

Rapid English project



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1. The organisations

Reading Youth Offending Service is part of the integrated youth development service within the department of education and children services in Reading Borough Council.

Rapid English Consultants are the creators of the Rapid English communication programmes (www.rapidenglish.com).

2. Overview

Reading Youth Offending Service uses Rapid English to teach young people to overcome their problems with literacy and communication skills. Most are disaffected young people who have been excluded from school. We have found that the system works and helps them to re-engage with education.

The Pareto principle states that, in any field of activity, 80% of return comes from just 20% of clients or effort and it urges businesses to focus on this 20%. Rapid English applies the same rigour for communicating in English, where 80% of communication comes from just 20% of the language. By focussing on the 20% of language that has a high frequency of use, students meet and practise language that has a high communicative value. Students are often amazed by how much they can do in a very short time and without confusion.

3. The detail

3.1 Approach

Students come to us at Reading Youth Offending Service either on referral or court orders. They work individually on computers, supported by teachers and volunteers. The teachers and students have access to a range of wall charts and each programme has paper-based student books and manuals for teachers. We collect and scan written samples of handwriting at the beginning of the course. It does not matter how poor the students are at writing, speaking or reading. The programmes analyse the problems of each student

individually and present the solutions one at a time in clear, logical steps. As students master each skill, we collect further samples to compare with the initial one. Many of our young people come to us with a poor self-image after years of failure but this changes when they see they can make rapid progress.

Our students usually have difficulty reading words, especially in context, and they have developed strategies to avoid reading or speaking in class. The pronunciation system allows them to make progress which they can hear for themselves and this gives them increased control and confidence. The students can apply this to any text they read. They find that they can read words in context as well as pronounce longer words, which were once inaccessible to them. This boosts their confidence and encourages them to re-engage with learning.

Rapid English uses in-house programmes to measure the frequency of use of English. We identify the key 20% of the language, which lets students communicate independently.

By measuring what we are aiming for, we can manage the teaching process much more efficiently. By taking samples of the target language, we can identify which parts of the language are most frequent. At secondary level, analysis of year 9 SATs and year 11 GCSE exams shows that 73% of sentences are simple or compound. The programmes establish the simple sentences first.

It is the same with tenses. The present simple and past simple tenses represent around 70% of all tense usage. Therefore, our programmes establish these tenses first: the present simple to describe people, places and things; and the past simple tense to narrate or recount stories in chronological order about the past.

We can also analyse punctuation. The main three (capital letters, full stops and commas) represent 86% of the target punctuation analysed. Our programmes give lots of practice. When working with young offenders, it is important not to make the learning task more difficult than it needs to be, as they are easily discouraged.

Many teachers (and perhaps students) spend sleepless nights over the use (or misuse) of the apostrophe. Research shows that the huge effort invested in its teaching is better spent in teaching the 95% of use without the apostrophe. Establishing first the main use of a final s without the apostrophe results in far less confusion and fewer mistakes.

The research also includes a detailed study of errors actually made by students during a five-year period in a typical British secondary school. These errors were recorded using our in-house computer programme, which allowed corrections to be collected as an on-going part of the normal curriculum. The use of a computer-aided correction system allows detailed analysis within each family of errors. This targets the key mistakes and helps us to develop the interactive solutions to overcome those problems that are holding the students back. It is the application of this research that helps Rapid English to make a real difference for young offenders.

So far the approach has been used in only a few whole-class settings but each time the results have shown that students benefit and achieve above-average results even when entered for standard National Curriculum tests. Its targeted application with individual offenders helps them with mainstream education.

Rapid English has used the research to create many interactive computer programmes that teach students to communicate simply, clearly and efficiently. These programmes can be used as single programmes, or combined as a relational database with access to every programme from a single screen.

Each student has an individual student tracking record starting with a set of diagnostic tests. These establish the strong and weak points in each of the communication skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening. The results give a suggested starting point and an individual study-plan using the various interactive solutions.

