Think, Reflect, Succeed: Using Reflective Thinking Routines to Develop Agency in Year 8 Girls in the French Classroom

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Abstract

This action research project explored how 12–13 year-old girls engaged in a reflective thinking routine, which aimed at increasing their agency in French lessons. The research was conducted with a group of 14 students at an all-girls' independent school in London, England. In this project, students added their questions to a physical question wall, then explored answers and related ideas together. Their discussions supported aspects such as consolidation of complex grammar, writing feedback, and topic revision. Data collected were qualitative in nature and captured by questionnaires, interviews, my field journal, lesson observations, artefacts, and student written work. The results indicated that use of a thinking routine developed individual question competence, peer questions enhanced their classmates' learning, the question wall provided potential for stretch and challenge, and the transactional nature of the studentteacher dynamic shifted over the ten weeks of the project. The students articulated the positive impact of the project on their sense of agency and discussed how thinking routines could be used moving forward. The effectiveness of the thinking routine with other year groups and other academic subjects can next be ascertained.

Glossary

Reflective thinking routine: The regular practice of a strategy which nurtures reflective thinking.

Student-Generated questions: Questions that the students generate following a period of reflection.

Agency: Empowering students to take a more active role in their learning.

Question wall: Students add their post-it questions to this board, annotate them with answers or further explorations, and then discuss.

Polyangulation: "The process of relating or integrating two or more sources of data in order to establish their quality and accuracy" (Mertler, 2020, p.313).

Study Skills programme: A Putney High initiative to promote our modern scholarship ethos by focussing on different key learning skills in each year group.

The inquiry classroom: A teaching and learning setting where questions and thinking are at the heart of the learning process (MacKenzie, 2024).

Modern scholarship: Putney High's ethos aims at making learning fun, challenging, relevant and selfmotivated. It also encourages students to develop real-world skills and an agile mindset.

GARC: Global Action Research Collaborative.

GCSE: General Certificate of Secondary Education (UK)

in Year 8 Girls in the French Classroom

In response to the 2024-25 GARC research topic, "Girls as Agents of their Learning: Creating a Culture of Empowerment and Engagement," I hoped to address a limiting idea that I had heard expressed by students in girls' schools for ten years—namely that languages are difficult—by increasing empowerment and engagement.

I considered the role of personal reflection and thinking in my French classroom. I have always been passionate about questioning as a tool for checking understanding and catering for the needs of all abilities. Most research in this area focusses on teacher questions. I observed such questioning as maintaining an element of passivity, given the stimulus is determined by somebody else and a teacher-led dynamic remains. Research also focusses on thinking routines specifically aimed at developing student question competence over time for project-based work. The research gap I perceived was exploring how the power of student-generated questions within a reflective thinking routine could be harnessed to support agency in the lesson-by-lesson experience of the academic curriculum.

My project explored whether student-generated questions could create more authentic engagement, and help girls develop a greater understanding of their own needs and greater skills for expressing those needs. Agency underpins each of these strands. Student curiosity, which is crucial for success in the inquiry classroom (MacKenzie, 2024), would organically direct the learning. Another important factor in our highly academic school setting was analysing how routine reflection could encourage higher-order thinking and stretch. Equally, allowing for student voice to take centre stage in the process fulfilled the school's key criteria of being inclusive.

These considerations culminated in the research question: How does using reflective thinking routines develop agency in Year 8 girls in the French classroom? Using action research methodology for this project was ideal, as it is practical, inductive and measured by authentic student experience (Mertler, 2020). Grounded in a qualitative, constructivist framework, action research focuses on narrative, descriptive data rather than numerical analysis, through iterative reflection and

collaboration between researchers and participants. This approach allows for an indepth understanding of student perspectives, fostering meaningful change informed by real-world educational contexts.

