Talking, Reading and Writing at Work

Qualifications and Curriculum Authority

January 1999

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

CONTENTS

The Investigation

The Purpose

The prime purpose of this investigation is to inform debate about the relationship of oral and literacy skills taught in school and those needed in the workplace. There is no intention to present the school curriculum as essentially pre-vocational or to suggest that skills needed for work are more important that those which have no obvious application to the workplace. Nonetheless it may be helpful for teachers to consider how they might further promote the development of particular skills which help young people meet the demands of work. It may be helpful for employers to consider the implications for workplace training.

Background and Aims

These young people were observed as part of an investigation into the language skills needed for different types of work done by 18-23 year olds. This investigation builds on a previous one [1] which focused on the skills in spoken and written language required for a sample of jobs recruiting young workers aged 16 and 17. The first survey looked in some detail at three workplaces and the young workers there who were either working at basic level jobs (such as receptionists or retail assistants) or in training for more skilled jobs. For the second investigation the focus was to determine whether these demands held good for a larger sample of workplaces and employees and to what extent literacy and communication demands shifted as young people gained more experience or began to take on more responsibility at work.

The sample

88 young people aged between 18 and 23 took part, from 30 workplaces in the north-west and south coast regions of England. Firms were asked to identify young employees who were likely to gain promotion at some point in their career or who were already in posts of responsibility

The questionnaire

Three consultants each visited 10 companies to administer a questionnaire to between one and five young employees, which asked them about the speaking, listening, reading and writing demands of their current job, and the importance of literacy and communication skills for that job and for their future prospects. The questionnaire aimed to identify in some detail the range and level of language skills required in the different workplaces and for different types of job. It asked young employees to identify those which were regularly in use and those which were called on occasionally, to give typical examples and to reflect on how they had learned the skills.

The meetings

Whenever possible the questionnaire was completed during a meeting with the group together, forming a basis for discussion and allowing the consultant to help the young people tune into the purpose of the investigation and to reflect on aspects of their work which they took for granted. The meetings provided valuable opportunities to discuss specific communication examples, to explore the balance of skills needed and to gain some sense of the language 'culture' in the workplace.

---

[1]SCAA: Literacy and Numeracy in the Workplace: ref:COM/97/787. ISBN 1 85838 235 1.

Further interviews and work-shadowing

In many of the workplaces it was also possible to interview a senior manager, usually a director, personnel officer or training manager. As well as completing the questionnaire, young people in six of the firms were shadowed for up to two days and their supervisors interviewed. In addition, an interview was held with a company which provided middle management training for some of the firms in the survey.

The report

The report has drawn on the questionnaires, meetings, work-shadowing and interviews. It attempts to reflect the range and balance of the evidence. Though the sample in this investigation was much larger than in the first one it does not claim to be a systematic survey with statistically significant findings. The firms which took part, and the range and level of work undertaken by the young workers give a varied picture but are not representative of the workforce as a whole and thus the reported findings are tentative.

THE WORKPLACES

Range and type

The thirty firms visited were identified either by the local Training and Enterprise Councils (TEC) or through other local contacts. They varied in size from a small retail firm employing five people to national companies with over 4000 employees. On average they employed between 200 and 500 people. They represented a wide range of employment, covering seven of the ten Standard Industrial Categories. Broadly, they divided into two major sectors: service and manufacturing enterprises. Seventeen service providers, private and public sector, and thirteen manufacturing firms were included.

Though very different, most of the thirty firms shared some **common features**. They usually:

- had experienced some form of major change in the last few years;
- had recently restructured to a flatter management structure;
- organised employees into teams;
- provided some opportunities for internal promotion;
- had a strong commitment to training, hence their willingness to invest time in the survey.

The firms demonstrated clear variations in **organisational culture**, but most showed to some degree the changes in attitudes, as well as structure, which have occurred in many British workplaces over recent years. All the directors and managers interviewed:

- looked to their staff to take on some responsibility for and sense of 'ownership' of company objectives and targets;
- expected them to contribute to team working and communal problem solving;
- were convinced of the importance of effective communication for the success of the organisation;
believed that sound literacy and communication skills were desirable for all employees in the modern workplace and essential for those aspiring to team leadership, supervision or management.

