

▶ Listen Very Carefully – I will say this only once.

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The participation of schools and learners on TDR programmes

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LSIS-IfL Research Development Fellowship Scheme

Aim

The aim of the project was to develop a programme of delivery of specific transitional skills for vocational science and engineering learners, with a view to improve, in the longer term, progression to, and achievement in, further and higher education.

Introduction

The term vocational learner is often regarded as being synonymous with a 'poor' or 'stupid' learner; they are seen as not being capable of achieving more 'academic' qualifications (Edward, Weedon, & Riddell, 2008). Time and again the vocational learner has taken or been pushed into this route at school because they are not very good at exams. This does not make them either poor at learning, stupid or not as intelligent as their 'academic' counterparts.

From my own experience, some of the young people who have chosen to follow the Young Apprenticeship route in science (in the North East of England) are being discouraged (in some local authorities and schools) from progressing onto Level 3 science qualifications¹ – even though they have achieved above and beyond their 'target' grades at GCSE.

Why are these learners being disadvantaged this way and what can we do to help? Although we can approach these questions in different ways one element could be that the way these learners are taught at school could mean that they are being disadvantaged when progressing on to further or higher education. Although good Vocational Teaching & Learning develops a number of excellent skills there are other skills, I would argue, that we assume the learners will pick up subliminally. These skills are equally important whether going on to further/higher education or progressing into employment.

Teaching methods in Higher Education institutions has not changed to the same extent as it has in schools or even Further Education colleges (Crabtree, Roberts, & Tyler, 2008; Yorke, 2000). Although this is not necessarily a bad thing it does mean that learners have to be able to adapt to a new and different learning environment. Imagine then a learner used to working in small groups, where listening and writing is kept to a minimum, going into a

¹ One of my year 11 learners, after a progression talk, said: 'I want to do science at college but they have told me that I can't – I have to do IT instead'

science lecture with a hundred other learners and having to sit for an hour, listen and make notes. Although many lecturers make their lecture notes available online it is uncertain how many students access them.²

TDR Training Ltd is a training provider that works with vocational learners in the engineering and science sectors. We work in partnership with local schools and colleges in the North East. The learners are generally taught in a hands on and interactive way and usually achieve good grades in their science and engineering qualifications but do not seem to have some of the skills required to progress onto further or higher education.

After identifying which skills the learners would benefit from the idea was initially to embed these skills within the curriculum. However, as the project progressed it became apparent that a more explicit approach would be needed. The objectives of the research project were:

- To identify specific transitional skills
- To evaluate the current levels of knowledge and practice of these skills
- To develop a programme of delivery to improve the level of knowledge and practice of these skills by learners
- To evaluate the effectiveness of this delivery programme

Hard indicators of impact of this research will be that vocational learners will have an improved skill set and have better progression and achievement rates. Another hard indicator is the creation of a programme of delivery.

Soft indicators are improvements in research methodology and my own understanding, improved confidence within learners and awareness in teaching staff.

Methodology

In the first instance I asked a number of graduates to complete a questionnaire on transitional skills and their perceptions of these skills. I asked them to score their own ability in these skills before and after University as well as to rank them in order of importance. They were also given the opportunity to suggest other skills as well as comment on the method of teaching of these skills.

I then identified groups of learners from different schools who were enrolled on either the Young Apprenticeships in Engineering or Science programmes. These were learners in year 11 at school and had been working with TDR since year 10. For these learners I decided to start the programme looking at listening and note-taking skills. Although these were not high ranking in the graduate questionnaire the ability to self assess was drawn into question when one graduate rated himself highly but had not listened to the verbal instructions given with the questionnaire. Also, to access the other skills the learners would need to have good listening and note-taking skills.

To evaluate their existing ability I used a BBC video, '10 things you didn't know about volcanoes', because it is divided into 10 sections, each lasting approximately five minutes. Therefore a different section could be used at

² Although the number of downloads could be calculated, the number of learners who then go on to read, annotate and research these would be more difficult to quantify.

different points of the assessment and I would not have to consider style, content, speaker or length as a contributory factor to results i.e. minimised variables. Learners who had indicated they didn't like the subject matter would probably continue to do so and vice versa.³ They were asked if they liked the subject matter after watching the first volcano clip rather than before.