The Literature Review

To reverse the culture of spoon-feeding, educators need to avoid doing thinking for students (Burman, 2023). MacKenzie (2024) further argues, “students have been taught out of agency, so give them the time and space to discover it” (p.350). Burman describes the hallmarks of agency as “intense concentration, managing distractions, persistence, intrinsic motivation, energy and drive to explore complex and creative thinking” (p.5). A Harvard report (Fergusson et al., 2015) lists factors related to building agency, such as academic mindsets involving growth mindset, sense of efficacy and academic perseverance; requiring grit, tenacity and self-control. The principle of these agentic mindsets is that skills fostered through teaching become positively embedded in the student identity (Fergusson et al., 2015). An example is the change in perspective from “we focus on being organised” to “I am well organised,” and inner drive is necessary because “the essence of growth mindset is that effort begets ability” (Fergusson et al., 2015, p.24).

Promoting student agency and an agile mindset (TEDx Talks, 2014) is particularly relevant to girls. Kevin Stannard (2024) reports that boys tend to consistently over-estimate their ability and performance, while girls lack confidence and tend to underestimate these. Stannard continues, stating that girls also tend to be compliant, conformist, and willing to please. In the classroom, Burman (2023) aptly identifies mindless compliance as the polar opposite of self-agency and that, in education. Furthermore, low self-confidence mixed with high motivation to do well leads to a “choking under self-imposed pressure [and a] closed mindset” (Stannard, 2024, p.51). One strategy aimed at relieving this sense of pressure is Dweck’s “power of yet” (TEDx Talks, 2014), praising process over achievement to boost confidence and give “a path into the future that creates greater persistence.” This perseverance or “grit” (TED, 2013), as defined by Duckworth, builds stamina and resilience in the face of seeming failure and increases self-efficacy beliefs.

Regarding practical classroom strategies encouraging agency, there has been much research into teacher questioning as a powerful formative assessment tool that elicits agency through engagement and inquiry (Athanases, 2013; MacKenzie, 2020; MacKenzie, 2024; Smart & Marshall, 2013; Victorian Academy, 2023). Nottingham (Victorian Academy, 2023) proposes that engagement is whatever you are thinking about and rather than asking "who is engaged?" in the classroom, ask "who is thinking?". He starts any student interaction by saying the most important things they are going to do are listen and think. Lilijedahl (2021) adds, thinking is a necessary precursor to learning and, "if students are not thinking, they are not learning" (p.5). Furthermore, MacKenzie (2020) states that questions are the heart of inquiry because they show your thinking, explore your strengths and areas for development as a learner, and give genuine student voice. In this way, students can shape their own learning and feel empowered. Meanwhile, Smart and Marshall (2013) add that in noninquiry based contexts the teacher's questions are closed, meaning narrow in focus with a fixed response, on the premise that the teacher is the authority and students should accept their knowledge. In inquiry-based settings, questions are open, create higher order thinking, re-direct the evaluative role back to the students and allow for a co-construction of knowledge (Smart & Marshall, 2013).

There is less research regarding student-generated questions. Tarin Harrar Weiss (2013) suggests students should be given the space to ask their own questions and Rothstein et al. (2017) argue that formulating one's own questions is the single most essential skill for learning. Additionally, the Right Question Institute (2017) asserts, "the person who owns the questions, owns the learning," identifying that student-generated questions are even more valuable in terms of agency than teacher questions.

"Question" or "Thinking" routines are less likely to have an impact as a one-off experience, while established routines can "nurture a culture of questioning … in which an inquiry mindset thrives and student voice, choice and ownership are evident in the role their questions play in the learning" (MacKenzie 2024, p.xviii). While this proposal provides new insight into student-generated

questions, a gap remains in giving focus to secondary age students. Equally, MacKenzie's case studies tend to focus on primary age settings and longer term project work, rarely on lesson-bylesson support of academic content.

