Intervention Strategies: Students at Risk

Marion King
Marion King is Chair of Higher Diploma Foundations and Diploma Foundations English at Al Ain Women’s College, Higher Colleges of Technology, U.A.E. She has worked in the Middle-East for the past seventeen years. She has an MA in TEFL from the University of Reading in the U.K.
Background

Al Ain Women’s College (AAWC), which is part of a system of colleges known as the Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT) in the United Arab Emirates, has a yearly intake of 500 students fresh from high school. The majority of these students enter into a foundation year, which equips them with the skills they need in English, Maths and IT to progress into their programmes of choice in either Diploma or Higher Diploma/Bachelors. Approximately 80% of students at AAWC, enter at a false beginner or lower elementary level of English and are placed in the Diploma Foundations (DF) programme. The remaining 20% of students are placed in the Higher Diploma Foundations (HDF) programme.

As the college operates an open entry system, students are of varying levels and abilities in English and are streamed at the beginning of the year according to their placement indices and scores in the nationally run Common Educational Proficiency Assessment (CEPA).

Reasons for Setting up the Programme

There is evidence to suggest that poor reading skills in adults can lead to lower overall academic achievement (Arnbak, 2004). Indeed, this same obstacle to student success was felt to be a serious problem at AAWC since approximately 25% of students placed in AAWC’s Diploma Foundations programme were struggling to meet the requirements for progression. This was despite their having spent, on average, seven years studying English in high schools and a further year of intensive language tuition in the foundation year. Several indicators showed that students’ literacy skills were significantly inferior to their ability to communicate orally. These indicators included assessment results, and feedback from teachers.

We know that proficient readers should be efficient and effective, able to construct meaning they can assimilate, and able to use strategies to seek the most direct path to meaning (Goodman, 2000). For the less proficient, struggling ESL readers at AAWC, there were fundamental weaknesses that needed to be addressed. However, due to the content demands of the core foundations programme, we came to the conclusion that it would be unlikely that students would have all their needs met in a large class setting, despite teachers’ best efforts to create classrooms that are responsive to every student.

Realising that these literacy problems could prevent significant numbers of students from progressing to the next level, based on results of regular in-class progress tests and teacher feedback, we concluded that intervention strategies were necessary. Faced with these challenges and committed to providing opportunities for success for each and every student, we embarked upon creating an intervention programme to assist with the task of improving weaker students’ literacy skills.

Our vision for a successful programme

Our intention was to put in place a programme that amongst other benefits would help students to become informed, critical and effective readers. However, we needed to be realistic about the nature of the problem as it manifested itself in our classrooms. Also, since there were quite large numbers of students involved and finite resources available, we needed to think carefully about the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of the programme.

In the setting up stage of the intervention programme, characteristics common to successful reading intervention programmes based on the work of Pikulski (1997) were considered. He
mentions that after reviewing the literature there are at least five early reading intervention programmes that have documented effectiveness and describes a number of factors that seem characteristic of these programmes. Many of the same factors were taken into consideration when designing the AAWC intervention programme and are over time gradually being incorporated into the programme. Important factors incorporated into the initial design of the programme were as follows:

1. a strong, effective program of regular classroom reading instruction
2. a small student-teacher ratio
3. reading for meaning
4. frequent and regular intervention of sufficient duration to make a difference
5. fast paced instruction

Knowledge of phonological skills, including phoneme awareness, is essential to the development of word decoding skills and necessary for students to become better readers. This is in addition to the other language skills needed, e.g. lexical knowledge and grammar, which are essential for meaningful comprehension of words and sentences (Ivey, 2006). Yet, our experience was of a body of students that were physically able to read, but less able to elicit meaning and place it within a broader context. From the literature too, we had also been made aware of pedagogical pitfalls such as focussing too heavily on semantic and syntactic decoding skills (Koda, 2005). For our students, the focus would be more on understanding text, its purpose and helping them to evaluate more globally the writers’ motives and message. This would require higher order thinking skills and knowledge about how and why texts operate in certain contexts.