The companies which took part in the investigation all had extensive **training** programmes or made use of training that was available locally. Larger companies had their own training units; some had flexible learning centres. Apprentices were taking courses, usually on a day release basis in Further Education colleges. A small number were taking HNC or HND courses and a few were studying for degrees.

Differences between the manufacturing and service sectors

In manufacturing companies:	In service sector companies
communication was a tool but the core activities focused on technical knowledge, skills and processes;	*communication* was part of the core business and sometimes the product. Most employees in the survey spent a high proportion of their time in some form of communication;
oral skills and informal writing helped the smooth and effective day to day running of the business;	*oral skills* were paramount in some customer liaison jobs, whereas for others reading, and particularly writing, were the critical skills;
literacy skills were important at higher levels and for apprentices in training	the demand on oral and *literacy skills* was to some extent linked to level of responsibility but less closely than in manufacturing companies.

Recruitment patterns

Firms recruited at a range of ages and levels, such as, modern apprentices at 16, fast track recruits at 18, and, for specialised posts, often graduates at 21+. Some young employees had first worked for the company on school or college work experience or on work placements as part of their degree course. Many jobs, particularly in service industries recruited people across a wide age range, simply specifying qualifications and aptitude.

Summary of Key Findings

- 65% of the sample of 88 young employees aged between 18 and 23 had 5 or more GCSEs at grade C or above and almost 80% had a grade A* - C in English.

- Whilst qualifications played a role in the recruitment process they interacted with demonstrable communication skills. Application forms were widely used to judge writing skills and good oral skills displayed at interview could sometimes outweigh qualifications.

- There is a reasonably close match between the requirements of Key Skills Communication (especially levels 2 and 3), GCSE English, the National Curriculum, and the literacy and communication demands of the workplace, though range and emphasis vary considerably depending on type of workplace, and level and type of job.

- Less than 5% of jobs in the survey made only a very low level of demand on any literacy and communication skills and the young people in these jobs were the least well qualified in the sample.

- Speaking and listening skills were the skills most widely needed across the range and level of job types. Day to day talk with colleagues or customers and clients, to progress business or solve problems was the commonest activity. One fifth of the sample gave presentations, usually informal. There was extensive, well developed workplace training for speaking and listening skills, especially in customer service companies.

- Reading was the least visible and least explicitly recognised language skill in the workplace, though many employees used some reading skills, usually in short bursts, on many occasions each day, often as an incidental support to speaking, listening and writing. It was generally assumed that employees had the skills for reading and there were very few examples of formal training being available.

- Much writing was limited in range, scope and variety though it was often of critical importance; it tended to be brief, concise and focused and often went hand in hand with reading. However for over half the sample more extensive writing was required, most often of formal letters. Most specific skills of workplace writing were developed through informal on the job training, following examples of more experienced colleagues.

- Some young employees at all job levels struggled to acquire the necessary skills to write difficult letters whilst those in higher level jobs often found reports and minutes hard to structure. There were excellent examples of courses and learning packages on writing skills but there was not the same practice of providing widespread formal training for writing nor the same perception of its need, as for speaking and listening.

- Having a higher level of job responsibility, particularly managing other people, or being in training, especially college-based training, considerably increased reading and writing demands.

- Some young employees were arguably 'over-qualified' in relation to the apparent level of demand on their literacy and communication skills, but to exercise these skills successfully under pressure in the workplace required them to be confident in their skills and not to be working at the limits of their competence.

- Sound literacy and communication skills appeared to be a factor which contributed to young employees being chosen for promotion, though their role in review and appraisal systems was often unclear.

Implications for Education and Employers

Implications for schools and colleges

Most of the specific literacy and communications skills required in the workplace are included in GCSE English, National Curriculum for English and/or Key Skill Communication requirements. They are also skills which come into play in the study of many other subjects besides English. Young people entering the workplace from education should have a grounding in the language skills which are likely to be most needed in their jobs. But clearly the context and emphases of the workplace are different and certain skills assume particular relevance.