Worth considering alongside inquiry is Yagcioglu's (2023) exploration of embodied cognition and its impact on foreign language learning within classroom settings. Embodied cognition theories highlight specifically the mind-body connection that relates to knowledge acquisition (Macrine & Fugate, 2020). Yagcioglu suggests that by allowing learners to physically participate in their learning process, educators can promote student agency. Equally, by tapping into the body's role in cognition, educators can create dynamic and engaging learning environments that cater to diverse learning styles and preferences. Focussing again on the language learning classroom, LarsenFreeman (2019) contends the issue of agency is particularly relevant due to the negatively prescriptive nature of developmental sequences. Hiver et al. (2021) address the same problem from a different perspective, observing that unhelpful strategies applied to "make" students learn result in students' perception that a new language only comes with difficulty. This challenge is reflected in the 30% decline in French entries at the GCSE from 2014–2018 (Tinsley, 2019). Furthermore, due to severe grading at GCSE, a consequent feeling among students that their ability is not as high in modern languages as in other subjects and the resulting lower uptake at A level, the proportion of providers offering French AS or A level dropped from 78% to 53% in 2021–22 (Dimsdale, 2024).

Regarding success for girls specifically, while some support the stereotype that girls have an advantage in language learning (Parrish, 2021; Tinsley, 2019), a study by Wucherer and Reiterer (2016) found an overall open-minded, extrovert, and motivated personality is most likely to succeed. This makes a sense of agency essential for girls "who are the most debilitated by the fear of failure" (Stannard, 2024, p.48). Hart (2016) states the "discussion-based" nature of questioning increases engagement for girls in particular. Additionally, Stannard (2024) and Hart (2016) agree that girls in single-sex schools are more likely to take risks and ask more questions.

Bearing in mind these insights into developing agency within my French teaching context, I introduced a reflective thinking routine using student-generated questions to my Year 8 group.

Methodology

Research Context

Putney High School is a highly academic independent all-girls' school in south-west London, United Kingdom. Students can attend from ages four to 18 years old. In 2024, the school had 1055 pupils and was a member of the Girls' Day School Trust comprising 25 schools across the UK, with 19,500 students in total. My project aligned closely with the Year 8 focus on reflection within the Putney High Study Skills programme and as a powerful self-efficacy tool, it promotes our central ethos of modern scholarship. Guided by our ethos, Putney girls should be innovative, intrepid, intellectual, and inclusive.

My research was undertaken with a class of 14 Year 8 pupils, aged 12 to 13 years old. The research took place at the start of the academic year over ten weeks, from September to December. Lessons were twice weekly and, alongside the project, the demanding academic curriculum needed to be covered. I had taught these girls since they started learning French in Year 7 and this established relationship was one reason for choosing the group. Another factor was tackling the confidence knock typically experienced by students in Year 8 when the grammar jumps in complexity. Lastly, choosing Year 8 fulfilled my aim to embed key thinking skills at an early stage in secondary school.

To protect the participants' privacy and gain the necessary permissions, I wrote to parents prior to the research period, outlining the research aims, process, and documentation of student responses. The letter clearly stated that girls could opt-out without being disadvantaged in any way and that all data collected would be both confidential and anonymous.

The Action

The central focus of this research project was embedding thinking routines to develop agency through reflection, to provide support for the academic curriculum. Firstly, I introduced the project to the students and discussed the importance of asking questions in class and how questions demonstrate thinking and thinking demonstrates engagement. The premise was that any problem or curiosity that came to mind, however small, was welcome in the spirit of us sharing and learning together. From the second week onwards, a post-it sticky note was placed on each student's desk as they arrived. During the lesson, students wrote questions on the notes which they then added to the question wall. A leader, myself or one of the students, would field discussion on questions from the board, making annotations, adding ideas, and elaborating on concepts. Student responses and related inquiry led the learning from there, rather than my PowerPoint presentation.