For the first clip the learners were asked to listen and then answer questions on the subject matter. For the second clip they were allowed to write notes and then answer questions. I used the number of correct and full answers to give me the baseline data. The groups also filled in a questionnaire about how they thought they listened and assessed two previous lessons – their favourite and least favourite lessons over the past week. They were asked to say what the lesson was about, whether they had to listen, make notes, research or answer questions. In addition they were asked to write down three things that they felt they had learned in the lesson.

After an initial assessment I did not continue with all of the groups. One group in particular was very negative towards me even before I had started the initial assessment and therefore were unlikely to contribute actively to the sessions.⁴

With two groups (approximately 20 learners) I then trialled different ways to encourage the learners to think about how they listen. I encouraged them to participate in a game of 'Simple Simon Says' at the start and followed this with some 'Chinese Whispers' to demonstrate the factors that could affect our listening (eg prior knowledge & understanding, speed of speech, length of sentence, complicated terminology). We discussed how we listen (eyes as well as ears), types of listening (positive, negative, neutral) concentrating on active listening and using this in situations when it is difficult to listen (e.g. subjects we don't like, people we don't like, emotional situations). This was then related to Higher education or employment situations. I used personal stories to engage their attention and a lateral thinking puzzle to challenge their listening assumptions (we only hear what we want/expect to hear).

For the note-taking the learners identified what kind of things should be taken down for notes. We discussed shorthand methods such as contractions and common symbols - this was related to their use of 'txt' on their mobile phones. We also looked at drawing diagrams, note expansion and researching. To assess this impact another volcano clip was used, notes were taken, a mind map drawn and questions asked. Another method used was for the learners to make notes, write 5 suitable questions and then ask the rest of the group one of their questions whilst also having the answer on hand. This ensured whole class participation and listening and no duplication in the questions. .

In addition I trialled the programme with two science apprentices (aged 17 & 20) and two groups of foundation learning students who were either unable to access the school system or were on the verge of disengaging with school (4 and 12 learners respectively). For one of these groups I used aspects of Appreciative Enquiry to begin the session. No baseline data was taken with these groups and so initial assessment is subjective and based primarily on engagement within the session.

³ This makes the assumption that we are more likely to listen and retain information if we like the subject matter or the speaker.

⁴ They were exhibiting 'Negative Listening'.

The project was started in October but assessment did not start until January due to a holiday, Christmas and school closures due to snow. Access to some of the learners was restricted to once a fortnight which is why not all learners completed all aspects of the programme in time for the write up.

All participants were made aware of the purpose of the research project and consent forms were completed by participants and learner parents where necessary.

Dissemination of findings will initially be to staff and colleagues at TDR through staff meetings and workshops. A presentation to partner schools and local authorities will be arranged to raise awareness of the issues identified through the project. A two day course incorporating project findings and programme development of the other skills identified, but not specifically dealt with, will be available for learners and teachers alike to access.

Further work will consider how, after explicit teaching on active listening and note-taking skills, how these can be practiced and embedded into the curriculum. In addition the other transition skills identified at the beginning of the project will be explored further.

Literature Review

An article on Guardian.co.uk by Anthea Lippett (July 2009) attracted my attention because it stated that students with vocational qualifications were not only less likely to get a university place they were more likely to drop out in their first year (Lippett, 2009). This was based on research by Dr Geoff Hayward of Oxford University's education department. As I primarily work with vocational learners and give advice on progression routes, this is a concern.