Individual teachers and teaching teams might find it helpful to consider how they can ensure that opportunities are provided for all young people to:

in speaking and listening	*in reading*	*in writing*
• recognise the importance of talk as a medium for getting things done; • recognise the importance of careful listening and the ability to both act on and reflect on what is heard; • become confident in routinely giving short, informal presentations.	• have a well-established range of reading experience which they can confidently rely on and apply in a variety of circumstances; • through their reading of non-fiction, information texts recognise that much reading is done in order to be acted upon, and develop their skills to do this; • develop different reading techniques and skills for different purposes; • as a tool for higher level jobs, develop techniques for selecting information for specific purposes and for summarising information for particular audiences.	• understand that different forms of writing have different but recognisable features depending on form, audience and purpose; • be able to replicate a range of forms of writing including notes, letters, reports; • as well as writing extended text, practise writing where the context and purpose require conciseness and precision; • understand the features of and be able to produce writing which is impersonal and objective; • understand why writing in some work contexts requires complete accuracy; • undertake writing tasks which contribute to a public, collective enterprise; • share responsibility with others for producing some writing; • have access to IT facilities to help them develop these skills; • understand the limitations of computer spell-checks.

Implications for employers

Employers clearly have expectations that young people will enter the workplace with well established literacy and communication skills, and they rely on the qualification system as one means of ensuring this. Employers generally recognise that whilst language demands of the workplace overlap with those of education, they are not entirely the same, and they build in opportunities for informal and formal training. However perceptions of the need for training are not the same for speaking, listening, reading and writing. Employers might like to consider the following points:

in speaking and listening	*in reading*	*in writing*
• the widespread good practice in training in speaking and listening in many service sector companies deserves to be emulated by all.	• there are specific types of reading demands in many workplaces, which are different from the reading young people have experienced in education; employers may need to check and provide for the necessary reading skills.	• where many people in a company require the same types of specific writing skills these might best be offered to all through a standard training programme, possibly as part of an induction, as is often the case for speaking and listening; • skills relating to organisation, expression, tone and accuracy of writing would all benefit from a more structured and explicit training approach, as these skills are hard to learn simply by following examples; • where jobs demand very high levels of spelling accuracy, recruitment processes should assess applicants' for this accuracy.

The Young Employees

Pen Portraits

These are examples of the young employees in the study, drawing out the demands for oral, reading and writing skills in the jobs.

*A young **salesman** in a very small retail company is in training to take over the business on the owners' retirement. He demonstrates sophisticated speaking and listening skills with a range of customers, each with very specific demands. He talks enthusiastically and knowledgeably about the products and judges when customers want to listen and be guided and when they want to converse. He explains how he learned these skills: from a GNVQ business studies course; by modelling his speaking technique on his father's whose fluency and style he admires; and by learning from colleagues at the firm since he went there as a 15 year old on work experience. Although he describes himself as dyslexic he reads complex specialist information to keep himself up to date and decide which products to stock and is learning to manage all the paperwork associated with running a small business.*

*A trainee **travel service administrator** on a 'fast track' Youth training (YT) programme needs to make use of his speaking and listening, reading and writing skills, moving speedily between them. He takes telephone calls, passing on information orally or in written notes to busy travel advisers. He uses the internal e-mail system, prepares standard letters and composes some of his own. He logs travel tickets, entering crucial information on paper and computer files. He scans incoming mail each day and decides what to do with it. He talks to colleagues and sorts out potential problems; he handles routine calls from customers. He very efficiently briefs a colleague who is taking over his job while he is on leave. He feels that none of the communications demands made on him by his job are as demanding as those of his A Level course but his confidence and skill in handling them mark him out as someone who is likely to gain a permanent job with the company and to progress with them.*

*Two **customer service telephone advisers** work in the headquarters of a national financial services company. They work in a large open-plan office which allows informal support and supervision. Every day they deal with customers' questions, requests and complaints. They need to listen carefully and to be fluent and clear in their responses. The pressure of responding quickly and accurately in 'real time' without the opportunity to reflect or plan their answers is considerable. They need to read the history of customers' accounts quickly and accurately while they talk to customers and control the pace of the telephone conversation. For some calls they need to know about the company's products and procedures so a substantial amount of information is in easy reach for quick reference. Sometimes they pass sensitive calls on to more senior staff; they need to judge when this is appropriate and negotiate this tactfully with callers.*

Jobs

Following the survey meetings it was clear that the level of job responsibility and demand was more varied than had been anticipated. This was partly the result of the range of occupations but also that companies were not always able to provide or release workers for interview who best fitted the survey brief, which was for young employees who were already or were likely to progress up the career ladder. As a result it was necessary to sub-divide the type of jobs surveyed and the 88 young workers' jobs were classified into *four broad levels*. These related to the levels of each job *as a whole* not specifically to level of literacy and communication demands.