The thinking routine evolved through continual dialogue with the students, in response to their needs and preferences. From a "question of the day" over the whole lesson, we moved to strategically chosen thinking stops; times when reflection would be most needed and fruitful. To internally trigger the reflection process, thinking stops were indicated with a PowerPoint icon (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

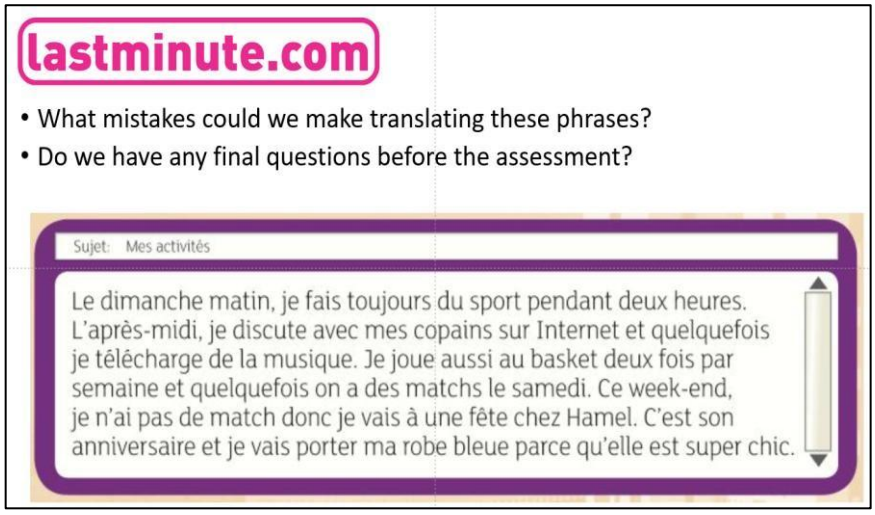
Icon Denoting a Thinking Stop

Students were given a one minute "silent time" to help increase their depth of reflection prior to generating questions, although this was needed less as the routine became embedded. To

support question generation further, a visual stimulus was provided in the form of grammar explanations, short French texts, marked questions or a previous question wall (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Visual Stimulus to Promote Question Generation



To maximise student agency, girls increasingly led the inquiry session at the question wall and invited other students to come up and write their responses or comments. As facilitator, I monitored student responses for accuracy, occasionally added my own question to the wall, and elaborated on certain responses to enable cognitive challenge. A half-way check-point session in November re-stated the aims of what was deliberately referred to as "our" project. The final weeks of the project corresponded with revision and feedback for our end of term writing assessment as well as the introduction of a challenging grammar area, so students were able to make full use of their newly acquired skills to approach these lessons with confidence.

Data Collection

During the ten weeks of practising reflective thinking routines with my Year 8 French students, I adopted a mixed-methods approach (Mertler 2020) to collect data, with an emphasis on qualitative data because I needed to hear from the girls about how their thinking processes were developing. This was not related to grades they achieved, although, if they started being more

assertive about their misconceptions and needs, I recognised their understanding could increase and their summative marks could potentially improve.

The data collection started with a baseline (online) questionnaire aimed at understanding any pre-conceived ideas about student-generated questions. The key artefacts in my research project were post-it notes, a fresh one each lesson per student, on which their questions were written. At the end of lessons, photographs were taken of the whiteboard post-it displays and any written responses so that I could track our progress. Regular semi-structured lesson observations allowed colleagues the flexibility to engage in periods of observation while filming or photographing key sections of my lessons (Mertler 2020).

At a mid-way point through the research, groups of students were invited to interviews so that I could document their responses to the research process. In semi-structured interviews I asked several base questions, with optional follow-up questions if needed (Mertler 2020). Student voice was key, since I was determined to take my lead from the students. I also kept a field journal throughout the process to systematically document lesson reflections for future reference and to order my thoughts. A summative questionnaire at the end of the action allowed for comparisons with the baseline questionnaire and cross-referencing with the other data.

Data Analysis

The rich variety of qualitative data were polyangulated using the inductive approach of organise, describe, interpret (Mertler 2020). The recorded interviews were transcribed and coded. Data were analysed steadily throughout the project, so that I could spot similar types of information or trends and for deciding on next steps. This developed into a thematic analysis of the data through study of the patterns emerging from student voice and teacher observation. Student voice proved by far the most valuable resource. Remembering that the value of any data was in how it directly answered my research question was essential for maintaining focus amidst the abundance of data generated by the research project. Several patterns and trends emerged and of these, four key themes are explored in detail below.