John Denham MP, previously Secretary for State for Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills, in a speech at Warwick University in 2008, talked about widening participation and the need to equip our young people to succeed at university. He also mentioned that in 2005 only 25% of maintained schools offered triple science courses at school and although this has since risen to 32% other students are effectively excluded from STEM⁵ choices (Denham, 2008). Students' academic self-perception and confidence appears to be different depending on their socioeconomic background and this may affect their success at university (Chevalier, Gibbons, Thorpe, Snell, & Hoskins, 2008). Working-class students are likely to have less peer support to draw on and there is some correlation between class, first year grades and persistence. (Harvey, Drew, & Smith, 2006)

The government set a target of 50% of young people aged between 18 and 30 to be participating in higher education by 2010. However there is concern over the high withdrawal rates for first year university students. One of the many research projects that has looked at the problems of transition to higher education and why there is poor retention in the first year (Crabtree, Roberts, & Tyler, 2008), identified that the differences in the teaching and learning environments could be a factor why some learners find the transition more difficult than others. University teaching was found to be traditional and totally classroom based in contrast to vocational learning which involves practical work-experience elements. In the report only one university tutor mentioned the value of checking informally on the level of engagement of individual students. Further Education and Sixth Form colleges differ in their approach to the university approach by their expectations of the students. The former place

⁵ STEM: Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics

a high reliability on things like attendance, punctuality and meeting deadlines whereas the university expected their learners to be proactive, engaged and motivated. In addition both college and university tutors expressed concern that learners were less well equipped for study.

A review of the research into the first year experience at university (Harvey, Drew, & Smith, 2006) suggests that first year students tend to overrate their knowledge and abilities. However the research also demonstrates that first year withdrawal is a complex combination of different factors and there is no simple solution to the problem. In the area of learning and teaching students demonstrated a preference for student-centred active learning rather than lectures – methods that are actively promoted in good secondary schools. In addition the research suggests that students need help and support to become autonomous learners. Rigid approaches to learning can inhibit learning and first year students tend to adopt a surface-learning approach. The report concludes by identifying two areas for consideration relating to the first year experience:

- transition and adjustment in relation to retention/withdrawal
- the experience of 'not being seen as individuals, as being taught or instructed rather than as having one's learning facilitated'.

Pre and post transition staff agree when identifying some of the issues of transition whilst they disagree on others (Tolmie F., 2009). University staff saw teaching and learning as being a problem area whereas the school staff cited social difficulties as being more relevant. However both agree that the need for school teachers to '*drill students to meet assessment objectives rather than encourage deeper approaches to learning*' and in part '*school league tables*' is a contributory factor in problems in transition.

Yorke argues that there is insufficient attention given to preparing the student for transition (Yorke, 2000) into 'a very different learning environment' as well as other new experiences. He suggests preparation should be well in advance of transition into university life. Yorke surveyed nearly 1000 students who had withdrawn from university in the first 6 months. Over 1/5 mentioned a lack of staff support, 1/3 said the teaching did not suit them and the lack of study skills was significant for some.

Coffield on the other hand (Coffield, 2008) suggests that post compulsory education has to deal with the problems created by some schools and caused by the target and performance driven government imposed culture. In his 10 principles of teaching and learning which are adapted from James and Pollard (2006) there are two for which the transitional skills I have decided to look at are particularly relevant:

- equip learners for life in the broadest sense
- promote active engagement of the learner.

In chapter 4 of a later booklet Coffield talks about 3 ways to improve learning (Coffield, 2009). Of particular interest here is the section on going 'meta' (p27) or being aware of how you learn. This is a principle used in developing the active listening skills of the learners in this study. In Box 3.1 (p17) there is an anecdote in which a student replies to the question 'what was that about?' 'no idea I wasn't listening either'.

On page 31 Coffield (Coffield, 2009) also discusses what separates the '*best from the rest*' and this idea is expanded upon in Richard Sennett's book, *The Craftsman* (Sennett, 2008). On page 38 Sennett says a skill is developed by

trained practice and that teachers, who are afraid of boring children, may avoid routine and therefore deprive the learner of practicing the skill. Sennett talks about the importance of embedding being a process which is essential for all skills (p50ff) but that there is a tension between motivation, trained practice and conflicting measures of quality based on correctness and/or practical experience. In chapter 3 he discusses the impact of machines on the development of the skills needed for development of a 'craftsman'. Within the context of listening and note taking skills I could argue that television, computers, mobile phones and i-pods are some of the machines that have an impact on these skills.