Description	Example	No in sample
still working at **basic** level	craft worker, receptionist, switch board operator, general clerical	18
in training for technician level or other skilled work	modern apprentices, administrative officers	37
fully trained **skilled** worker	production engineer, personnel projects officer	21
significant responsibility for other people, or significant technical/**specialist** responsibility	admin/technical team leader, restaurant manager, marketing manager, environmental health officer	12

There was a slight upward trend in the proportion of young employees having English at grade C or above as the job level increased, though most of the sample had this qualification whatever their job level. Sample sizes were too small to indicate any clear patterns between age and job level except that the majority of the eighteen and nineteen year-olds were in basic or training jobs. For twenty year-olds and above the distribution was more even across all four job levels, though the small numbers at each age and level must be borne in mind.

Match between Qualifications, Skills possessed and Literacy and Communications demands of the job

General features

- It was not easy to determine a clear cut relationship between qualifications, language skills and demands of the job across the sample. The sample covered a wider age range than the earlier survey and included people who had left full-time education some years ago alongside more recent leavers. Thus the impact of experience on skill levels was also a factor in young people's judgement of the demands of their jobs.

- The communication and literacy demands of jobs were determined not just by job level but by type of workplace and nature of core business, depending on whether it was focused on, for example, designing, making, explaining, organising, selling, recording, or calculating.

- In general there was a link between people's qualifications and the level of job they were doing though the routes by which people arrived there varied. For example, some young employees had come straight into Level 4 jobs with higher qualifications, such as a degree, whilst others had got there through experience, sometimes gaining HNDs or degrees on the way, as part of their job-related training.

'Basic' (18 jobs)

- A very small number of jobs (6 of the 18) had an overall low demand on all communications and literacy skills: informal talk with colleagues to progress a task; occasional recording or reading of very small amounts information. These young workers had the lowest levels of qualifications with only one having GCSE English at grade C or above and some questionnaire returns indicated limited literacy skills.

- The other 12 jobs had more extensive demands but predictable and limited in range; all except one of these young workers had GCSE English at grade C or above and were arguably 'over-qualified' in terms of the language skills their jobs required.

Examples

A food process worker aged 19 whose job involved only small amounts of predictable reading and writing had left school at 16 with 7 GCSEs at grade C or above, including English and maths. His questionnaire showed very fluent and accurate writing skills.

A 19 year old office junior doing basic clerical tasks had 9 GCSEs and 3 A-levels.

An 18 year-old restaurant worker, whose job included talking to customers, but very small amounts of reading and writing, had 6 GCSEs including maths and English.

'In training'   (37 jobs)

- Jobs judged to be at this level divided broadly into service sector jobs which had a strong customer-communication focus, and manufacturing sector jobs which recruited through the modern apprenticeship scheme.

- Some service sector jobs appeared to have demands which were below the skills and qualifications the young workers had. For those still in training demands were likely to increase as people assumed more responsibility once trained.

- Nearly half the workers were at various stages on modern apprenticeship schemes. They were well qualified, the majority having 6 or more GCSEs at grade C or above, including English and maths. Whilst they tended to judge the literacy and communications needed in their day to day jobs as undemanding, it was the demand on these skills in relation to their training which stretched them and made them glad to have their initial qualifications.

Examples

A customer service adviser with a financial services company left school at 18 with 9 GCSEs at grade C or above including maths and English. At 21 her job involved communicating with customers by phone and letter. She had been on several customer communication courses, had gained an NVQ level 2, had won two staff service awards for good customer communication, been promoted, and expected to be promoted further. She believed her progress was closely related to her confidence and ability as a communicator.