Discussion of Results

The four key findings I identified from my data analysis were related to question generation, the power of peer questions, the impact of individuals' questions on their depth of understanding and the perceived shift in the student-teacher dynamic.

Thinking Routines Develop Question Competence

Prior to the intervention, I had observed that this class consistently put their hands up to ask me questions. However, in the first lesson of the thinking routine where the questioning format was slightly more formalised, they seemed to freeze and not one girl wrote a question. Students expressed fear of failure in the baseline questionnaire: "I do get nervous wondering if the question isn't silly or stupid," "sometimes I become embarrassed," or questions "come out wrong." The action, therefore, went through an evolution of creative adaptation to encourage questiongeneration and in doing so, facilitate agency. According to my field journal, making the post-it notes anonymous was an excellent starting point because students felt less inhibited about producing and sharing questions. On the use of visual stimuli or "provocations" (MacKenzie, 2024), such as grammar charts or even the picture of a previous question wall, Student B remarked, "[if] you look at it for long enough, then you always think, why?". Supporting Yagcioglu's (2023) embodied cognition research, my field journal also suggested that having movement as part of the inquiry process kept the class dynamic; students emitted a fizz of interest as their friends posted questions on the question wall, then went up to add their own. Of our "silent time," Student H said, "it helps me to think, like, quietly because everyone is thinking."

Comments in the second questionnaire also vindicated my continued efforts to create space for inquiry, despite the demands of the curriculum, because students appreciated "a second to reflect without learning even more" (Student F). Space prevented students from feeling "on the spot" (Student C) and my field journal noted how the associated sense of freedom allowed curiosity and agency to flow. Throughout the project, I endeavoured to follow Mackenzie's (2024) guidance that providing space for reflection is essential and that lessons should revolve around facilitating inquiry

“skills and habits” and “dispositions of mind,” rather than covering content, since training in these will provide enduring support for all future studies (TeachersPD, 2021).

The growth in confidence was striking by the second round of interviews. Student B said the routine “helped us get in the mindset,” while Student F revealed, “I found it hard at first but now I get six questions every time,” and yet another felt they were “more aware of mistakes and the kinds of questions I can ask (to help).”

The impact of physically writing questions down was the most unexpected aspect of my findings. Interview observations highlighted the student perception that writing questions gives you time to think, you are forced to articulate more clearly than if you immediately ask the teacher, and “something seems complicated in your head, simpler once formulated on paper” (Student G). Another added, “I develop the ability to work things out myself when I write a question”. Indeed, first observed by my mentor, then seen frequently in both interviews and questionnaires, was the realisation, “I write a question down and, wait, I know the answer!” (Student J).

Peer Questions are a Powerful Tool for Supporting a Students’ own Reflective Thinking . “I prefer listening to other people’s questions … I hear others’ questions and think, what about this?” (Student B). Others commented in questionnaires, “sometimes I don’t know how to phrase a thing but someone else does and I learn from them” (Student A), “listening to others’ questions gives me a deeper understanding” (Student E), and “so many minds in one classroom. Not one mind can think of every question there is” (Student J). When asked in an interview about the impact of the question wall, a student described it, “like a mind-map, lots of different things come up” and another of the questions, “we work them out together … like making teamwork happen, the teacher just helps if needed.” Sometimes the question wall contained similar or repeated questions indicating where support was needed, meaning I could address the question in aggregate rather than walking around repeating it individually. Student B added in an interview that “[it’s] nice when there is a similar question to yours, you’re not the only one struggling, thinking why am I not getting this?.”

Questionnaire responses also highlighted that when students understand the feelings and the struggles of peers, their questions can feel more relatable and relevant than mine. In summary, the collaborative nature of our thinking routine efficiently maximised the group's collective mind so that students could use the reassurance, support and motivation provided by their peers to develop their own agency.