McGuiness (1999) in her paper *'From thinking skills to thinking classrooms'* identifies some core concepts, one of which states the need for explicit teaching to allow learners to become better thinkers and inherent in her argument is the need for good listening skills. *'Effective learners have gained understanding of the process necessary to become effective learners'* (Watkins C., Carnell E., et al 2001). The argument starts by suggesting that school aged learners do not know much about the process of teaching and learning but by raising the awareness and having an explicit focus on learning can enhance performance. They also discuss different types of activities that can be employed, such as student generated questions, and state that 'when teachers actually 'coach' learners in learning strategies that a significant difference in use occurs'. They conclude that this doesn't happen often in the classroom but when teachers are made more aware and employ these techniques there is a marked difference in outcomes – particularly for the under achieving learner.

Research undertaken by Glasgow Caledonian University (Christine Irving, 2008) identified that students arriving at university either have poor or limited information literacy skills and that these may not be improved whilst at university. These skills include researching, referencing and authenticating source material. Geoff Dubber, Chair of the School Libraries Association, reported that out of a group of 14 freshers, at the University of West England, 12 failed their first assignment because they didn't reference their work (Dubber, 2009).

Elander et al looked at academic writing as an issue for learners starting at university (Elander, Norton, McDonough, & Foxcroft, 2009). Part of the problem is down to the students' own self perception of academic ability but also the UK education system fosters a gap between the way academic writing is taught in schools and universities.

Bentley researched discussion skills used by trainee teachers in two different subject specialisms (Bentley, 2004). Not surprisingly the English teachers were better at speaking and listening than the geography teachers.

Doodling has recently been identified as an aid to listening especially in situations where listening can be hard (Andrade, 2009). The research demonstrated that the people in the test could recall more information if they doodled whilst listening on the telephone. This is contrary to what most people generally believe.

It is obvious from the literature that there is no one solution that can solve the problems that occur during transition to university. In addition there is evidence of the difference between school and university teaching and learning is a major contributory factor. As modern teaching moves into more active learning, enquiry based, problem solving and understanding of learning the gap to the more traditional style will widen. In addition a number of specific skills required at university (but also of importance in the workplace) are identified as lacking and therefore teaching of these skills may aid transition.

'Widening access to courses means students may not be familiar with or prepared for traditional university learning teaching and assessment methods'. (Harvey, Drew, & Smith, 2006).

Data Summary and Analysis

Graduate Questionnaire

14 questionnaires were returned, of which 3 indicated that they had gone to university via a vocational route. The sample was too small to break the data down to compare vocational responses with academic.

For the purpose of the questionnaire, and based on research, the 8 identified skills were:

Listening, Note-taking, Researching, Referencing, Report Writing, Essay writing, Practical Write ups, Authenticating Source Material.

They were asked to self assess competency in these skills prior to, and post university.

Graph 1.1 shows the percentage responses for self assessment of these 8 skills based on: Excellent, Good, Poor and Non-Existent.

Prior to university 29% thought they had excellent listening skills which had increased to 57% after university. Over 50% thought that they were poor at researching, essay writing, report writing and authenticating source material prior to university. Post university all graduates indicated an improvement in all areas with the exception of one who felt that there was no improvement on practical write ups.

Other skills suggested in the questionnaire were team working, keeping a lab note book, time management and distance learning.

Comments included:

'note-taking and listening not taught'

'note-taking, listening and essay writing were taught prior to university.'

In addition the method of teaching was:

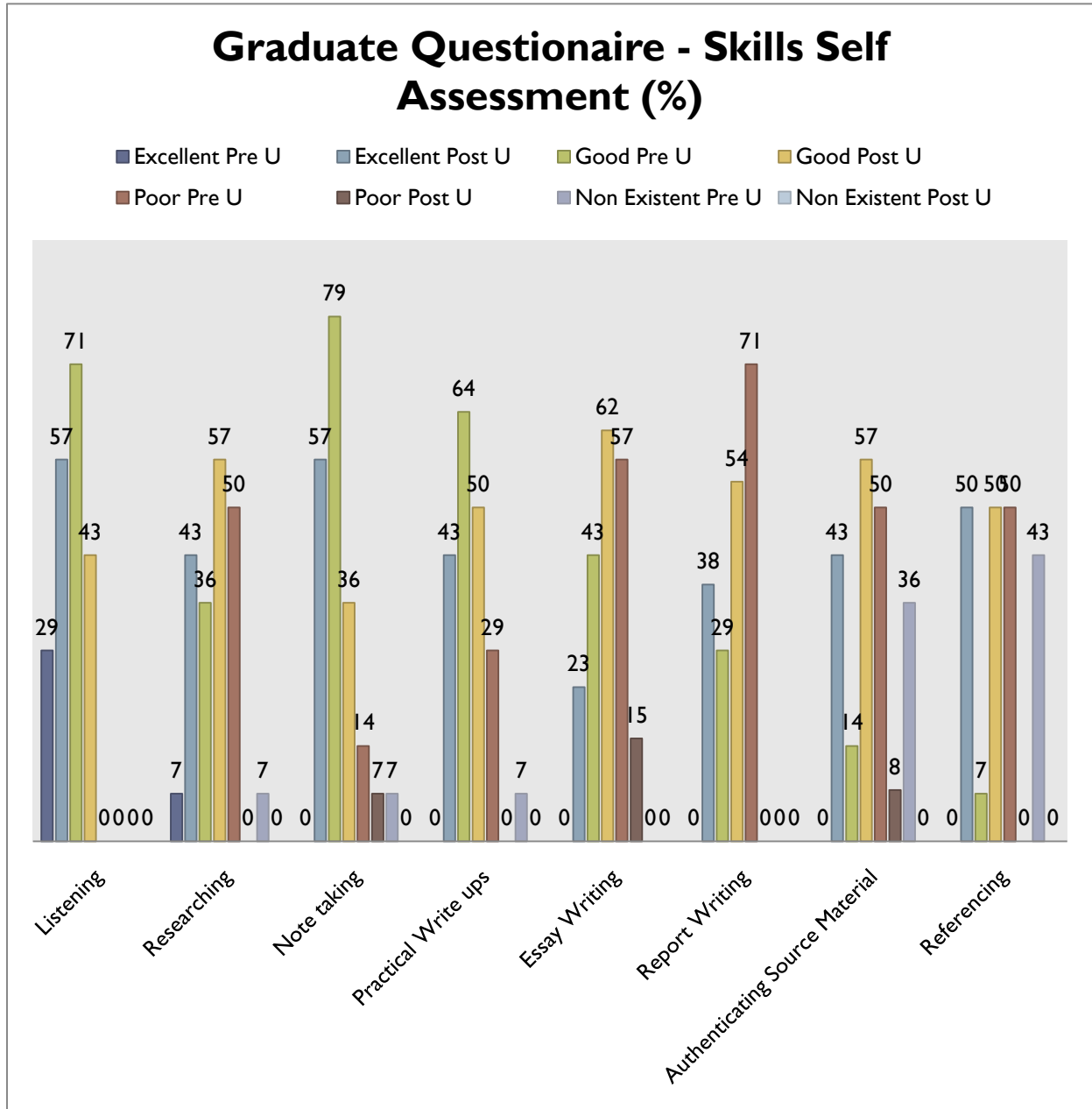
'taught by correction afterwards – it could affect your grade'

'through lectures but no alternative methods suggested, mostly self taught'

'expect learners to pick up skills'

Because research suggests that learners are likely to over-estimate their abilities (Harvey, Drew, & Smith, 2006) it seems reasonable not to read too much into the data produced other than an improvement in skills was perceived. Of more interest are the comments which demonstrated a wide range of experience but most suggest that for many of the skills they had to learn it for themselves.

Graph 1.1 Graduate Questionnaire Analysis



Listening Skills Questionnaire

Given to 57 learners: 36 of which were YA Engineers, 21 YA Science; 13 were female, 44 male

21% didn't think that they were good listeners, 54% of the girls didn't think they were good listeners.

72% recognised that they listen when it is an interesting subject

Interesting comments:

I think I am good at knowing when to speak and when to listen because:

'the teacher tells me'.

I don't like listening when:

'I am being talked at'

'The speaker is not interested in the subject'

'the topic drags on for too long'

'it's not interactive'

- Most cited 'boring' or 'don't understand'

The majority of learners knew what they needed to do to be a good listener.