An 18 year-old clothing assistant who processed stock orders and an administrative assistant, both with a sports clothing company, left school with 9 GCSEs each at grade C and above including maths and English. They both judged the reading and writing in their jobs to be undemanding.

A 20 year-old technical apprentice in a chemical company had 9 GCSEs and 3 A-levels and had only limited workplace demand on his literacy skills but found they extended on his current HNC study.

'Skilled' (21 jobs)

- The workers were not necessarily better qualified than those 'In training' or even some 'Basic' jobs, but they were usually older (aged 20 and above) and had shown their ability to to work their way up to a more demanding position; the youngest three in 'Skilled' jobs, all 19 year-olds, were all well qualified, with 9 or 10 GCSEs at C or above and 2 or 3 A-levels each.

- Some employees were the fully trained equivalents of younger workers in 'In training' jobs, particularly in the service sector. Their jobs did not always make greater specific demands on their literacy and communication skills than the 'In training' jobs, but the *expectations* on them tended to be greater in terms of their knowledge, confidence, and competence in demonstrating these skills. They were expected to be able to do the job and to be less reliant on their colleagues for checking their work or advising them.

- As with the 'Basic' and 'In training' jobs, there were some young workers who had qualifications and communications skills above what their current jobs appeared to demand, but at this level uncertainty about job choice and career direction were factors in the mis-match.

- On the other hand where a job offered a range of demanding communication tasks supported with training this could increase confidence and encourage young workers to resume their education to acquire higher qualifications.

Examples

A 22 year-old pensions administrator who left school at 16 with 2 GCSEs at C or above, including maths and English had gained professional pensions qualifications at NVQ Level 4. Her job involved extensive oral and written communication with customers and reading complex pensions regulations. Her professional training had increased her literacy and communication skills but these had also built up over time by practice and following the examples of more senior staff.

A 23 year-old departmental administrator with a financial services company left full-time education at 16 with 6 GCSEs at C or above including maths and English, had gained a BTEC National Diploma in Business and Finance, then an HND, and was due to complete an honours degree at the end of the year. The job required quite extensive literacy and communication skills which she had developed through practice and training, but studying part-time for many years had also contributed.

A payroll assistant in a personnel department with 9 GCSEs and 3 A-levels wrote incisively about the literacy and communications demands of her job. She recognised that whilst all the skills were entirely relevant, what counted in her appraisal was meeting job-specific performance targets. It was assumed that she would have the literacy and communication skills at a level appropriate to meet those targets.

'Specialist' (12 jobs)

- Young employees in this type of job either did work of a specialist technical nature or had some responsibility for co-ordinating the work of others. They had left education at different points, but most had gone on improving their qualifications, either through education or at work. Two were graduates and two were on a work placement year of their degree. Of the 12 whose jobs were judged to be at this level all except one were aged 20 or over. Young people in these promoted posts were most likely to be using more advanced and complex language skills.

- As a group they tended to be the most reflective and perceptive about the role of these skills in their jobs, how they had been acquired, how they shaded into other job-specific skills and how they were valued, developed or rewarded by their employers.

- In most cases the young employees regarded the literacy and communication demands as high, were well aware of areas they found particularly difficult and needed to develop, and could assess which aspects of their formal education had helped prepare them to meet the demands.

Examples

A recently appointed 23 year-old marketing graduate with 8 GCSEs and 4 A-levels, working as a special projects analyst for a vehicle manufacturing company found understanding technical conversations over the phone difficult. He was helped in the presentations he had to do by emphasis on these skills in his university course. Minutes and reports required practice and familiarity with conventions but he had the necessary writing skills. Technical writing was most challenging because of the difficulty of the information to read and represent.

A 24 year-old front end section manager with a large retail chain who left school with 4 GCSEs at grade C, excluding English, wrote articles for the store newsletter and interpreted sensitive technical data which often had to be quickly acted upon, as well as a manager's day to day communication tasks such as planning rotas, sorting out over-time, dealing with customer queries and complaints. She had learnt much through practice, but identified listening skills as something she had improved by attending workshops in effective management, run by her 'very communication-focused' company.