Questions Act as a Springboard for Deeper Inquiry and Cognitive Stretch, Promoting an Inquiry Mindset

There was a recurrent link between questions and confusion in the baseline questionnaires: "I ask questions if I'm confused," "good in case we are still confused." By the second questionnaires, the purpose of questions became "deeper meaning" and "understanding in more detail." My field journal also outlined a transition in lessons into a deeper and more confident spirit of inquiry: "You think you know, then maybe there's more" reflected Student Z in a class discussion. Interviews suggested students were reassured by knowing every question on the wall would be answered, meaning that students of all abilities would have their queries dealt with: "Nobody is left out" (Student E), whereas "in other lessons, if you don't get picked to ask your question, you stay stuck." (Student I). Equally, "in (other) lessons it's a quick answer" (Student M), allowing for less depth than the question wall work. Meanwhile, "there is less processing overload in a lesson when you stop to do the thinking routine" (Student C).

Given MacKenzie's findings (2024), I expected cognitive stretch to be seen through an evolution of the kind of questions formulated. It is true that I recorded a range of simple to more reflective questions added to the question wall (see Figure 3), but there were examples of both throughout the research, rather than an increase in reflective questions towards the end. In practice, lesson observations revealed cognitive stretch arose from what we were doing with the questions. One example was creating "star phrases" by extending phrases from the question wall; a simple question about sentence translation could evolve through discussion into a highly sophisticated sentence (see Figure 4).

Figure 3

Examples of Reflective Questions

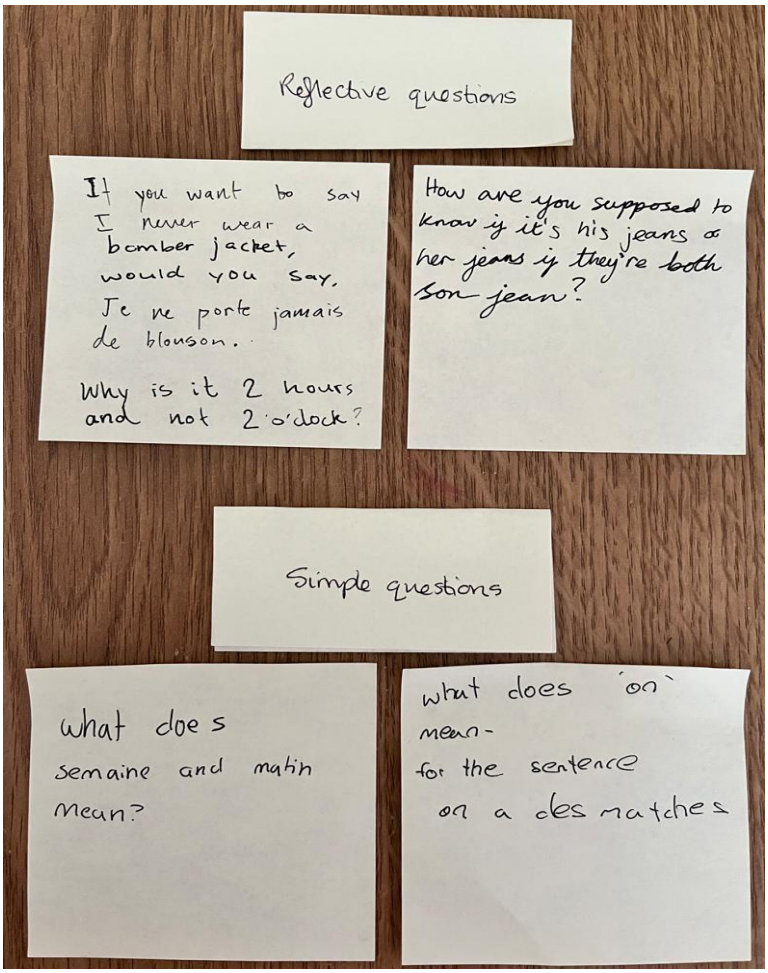
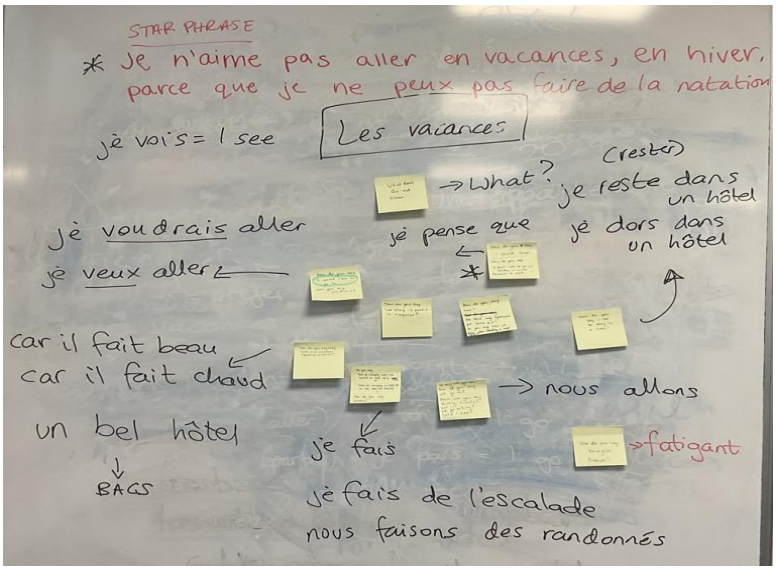


