

Independently, several weeks later, he wrote;

“Get him in the neck that will kill him”, explained the elf. “Let’s go” shouted Thor excitedly. His hammer was rusting away it needed a warm up. All the goblins burnt to ashes.”

Similar improvements were seen in children B, D and E. A more detailed commentary and examples can be found in Appendix 6.

Less improvement was evident in Child C. This may be due to less focus on sentence work in the project period than other children. Although the TA took part in peer observations, they sessions generally had a spelling focus and strategies which others had found successful e.g. Stack up were not tried regularly. However it is also

true that Child C has a range of specific language needs and so, progress on all aspects of writing is more gradual.

Overall, the evidence seems to support the findings of Farrell et al (2010) that significant progress can only be gained through specific intervention programmes rather than more general in-class support.

Aim 4: Teaching assistants will become more reflective and self-efficacious

When interviewed, all TAs felt they had benefited from peer observations and several felt strongly that they would like to continue to do this over time. They really appreciated the teamwork aspect of the taught sessions and enjoyed discussing things together and solving problems collaboratively.

“Observations helped you to see how the child responds which you don’t see yourself. We should do this more often. It helps each other if you need more ideas.”
TA 5

“We’ve been working more as a team to adapt strategies to your particular child. I feel a little bit more in control.”
TA1

Through the interviews I realised how the TAs had felt in some circumstances prior to the CPD sessions. Whilst all reported that they ‘got on well with’ the classteachers and saw themselves as working in partnership, they not experiencing the ‘genuine partnership’; there was still the kind of hierarchy identified by Wilson and Bedford (2008). They did not have a forum where these kinds of discussions could be had. By setting up a TA group, through open discussions and sharing of ideas, they began to see that the benefits of the trust and honesty they had developed with each other.

“As a group I think we’ve talked more. More about what we are doing and how our children are getting on. And not just in the sessions, but at coffee times and lunch. We’ve always talked, but not like this with so much details, so many ideas.”
TA 4

Responses from classteachers and senior leaders through questionnaires and informal interviews commented on the confidence gained by the teaching assistants;

“She has been keen to understand where children are working and how they can improve. She [TA1] is more reflective and we always discuss sessions and next steps following work with children”.
Classteacher

“To know and be confident in different strategies ...helps to ensure we are all enjoying the learning process. ... You also reminded me how much I enjoy literacy and learning new things!”
TA 3

Aim 5 : Teaching assistants will deploy a wider range of teaching and learning strategies

Interviews have shown greater confidence to work flexibly, to listen to children more and to adapt activities to meet the learning outcomes rather than task completion.

“It is helpful to agree and clarify the roles and expectations.” TA5

Teaching assistants also reported listening to pupils more, and using techniques such as Wait time to give more time for pupils to think and respond.

“1 simple question helps you to see what they are trying to mean.”

Evidence from senior leader questionnaires also show an increased range of techniques;

“[TA3] has been delivering small group intervention focusing on sentence structure. This is planned by the teacher. [TA3]’s class teacher has noticed increased confidence when working with children and her skills in interacting and supporting children who are experiencing difficulties has developed. [TA3] has particularly developed skills of supporting child in finding an answer instead of giving them the answer and has taken on board thinking time, etc”
Literacy subject leader

In questionnaires, several months after the project period, TAs and classteachers responded that most of the strategies shared in the taught sessions were used frequently. Time out, 9 steps and Stack up were used most frequently and with most perceived success. Digital voice recorders to support oral rehearsal were not used frequently by any TAs due to the anticipated disruption on the rest of the class, despite their recognition in questionnaires that the strategy was useful to pupils. Improvement prompts were seen to be quite useful by most, but were not used frequently due to the complexity and difficulty TAs had in remembering the types of prompt.

The research on zoning was shared with all teaching staff and opened up a reflection in all classroom on general classroom management and use of TAs. One TA and classteacher used the research to redefine areas in the classroom;

“We changed the classroom around after one of your lessons. It did work.