A 19 year-old training manager who had joined the same company at 18 with 6 GCSEs after studying a BTEC Business and Finance diploma at college had improved her speaking skills on her college course and through company courses on speaking and listening in different situations. She did not find the reading and writing difficult and felt she had the skills. She judged all the literacy and communications skills as essential to the job: ....'how can you develop people if you do not have these skills'.

Literacy and communications skills in the work context

For some jobs it was clear that the level of literacy and communication skills needed was below what the young employees possessed, particularly in terms of reading and writing demand. Only a minority of the jobs made demands on those skills comparable say to the literacy demands of qualifications at A-level or equivalent, and above. But putting literacy and communication skills into practice effectively in the workplace was seen as a different matter to using them in the education system.

Literacy and communication skills were seen as some of the skills needed to survive and function in the workplace. Depending on the nature of the workplace, they might feed directly in to the end product or they might be a means to that end. They were embedded into the tasks people had to do, which also required other specific skills and knowledge related to the particular jobs. They interacted with other Key Skills: they were usually closely intertwined with IT, Improving Own Learning and Performance, often with Problem Solving, and for a substantial number of jobs, with Numeracy skills as well. They also shaded into interpersonal skills (Key Skill - Working with Others) which was one of the reasons why the demand was greater in jobs involving managing people.

In the workplace literacy and communications skills had to be demonstrated in 'real time'. There was usually no dummy run. Communication in different modes often took place virtually simultaneously and always had a real audience. Whatever the job and the level of skill demanded, the ability to produce what was required in terms of communication was a part of doing the job properly.

Because of these realities of the workplace, there was a sense in which, apart from the few 'Basic' jobs with very low communication demand, the accumulation of oracy and literacy skills needed

to do modern jobs well was often greater than the individual parts. Thus some graduates who might never have had to produce writing in the workplace which was as lengthy or complex as in their final degree year nor read so extensively, still found their jobs demanding in these areas because of the context of their reading and writing: its specialist knowledge base, its conventions, its audience, urgency, importance, its role in demonstrating their personal effectiveness as employees.

In jobs where the young employees recognised that the skills required were well within their reach, again it was the context which conferred importance on these skills: the need to communicate meaning clearly to colleagues and customers, the observance of company codes or procedures, the need for speed or accuracy or moving quickly from one mode to another.

Thus although on paper there were some young people who appeared to be 'over-qualified' in terms of the literacy and communications demands of the job, they recognised the importance of feeling confident about their skills and not working at the limits of their competence. They also recognised the importance of these skills in relation to other workplace skills and to career progression. Given that communication demands increased with greater responsibility, these young people were likely to be the future team leaders, supervisors and managers.

The Selection Process

Applications and interviews

- Most of the young people in the sample had been recruited through a competitive application and interview, though the importance of literacy and communication skills in the process was variable.

- Most companies used application forms to identify major literacy difficulties and interview performance to assess oracy skills.

- Some customer service companies used a simulated telephone exercise for verbal communication. One manufacturing company used a simple written comprehension test and another was thinking of introducing a written test for office job applicants.

- Applicants for apprenticeships were likely to have to demonstrate their literacy skills through aptitude tests which included verbal reasoning, reflecting the relatively high literacy demands of their future training. For one group of apprentices, selected from over 600 applicants, the process had included a test of their ability to write accurately and fluently in continuous prose, in the guise of an essay on why they wanted to train for that career.

- Overall though there was little evidence of selection processes for this age group which attempted to tightly assess communication and literacy skills in relation to the demands of the particular job.

Use of qualifications

- Similarly, few companies were rigid about qualifications in English, even where jobs included considerable speaking, listening, reading or writing demands.

- Some companies in the service sector said they *preferred* applicants to have GCSE English at C or above but if a candidate interviewed well that could sway the balance. One such company said that whilst they needed trainees to be literate, they looked particularly for enthusiasm and ambition rather than formal qualifications.

- In general there was some indication that if applicants could present themselves well orally in interview, this could outweigh the importance of having particular GCSE grades. In practice, from the evidence of the sample, the young people who were able to do this were also likely to have at least a grade C in GCSE English.

- As with the other aspects of selection, the link between qualification and type of work was not entirely clear-cut and there were examples of different requirements for jobs involving broadly similar communication demands.