To help me listen I usually:

'stay away from friends'

'doodle or fiddle'⁶

One learner who, thought they were excellent at listening and taking things in, didn't follow instructions and put their name on to the questionnaire, even though there was a space at the top next to the date. He also talked throughout the session and had to ask what to do with his work at the end of the session, even though this had been iterated by myself and reiterated by his class teacher several times. This leads me to question the validity of self-evaluation of listening skills.

Volcano Clip Analysis

⁶ This is of interest in light of Andrade's research (Andrade, 2009).

Table 1.1 Volcano Clip Analysis

	Did not Follow verbal Instruction	Liked Subject Matter	Volcano 1 - over 50% correct answers - Listening only	Volcano 2 - over 50% correct answers - Listening and note taking	Improved own score by taking notes	Volcano 3 - over 50% correct answers - Post intervention	Improved own score after intervention
% learners	39	54	56	58	42	76	67
Sample size	57	57	57	57	57	21	21
Notes		67% of Young Apprentices in Science		notes were generally of poor quality	one learner with additional learning needs went from 69%-29%	some notes were of better quality but not always used to answer Q	90% of girls improved their score
Apprentices (2)			Correct Answers 70%	Correct Answers 75%		Correct Answers 100%	

The difference in score between volcano 1 and volcano 2 is negligible – however over 2/5 of the learners did improve their score by taking notes. As indicated in Table 1.1 one learner went from quite a good score to a poor score because he actually has writing difficulties and was concentrating so much on trying to make notes that he couldn't process all the information at once. The standard of notes produced was generally poor and even when notes looked good they were not utilised to best effect - one learner, for instance, actually scored lower in the third volcano questions even though all the relevant answers were in her notes.

After the lesson(s) on Active listening skills and effective note-taking there was an increase in the score going from just over 1/2 to just over 3/4 of the class getting the majority of answers correct.

Analysis of Favourite and Least Favourite Lessons

Learners were asked to identify a lesson they had and hadn't enjoyed (their favourite and least favourite lessons) over the previous week. They had to tick which skills they thought they had used and write three things they had learnt in each.

Of the 57 learners 1 in 5 didn't think that they needed to listen in lessons. Of the remaining 4/5, 39% didn't think that they needed to make notes. However nearly all of the girls (91%) recognised that they needed to listen in all lessons.

Comparing the two lessons 1 in 3 could remember the same amount of information, regardless of which lesson it was (although I could not access if this was either accurate or appropriate). 44% could remember more in the

lesson they enjoyed whereas 16% could remember more in the lesson they didn't enjoy. 7% did not complete this section of the form.

Discussion Points:

Several interesting comments came up during discussions during the different sessions:

When asked why it was important to listen, the YA engineers invariably said that they had to listen to instructions otherwise they would 'get wrong'. Even quite leading questioning rarely elicited a response relating to health and safety. However, the science and Foundation Tier learners did recognise health and safety as being a factor.

Another comment which came up in different classes was the dislike when a teacher repeats themselves over and over again. Although they could see why this happens it was not something that encouraged them to listen in class.

General comments about participation:

Many of the learners continued to talk throughout the sessions regardless of being instructed to produce their own work, otherwise it could compromise the validity of the data collected. Many of these same learners indicated distractions being a reason for not listening. However they were usually reaffirming with each other what was being discussed/said. I would suggest, to a lack of confidence in their own ability to listen, take in relevant information and be sure of their own understanding.

One group who had been told what I was going to do prior to the lesson was very negative before I had even started. As I was setting up my equipment I gave out the questionnaire and could hear comments such as 'this is rubbish' 'I'm not going to write anything' and 'these questions are stupid'. Their negative attitude was a good example of how it impacted their listening. For this group half improved their scores and half were worse. Comments on the questionnaire included statements such as *'I think I am a good listener because my ears work'* Other comments – I think I am good at knowing when to speak and when to listen because...*'I am', 'I put my hand up', 'when I need to'*. I decided not to proceed with this group as I felt that they were not willing participants in the research and this could result in skewed results.