Preparing the programme required that we had to identify some key skills and strategies necessary to decode text effectively at this level, and we had to know how students understand and comprehend what they have just read. We also agreed that it was necessary to include syllabus points that encouraged students to question and challenge what they have read and why it has been written.

We sought to incorporate into the programme syllabus characteristics that are common to successful reading intervention programmes, but with an emphasis on those features we felt to be most pertinent to our students. It is essential for literacy learning to be contextualised for struggling readers and to begin where the student is at, encouraging and empowering them to continue. Sensitive to the points above, AAWC designed its reading intervention programme around the specific needs of its struggling readers, whilst ensuring they remained active and receptive learners in the process.

**Setting up the Intervention Programme**

**Location**

The Student Success Centre, which is part of the Independent Learning Centre, was in part created for and therefore chosen as the location for the intervention programme. In September 2006, the space was designed to create an optimal learning environment for students facing problems with their learning, where they felt accepted because of their individual differences (Manuel, 2003). In addition to a monitored, large open space containing clusters of desks for small group study, there are also three small well-equipped mini-classrooms with seating for a maximum of six students and a teacher. These rooms can be booked for 30-60 minute periods throughout the day by departments scheduling intervention activities for students, by teachers wishing to give small group tuition to their students or by students wishing to study in a quiet space with their friends.
Identification of Students

Many of the students accepted for study in the foundation programme have a low level of English proficiency evidenced by their placement indices and further in-house diagnostic tests, and as such are monitored carefully in the initial weeks to determine whether or not they will need access to an intervention programme. There were many students who may have benefited from additional individualised support. Resources however, were limited and it was essential that they should be directed towards those who might benefit most. Results for AAWC students in the Diploma Foundations ‘must-pass’ end-of-year exam conducted across all HCT campuses were analysed for the June 2006 cohort of students. The results of this exam were compared with the results of each of the skills components of the progress tests students had sat during the course of the year to see if there was anything significant in the early stages of the course that could help to predict success later on and aid us in identifying those in need of additional support. The reading test midway through Semester One appeared to meet our criteria and act as an effective predictor of end-of-year success. We found that of the students who went on to fail at the end of the year, 95% had scored less than 48% in this reading test. Students who had scored 66% or more in the test had a 93% chance of going on to pass at the end of the year. Students who had scored between 50-65% had a 60% chance of success. We used the results of this test combined with teacher feedback on motivation, attitude and aptitude to help create our lists of students requiring help. Intervention classes were scheduled to start in week 11 of the first semester for all students who had scored less than 66% in the mid-semester reading exam. As resources were limited, we would monitor those in the lowest quartile and if little or no improvement was noted, then additional resources would be directed to the next group up. Since September 2006, we have been able to start intervention classes earlier, according to availability of resources, based on teachers’ recommendations and then reassess after the mid-semester exams.

Timetabling and attendance

Students were placed into groups of no larger than four students, according to skills weaknesses. They were scheduled to attend for two 30 minute sessions per week for a minimum period of 10 weeks i.e. until after the results of the subsequent progress tests. The sessions were slotted into gaps in their regular schedules, taking into consideration number of hours study in a day, breaks for lunch etc. This resulted in some students being expected to arrive half an hour earlier than usual on a particular day, or leaving up to one hour later than they were scheduled to do. Classes were compulsory. Students were informed clearly in advance and were even directed to the room they should report to by their English teachers, to save any confusion. Students had to meet with the Programme Chair if they had any unexcused absences after the first lesson. Word travelled rapidly that these classes were not optional and the majority of students settled into the new routine. Students who did not attend regularly were issued with contracts outlining their reasons for needing to attend and the consequences of not doing so. As classes proceeded, attendance was very good in general, with absences attributable mainly to sickness.

Staffing

The intervention programme was created as a direct response to very poor student success rates in DF in June 2006 in particular. It was important that intervention started as quickly as possible and as such there was little consultation with teachers in the preliminary stages. However, despite some reservations, they fully supported the idea of providing intervention considering it essential for success. Tuition was given by a small group of English teachers who were teaching the stronger sections. Hours of instruction were reduced for these sections by one to three hours per week, and these hours were used to provide intervention for the weaker students. Teachers created materials to practise the task types students would encounter in
their final exams and shared them with their colleagues. This reduced the amount of individual preparation for each teacher. A member of ILC faculty was appointed to take charge of the Student Success Centre and she too provided about 10 hours of tuition per week. The English programme Chair also contributed five hours of tuition. Additional hours were provided by an ILC technician who held a teaching qualification.