We don’t seem to have as many queues at the teacher’s desk now!” TA 2

Senior leaders are hopeful that this will continue to improve classroom practice.

There were also a number of strategies mentioned incidentally through the taught sessions as well as ideas they generated together which have been used effectively by TAs. Overall, many strategies have been trialed, remembered, adapted and become embedded into every day practice.

4.2 Evaluating the impact of the enquiry

In summary, my findings show several aspects which need to be considered when planning effective professional development for Teaching assistants.

Firstly, professional development should be based around partnership work. Where teachers and teaching assistants have a joint, shared understanding of the purposes and aims of the professional development, learning is more likely to be embedded within the classroom. On re-designing the professional development package for use in other schools, I have added a briefing event for all teaching staff before the project and a review and feedback session at the end. Information for Teaching assistants to share with classteachers at the end of each session has also been included. Furthermore, consideration should be given to the support teachers need themselves in working effectively with other adults in the classroom – a role which is assumed rather than learnt or developed formally through training (Wilson, 2008). Moreover, the view TAs hold of themselves differs with each individual, often depending on experience, the role they hold in school and how they have come by that role. Greater take up of new strategies was seen in those teaching assistants who saw themselves as learners and professionals with a key role to play in children's learning as a teacher as well as classteacher assistant. Participation in the project formed part of the TAs performance management reviews and statements were written by me to support the review process. More formal links to the performance management process could have been made from the outset, with pupil performance targets linked to the project as well as professional development statements. The opportunity for TAs to share their learning with the wider staff was a powerful way of summarising and deepening learning so should be included in all professional development packages.

As discussed in the previous section, impact on pupil learning has been difficult to identify for a number of reasons. It is clear that 4 weeks of intervention is not sufficient to make a noticeable difference on these children's' sentence structure. Interestingly, aim 3 became less significant throughout the project and evaluation period. Although we began the project with a focus on identified children with specific needs, the focus shifted towards greater emphasis on aims 4 and 5. This is not necessarily due to lack of clarity in the aims, but recognition that the teaching assistants were able to direct the sessions towards what was to them, a more pressing need. Hence, in the final session they requested a focus on behaviour management and classroom organisation. This highlights the complex nature of their role and how, in some cases, discrepancies exist between what was intended, what is expected, what occurs and how success is judged. That is to say, senior leaders

may consider the role of teaching assistants to intervene with individuals to develop specific skills and raise attainment whilst in practice they find themselves managing behaviour and supporting whole class learning. This links strongly with the findings of HMI back in 2002.

Lastly, peer observation has been an effective way to develop reflective and effective learning behaviours. Consideration should be made as to how this might be developed further, perhaps through including classteachers and senior leaders. There is also potential for involving pupils in the observations and evaluations of specific strategies. This has impact on the organisation of all future professional development beyond the focus of the project.

4.3 Reflections on professional learning

Through undertaking the study I have learnt far more about the belief systems underlying the work of Teaching assistants. Wider reading has prompted me to think more carefully about the conversations I had with teaching assistants and reflect on their view of themselves as learners and teachers. I have also been prompted to reflect on the discussions between classteachers and teaching assistants where understanding has been assumed, particularly when considering the differences between learning outcomes and lesson outcomes.

It has also been useful to do some wider reading and reflection on effective strategies for both sentence structure and generic teaching and learning. As a teacher of 20 years with considerable consultant experience, I have a 'cadre' of techniques which I know work for me. However, it has been useful to expand these and re-focus my ideas into straight forward practical strategies to communicate to Teaching assistants. The wider reading has reaffirmed the research background from which the strategies have been developed.

Through the action research process, the enquiry has allowed me to refine the offer I make to schools in the future both in terms of Teaching assistant professional development and development of writing as a whole.

A further extension to the study, outside the confines of this paper, will be to explore pupils' views of Teaching assistants and the progress they make during intervention sessions in light of the findings by Fraser and Meadows (2008).