Figure 4

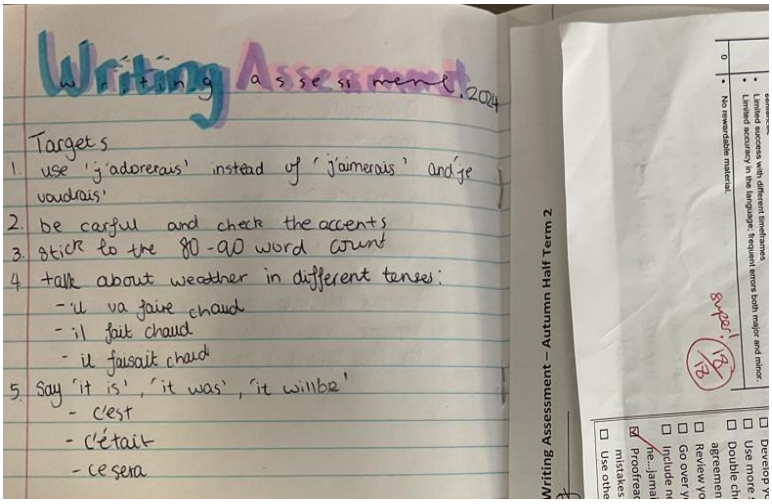
Star Phrases Idea Used to Extend Phrases



Another was during writing assessment feedback, in which top scoring students typically feel they have no targets to write, where the question wall work gave everyone multiple areas for development and provided these learners with many targets (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

Writing Assessment Feedback



Regarding the research problem that languages are perceived to be full of difficulty (Dimsdale, 2024), my field journal reported that, for the first time, this Year 8 class did not react despondently to more challenging aspects of the French past tense. In fact, one student asked the key question that unlocks a logical process for making the grammar feel easy and can help to avoid a mental block forming. Our reflective thinking routine strengthened the students' analytical skills so that more challenging concepts became accessible and embedded a mindset that empowered students to create their own opportunities for stretch and challenge.