Factors Influencing the Design of the Programme

The literacy instruction students were to receive as part of the intervention was in addition to their regular classroom literacy instruction. It was also considered important to assist students in developing strategies to help build lexical knowledge to improve comprehension of texts etc. The inclusion of phonics to improve word recognition and spelling development was also an important factor. The teaching of phonics as part of remedial instruction is usually associated with beginning readers who still need help at the decoding level. Our readers do not fully fall into this category. They can better be described as inexperienced readers who need help making meaning from the ever more complex texts they are exposed to upon entry to college. However, we have noticed gaps in students' knowledge at this level which phonics instruction has helped to fill. Literature in this area also demonstrates that phoneme awareness training, particularly when combined with letter-sound teaching, results in improved reading and spelling development (Ryan & Meara, 1991; Fender, 2008). It is important to note that phoneme awareness training should not be conducted as a series of isolated drills and exercises, but should be taught through the use of interesting and meaningful texts. Intervention programmes, especially those dealing with the teaching of phonics to adults, can sometimes be criticised for teaching decontextualised skills or using age inappropriate reading material. Aware of this, we tried to design materials that were meaningful and could serve a variety of purposes. A reading text about a topic of interest to our students, brought in by students or provided by the teacher, e.g. weddings in different cultures, could be introduced with photographs and pictures to generate discussion and to elicit some of the language that might be contained in the text. This could be followed up with creating questions we'd like answered by the text and then reading to see if our answers are contained in the text. There may also be comprehension or True/False questions to practise the skills needed for coping with texts in exams. For homework students would highlight new words and add them to their personal vocabulary books, checking for meaning in bilingual dictionaries. Supplementary phonics work would centre around this text too. We use an adult friendly, ready-made phonics programme, Get Reading (Anderson, 2006) created specially for our students, but suitable for use in any similar context. The focus for the week might be the short vowels /æ/ and /ə/. Students would be asked to find words in the text that contain these sounds. At home they would do the online phonics activities contained in the Get Reading programme to help them with the task. Their progress would be checked at the start of the next intervention session.

The use of comprehensible and meaningful texts was a key factor. It was important to select texts students could enjoy interacting with and which were suited to their age and interests. As mentioned earlier, students were encouraged to bring their own reading material to class, too. Material that is accessible and selected by the student as often as provided by the teacher is seen as a critical factor in ongoing reading achievement (Fischer, 1999). Writing was also included as we see it as being integrally connected to the other literacy skills of reading, speaking and listening and it is used to teach and extend word identification skills while consolidating work at the sentence and simple paragraph level. Again, this allowed students to contribute and have ownership of the curriculum they are expected to engage with. Writing topics would be generated through discussion with students.

Length of classes and their frequency was another consideration. Students are already engaged in 15 hours of English instruction and a further 10 hours of content instruction through the medium of English each week. As we have found that weaker students in particular have
trouble concentrating when tired, two thirty minute blocks of instruction were scheduled and the
teacher-student ratio was set at one to four. Teachers were given the freedom to create and
source suitable materials which were used exclusively with these classes. The instruction was
fast paced to maintain student interest and to best utilise the time. Homework was also set for
these classes so they were viewed by students as an integral part of their learning and not an
unrelated ‘extra.’

In addition to the intervention strategies, in their regular classes teachers mainly employed
an interactive model of the reading process (Eskey, 2000). Many activities common to the
regular classes such as jigsaw readings, role plays and drama were used. However, these
were supplemented with additional activities, some of which relied on Web 2.0 technologies
such as edublogs, which allow students to publish their work and give feedback on others’ work,
in addition to taking part in online discussions. Hot seating, a technique often used in drama
classrooms, where individual students take on the role of one of the characters in a particular
story or play they have read and other students ask questions, has proved a very effective
tool for helping even the weakest of students engage with a text in a meaningful way. Other
teachers have used cognitive organisers, e.g. mind maps and graphic organisers as powerful
and engaging ways of helping students anchor the experience of reading and provide additional
opportunities for students experiencing difficulties to respond.