The foundation tier learners, where no baseline data was taken first, appeared to engage with the session. With the exception of a couple of learners who were reluctant to contribute to group discussions, they exhibited body language that was indicative of good listening. I used a PowerPoint presentation on nanotechnology to test their listening skills and they were able to repeat a number of the facts afterwards. Accompanying support staff were impressed with the level of engagement with these learners and one of the schools asked for details of the session.

Although the session worked well with year 11 learners I think it would work much better with year 12 learners who are a bit more mature and perhaps more able to self evaluate.

One method employed during the sessions looking at Active Listening and Effective Note Taking was to ask the learners to make notes and then write 5 questions that they could ask their peers. I then asked them to ask one of their 5 – making sure that they knew the answer. All members of the groups participated and no 2 questions asked were the same. At the end all learners were more aware of the content of the volcano clip than with previous clips. In addition some of the questions being asked required more thought than just writing down facts

and figures for instance one learner asked ‘How much of the island was left when the volcano erupted?’ when the information from the clip actually stated how much had been destroyed.

Conclusions

There is concern over the withdrawal rates of first year university students but the reasons for this is complex and no one solution will solve this problem. Vocational learners also appear to be disadvantaged for a number of reasons. A number of varied and different interventions are needed to address these issues.

Addressing the issue of specific skills to improve confidence in transitioning to higher education is one area where a difference can be made. Typically as practitioners in teaching and learning we are emphatic about ensuring that skills are embedded into the curriculum. Many learners are good at picking these skills up almost subliminally but would not be able to express fully in words how they do this. Other learners will need a more explicit approach.

One of the schools I worked with explained that listening skills are embedded into their curriculum. Certainly teachers use listening skill techniques embedded in what they do, these are not, however, aimed at encouraging active listening skills. A colleague also suggested that as teachers we don’t necessarily ‘model’ good active listening skills to our learners. Another colleague commented on how learners took notes in his class – ‘*firstly they copy directly out of the book and secondly they do it in 3 word blocks – therefore at the end they have no sense of what they have made notes about.*’

Television can be rewound if you miss something, programmes spend most of their airtime either telling you what they are going to tell you followed by what they have told you. School teachers are told not to talk for too long and end up constantly repeating important points or producing handouts for the learners because they have targets to meet.⁷ We are told people have a short attention span. None of these things encourage learners to listen.⁸ It is little wonder that they struggle with the more traditional methods practiced in universities (Middendorf J, Kalish A, 1996).

“Some people talk in their sleep, Lecturers talk while other people sleep” Albert Camus

Learners don’t understand about listening and choose not to listen if they don’t like the teacher or the subject matter. However, at work or at university there are situations where you need to listen regardless of your interest or not and you don’t usually have the rewind facility on hand. This requires developing an active listening technique which some people can pick up subliminally whilst others need to be taught it explicitly. The research suggests that explicit teaching about how we listen, the need for active listening skills and effective note-taking is an important first step. These can be built upon by ‘trained practice’ within the curriculum.

⁷ One school I worked at wanted to implement a similar time frame for 6th form learners where talking to would be limited to 12 minutes maximum during a lesson. Whilst I enjoy interactive lessons having a time limit on talking adds unwanted pressure to the lesson and equally does not prepare the learner for university lectures.

⁸ In fact as a consequence of this project I wonder if, in society as a whole, we are breeding a nation of lazy listeners.

This research has also demonstrated that learners tend to overestimate their own abilities although interestingly many of the girls underestimated their ability to listen. The girls recognised distracting factors and therefore, consciously or not, were able to adjust their skill level to compensate for this. There is also a suggestion that the older learners (apprentices) were more receptive in the active listening sessions.

Exploration into the other transitional skills and how these can be taught and learnt is a topic for further research.

Research has shown that vocational learners face a number of challenges when transitioning from school to university. However helping learners understand about listening and, in particular, how to develop active listening skills will help them transition not only to university but also into employment. They may not like the traditional teaching methods but they will be able to access them. Effective note taking aids recall whether for an examination or within a team meeting. Together these can help learners to develop confidence and raise achievement.

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