Students Feel More Ownership of Their Learning and Less Reliance on the Teacher

A trend I noticed in the baseline questionnaire was the central role of the teacher in inquiry, mentioned frequently and reflecting a traditional, transactional style of learning. Girls talked about asking the teacher, the teacher responding, "the teacher always helps." By the second questionnaire, only 2 of 14 students even mentioned the teacher. Instead, interviewed students reflected on the routines commenting, "we get to do independent work and I like it" (Student A) and

“in French we do lots of work on our own, but like in a good way, because that makes us think more” (Student F). Since there was less reliance on the teacher, girls were also free from the mindless compliance described by Burman (2023) and endeavoured to think more for themselves which in turn promoted agency: “everyone is thinking … if a student gives an answer they may be wrong, so everyone needs to keep thinking” (Student D). An awareness developed that what students get out of the lesson is determined by their questions and engagement, “if you didn’t ask questions, you will never learn” (Student D). My mentor also observed how engaged and motivated students were when playing the teacher and the epitome of this empowerment was Student A’s reaction to receiving support while she led the question wall answers: “like I don’t want to be rude but I have an idea, I don’t need you.”

Some girls found it more challenging to come out of their comfort zone. Students’ remarks included, “I am impatient, I want the teacher to answer the question immediately, otherwise I forget about it,” “I don’t want to write it, I just want to tell you,” and also “the purpose of a lesson is for someone who knows more to tell you the answer.” Moving forward, it will be important to continue student voice lesson plenaries as well as private questionnaires, so the wealth of positive feedback about experiencing agency can encourage confidence in others to embrace the process.

Conclusions

The findings from my action research show that girls, aged 12–13 years old, demonstrated greater engagement and empowerment when practising a reflective thinking routine. Students displayed intellectual maturity beyond their years in exploring language and grammar independently. They enjoyed supporting each other and their eyes would frequently light up with celebration or curiosity. Stretch and challenge emerged organically from this intellectually fertile environment. Teaching others also proved to be extremely effective for a student’s own language development and, overall, there was significantly less dependence on me.

A limitation of this project was that the shift in agency was generally more obvious to me as the teacher than it was to the students, so they had to be repeatedly reminded how impressive their efforts were. Secondly, for the purposes of my project, the thinking routine was conducted in every

lesson, but I feel that after an embedding phase, it would create a more balanced curriculum to introduce it periodically during the teaching term, when needed.

The next step will be to introduce reflective thinking routines to other year groups in the school, and in other subjects. It will also be important to assess how effective the routine is with my Year 8 group in the long term, when used in a more sporadic manner to address specific needs. What I have already noticed in lessons since the project finished, is that their default reflection process is markedly deeper and they use each other's comments to build on their reflections more effectively. As a consequence, they independently make linguistic connections faster and seem to demonstrate better retention of lesson material.

Reflection Statement

When I reflect on my project, it was not just the students who were encouraged out of their comfort zone. I had to constantly improvise in lessons, relinquishing my PowerPoint and, as MacKenzie (2022) advocates, allow student inquiry to shape their learning. This challenge was compounded by the feeling of time pressure due to our content heavy curriculum, thus honing my prioritisation skills. The data also led me to consider the role of the teacher in our inquiry classroom. The teacher is the expert in the room but there can be a co-construction of knowledge (Smart & Marshall, 2013). I tried stepping in to extend inquiry further or to manage the timeframes of activities. For example, the class energy was waning during a prolonged question wall session, so I directed the students to start writing targets while I addressed any remaining questions. After all, the class dynamic remains the teacher's responsibility. I also tried adding my own questions to the wall, where I perceived gaps in the inquiry or to join in the team effort. Interestingly, I now find myself naturally scrutinising each activity in the teaching day, asking whether I need to do it or whether there is a way for the students to do it themselves so that they gain more from the experience. The aspects of the teacher as expert but not leader and disrupting the teacher's comfort zone will be my personal take-aways from the project.

I would like to thank my research advisor and school mentor for their enthusiastic support, fruitful ideas and thoughtful feedback throughout my research journey. I was provided by the GARC programme with an inspiring opportunity to enrich and expand my teaching practice. It has been highly motivating to engage in academic study and the guidance given by the GARC team has trained me in how to approach any teaching question from a research point of view. Working alongside dedicated teachers from around the globe has also culturally broadened my perspective on teaching. I would like to sincerely thank my Head Teacher, Jo Sharrock, for enabling this adventure.

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