Student and Teacher Reactions

Teachers were positive but had some reservations about certain aspects of the intervention
programme. Many believed that 30 minutes was too short a period to achieve anything
significant with the students. Others were concerned that the students were being overloaded
and would not be able to concentrate in their other lessons. A further concern was that students
were merely repeating the skills and strategies they had been unsuccessful learning in class.
However, after a short settling-in period, teachers began reporting back positively about student
attitude and motivation. Class teachers also reported that they were seeing improvement in
many of their students in their regular classes.

Students were initially perplexed by why they had to attend these classes. They appeared to
perceive them as a punishment for being weak. A surprising turn-around in attitude came about
three weeks into the first course. Students’ classmates began to request these classes and
insisted their names were added to waiting lists. In general, students who were registered for the
classes attended regularly, were punctual and completed homework assignments willingly. They
responded well to the small group, supportive atmosphere and would ask questions about other
areas of language they were studying in their regular classes. They also allowed each other
to answer questions without interrupting or providing answers when their friends were stuck,
beginning to understand that each one was responsible for their own learning.

Effectiveness of the Intervention Programme

The effectiveness of the intervention programme was measured at the end of the year. The
target for each student is to gain entry to the first year of the Diploma programme. There are
high stakes must-pass exams in English and Maths which account for 30% of the year’s grade
in each subject. In English, students are required to pass a four skills exam in reading, writing,
listening and speaking, where the weightings for these skills are 35, 30, 25, and 10 percent
respectively. There is no minimum pass mark required for each skill, but students must have a
minimum score of 60% in both coursework and final exam to meet the requirements for entry to
the Diploma programme. A comparison of the results for performance in the reading and writing
exams across three academic years 2005-2006, 2006-2007, and 2007-2008 is shown in Table
These results include students who did not need to attend the intervention programme, which might suggest that the gains for the remediated students were even higher.

Table 1. AAWC reading and writing results compared to all HCT students’ average, 2006-2008.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>June 2006</th>
<th>June 2007</th>
<th>June 2008</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AAWC Reading Average%</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All HCT students: Reading Average %</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AAWC Writing Average %</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All HCT students: Writing Average %</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Improvement in reading and writing exam results can be seen across the years. In June 2006, prior to formalised intervention taking place, results were significantly below the system average. (This coincided with a change to the assessment tool, which is reflected in a low exam average for all HCT students taking reading and writing exams in that particular year.) In June 2007, the results show a dramatic improvement in both areas for AAWC students and all HCT students in general. However, the results for AAWC students compared to results for all HCT students shows an improvement on the previous year. Whereas in 2006 AAWC students performed five to six percentage points below the average for all HCT students in both reading and writing, in 2007 the gap was much smaller in reading, just two points below compared to the all HCT student average, with writing being the same. In the final year results were better than the HCT average in both areas, by one percentage point for reading and three percentage points for writing.

An analysis of overall success rates for students attending the intervention is provided in the Appendix. However, a brief summary of the results provides us with the following information. The pass rate for 131 Diploma Foundations students enrolled in the intervention programme throughout the year was 91% (excluding withdrawals) and 72% for a slow-track Diploma Foundations cohort. The slow-track students had weaker language levels than the regular students and as such were placed in a three semester, rather than a regular two semester programme, in the belief that additional time might give them more time to assimilate the language and help them achieve success. It is believed many of these students would have failed without intervention, especially the slow-track students, where 58% of those who were successful passed with D grades. 85% of the regular track students passed with grades of C or above, which is a good indicator for their continued success. The 10 students who failed at the end of the year had all received a minimum of 10 weeks of remediation.