Each interactive programme can be used on any PC-based computer. Each programme also comes with a printed student book for use when computers are not available, or as a change of approach when revising work already done on the computer. Our young offenders respond well to this variety.

The handwriting programme is an excellent starting point as it tackles a problem common to many young offenders and it always produces rapid results. For many of our students, their achievements with this programme often represent their first success in many years, and they start to believe that success is possible. As they use the programme, students print out individual sheets and work on them. Each sheet presents various options and the students choose the option that feels most comfortable for them. The students remain in charge at all times. The teacher offers choices and the student decides. We constantly monitor the reaction of our students and we get their feedback on a regular basis as part of the student tracking system. They also contribute ideas and opinions on how to improve the layout of screens as well as checking the use of the navigation and control buttons.

In another programme, we use the fact that 40% of statements are simple (one subject plus one verb) and over 60% of tenses are present and past simple. With these, students find that they can communicate about the world around them using simple statements and simple tenses. It is easy to build from this solid foundation.

Students create single sentences with help from drop-down menus for the subject and verb. The student can change the menus by changing the subject (I, he, she, it, etc) at any time. The students select the subject and verbs depending on the person or place they are describing.

When they finish the individual sentences, they go to the next screen and simply click on a button and all the sentences merge together into one complete paragraph. This is usually greeted with cries of delight the first time students see this happen. The students then select a different person or place and start another set of sentences.

After completing several of these simple paragraphs, students begin to operate more naturally. They think of more people they know and they decide what they want to say about them. With this new confidence, they go to the next stage where they re-visit the simple sentences and add extra information to some (but not all) of their sentences. The students are often amazed, after adding information to just a few sentences, just how much fuller their paragraphs are. This type of exercise is only possible using technology so that the student can focus at the sentence level to communicate the ideas while the computer looks after the paragraphs.

Success with young offenders means breaking the cycle of failure. This comes from changing the learning experience. When they learn the key 20% of the language and use it interactively, they communicate simply and clearly. The logical progression and the support that students get from the programmes motivate them to continue. Students quickly become more confident and they enjoy getting better results. They give us positive feedback about the new learning experience and the progress they make. Their suggestions lead to more innovation. Teach the 20 percent and you get the 80 percent. This is our project approach: methodology with technology.

3.2 Scale

The project started in 2003, and continued one day per week until 2006. We worked with three or four students per week for one hour each. A grant from NIACE in 2006 allowed us to expand to three days a week, enabling us to teach over 80 students a month. Students are sent from the intensive supervision and surveillance programme (ISSP) in Reading; Wokingham youth offending service has just started using Rapid English for one day a week.

3.3 Impact ...

... on learners, teachers, partners, staff, etc

The greatest impact has been on the number of students and on the quality of their work. Attendance before the expansion was about 50%. This rose to 85% even with the increased number of students. Caseworkers report a much better attitude with those students who attend.

... on the organisation

Other youth offending services have recognised the work done by the Reading service, and we have regular visitors coming to see what we are doing. Staff members are enthusiastic and have confidence in the service offered to their young people. Even staff not directly involved with the project often find themselves talking to other organisations about it.

3.4 Costs and benefits

Reading Borough Council has funded the project from the start from its youth justice budget and this was supplemented by the NIACE grant of £10,000. We hope to meet part of future funding through grants and by selling training to other organisations involved in offender learning.

4. Lessons, caveats, and implications

4.1 for the organisation

The project has been successful so far. Providing students are prepared to take the first step, they are likely to succeed. Less than five per cent of students are not prepared to take the first step because they are so disillusioned with education. We try to convince students to have a go, so that they can see that education can be different and can work for them.

4.2 for others

In changing the approach it is important not to be sidetracked by existing curricula, or more traditional methodology. It is the change of methodology, as well as the e-learning technology, that makes this approach work.

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