Conclusion

Summary of what works

The intervention programme at AAWC is still at an early stage in terms of its development. The success of a project of this nature requires buy-in from a number of different stakeholders, i.e. students, teachers, ILC and library staff, Programme Chairs, Deans and Directors. It would not be possible to run the programme efficiently and effectively without having the support of all these people, and a common belief that successful language learning is within the grasp of these students.

Resources are of course an issue, especially if a cohort of students is particularly weak and demand for intervention is great. In the initial stages we were unable to invest a great deal of
resources into the project as we had no concrete evidence to suggest this kind of intervention could work. However, the results of the past two years have provided us with the evidence we needed to continue. Resources continue to be an issue as the current HCT funding model does not provide a separate budget for intervention. However, student success is a priority for AAWC and available resources are channelled in this direction.

One of the most rewarding aspects of this project has been seeing the change in students’ understanding of their role in the language learning process and seeing the subsequent changes in confidence as they succeed and grow.

**What could work better**

In terms of difficulties faced along the way, the main one has been the staffing and timetabling of these classes. Although we now have two dedicated Student Success Centre faculty, in times of staff shortage they can be pulled back into regular classes reducing drastically the number of contact hours they can provide for intervention. Intervention is not limited to the foundations year which also means we compete for hours with other programmes. This results in staffing being on quite an ad hoc basis which means timetabling cannot done at the same time as the regular scheduling takes place. This also leads to rather tedious manual scheduling which can be quite time consuming.

**Plans for the future**

Teacher training and development is an important area to focus on in the future. Our teachers are highly trained, competent professionals with many years of experience of language teaching. However, the skills teachers require for the short intervention classes can in some cases be quite different to the skill sets they require for regular classroom language teaching across a broad range of levels. Teachers with experience of or training in special needs education might broaden and enrich the current programme we offer and may help us reach and guide even more students to success. What we can be certain of is that all teachers need to be equipped with meaningful and practical knowledge, skills, and understanding about how and in what ways to meet the needs of students who are facing difficulties. Training and development would help us move in this direction.

In the early stages of the programme the intervention was geared towards providing students with the skills and strategies needed to pass their exams. We still include development of exam skills and strategies, but over time we have broadened the focus and have now taken on the role of facilitators guiding students into taking more responsibility for their own literacy learning development. In the coming academic year we will also be looking at developing a more comprehensive syllabus to run alongside the regular language syllabus to ensure we are meeting the needs of our students who are facing difficulties and to help us work towards continuity in the future. We are proud of our achievements so far, but understand there is still much work to do.

**References**


AAWC AT-RISK RESULTS FOR ENGLISH 0155

October 2007, 90 students identified as 'at risk' based on teacher evaluation and class assessment.

- Students assigned to small group (4dst) remedial sessions led by English faculty, supervisor and ILC English staff
- Sessions target identified individual skills weaknesses

26 students are withdrawn from program due to satisfactory progress i.e scores of 66% or more in End of Semester 1 exams

- Ongoing evaluation of student progress to determine need for students to remain in the programme. 58 students successful at End of Semester 1. 24 students continue to fail.

56 students continue. An additional 49 DF students identified as 'at risk'. 33 EF students also identified as borderline and able to benefit from remediation.

20 students pass at end of year. 3 students fail. 3 students withdraw.

105 DF students attend classes – 91% pass at end of year. 33 EF students attend: 72% pass at end of year.

Required attendance is 2 x 30 minute sessions every week

Attendance problems are dealt with by a range of intervention strategies including verbal warnings, written warnings, calls to parents and disciplinary probation

8 students withdraw from AAWC

Summary

The pass rate for 131 DF students enrolled in the 'at-risk' programme throughout the year was 91% (excluding withdrawals) and 72% for EF students. It is believed many of these students would have failed without intervention, especially the EF students, where 58% passed with D grades. 65% of DF students passed with grades of C or above, which bodes well for their continued success. The 10 DF students who failed at the end of the year had all received a minimum of 10 weeks of remediation. Although in the initial stages students appear to resent attending the extra classes, after a very short amount of time they begin to see the benefits and in general attend regularly. In addition, there were many unexpected requests to attend, from students not scheduled for these classes.

AY 2007-08