In practice companies' recruitment was affected by a range of factors, including features of the local labour market such as post-16 staying-on rates and overall job opportunities. Most companies allowed themselves the flexibility to use the 'best fit' recruitment available to them at any one time.

Links between Language demands in the Workplace and Requirements of Key Skill Communication, GCSE English and the National Curriculum

Language requirements in the curriculum

The language demands of the workplace and the National Curriculum for English, GCSE English and Key Skill Communication have significant points in common. The National Curriculum and GCSE English both cover much wider ground including the study of literature. Key Skill Communication has been designed with the needs of the workplace and workplace training more specifically in mind and is a close match with the language skills needed in some of the jobs in the survey.

SPEAKING AND LISTENING

"*These skills help me to communicate with colleagues and customers to resolve problems and do my job effectively.*" (20 year-old Complaints Controller with a large chemical company).

- Speaking and listening were the most widely and regularly used language skills in the workplace.

- The significance of these skills was recognised by the young employees and their supervisors.

- The young employees felt that they already had most of the oral skills necessary for work but had developed them further through experience on the job, observing others at work.

- Systematic training was much more likely to be provided for speaking and listening than for the other language modes.

Day-to-day talk

This fell into two main categories with the balance between them depending very much on the firm and job:

- on-the-job discussion with colleagues to get something done, including problem solving and review of progress;
- discussions with clients or customers either face to face or on the phone.

In customer service companies, for example banks, credit firms or government services, young employees spent much of their time talking to clients on the phone. In retail organisations they spent much of their time talking to customers face-to-face. For both groups, how they dealt with customers was critical to their companies' reputation.

However, in manufacturing firms young employees were often less likely to talk to clients face-to face until they were fully trained; this was done by managers and supervisors or fully trained technical staff.

Much talk within the firms was informal and happened as people worked, either face to face or on the phone within the company. Jobs and problems needed to be explained and discussed and strategies and solutions agreed.

Depending upon the situation, young employees needed to be able to:

- know when talking about something was likely to progress the job rather than slow it down;
- frame and answer questions;
- explain clearly what they were doing or thinking;
- describe a problem;
- listen carefully, make sense of information and retain it;
- take their turn in conversations.

Contexts for speaking and listening

Getting the job done

- In manufacturing firms workers exchanged information between shifts about what jobs had been completed and what needed to be done. Listening was rated a key skill here by young employees and their managers.

- Some apprentices reported how they had needed to improve their ability to listen and pick up information. At first they had found that they had to go back and ask supervisors to repeat what had been said. They had then devised ways of structuring the information to make it easier to remember specifications and codes accurately. Some made notes to aid recall but this was not always easy on the shop floor and accurate recall was essential.

- Apprentices were well aware of the relationship between clear explanation and efficiency at work. Several examples were cited of difficulties carrying out work when more senior staff were poor communicators.

Team meetings

Some firms or teams within firms had regular weekly or daily team meetings where information was passed on. Listening was important. Some young employees had responsibility for leading these meetings or making a regular contribution to them: a personal assistant on a newspaper presented the minutes and the agenda at meetings of various teams; the restaurant manageress at a hotel led daily briefings of her team.

Telephone conversations outside the organisation

Over a third of the young people interviewed spoke to clients or customers on the phone at least once a week but half rarely or never spoke to a client on the phone. Depending on the nature of the firm young employees might either be dealing with clients and customers on the phone all day long or not at all.

In all firms there were some jobs where employees were in regular contact with clients over the phone but whereas telephone work was a major part of many service sector jobs, in manufacturing firms the staff who dealt with clients over the phone tended to be in senior positions.

Speaking and listening on the telephone were associated with higher levels of demand on oral skills. The critical factors which contributed to this level of demand were the unpredictability of the call and the need to tune in quickly and sort out the essential facts and appropriate response.

Many firms had some set routines for telephone calls: formulae to use when greeting a caller, a structure for the call overall, or guidance on how to handle abuse, but all the young employees reported that they were expected to use their own initiative and respond individually to clients.

Face to face with clients

In face-to-face contact with clients young employees always used their own initiative, though they might use set opening formulae, or structure for interviews.

> *A large retail firm had moved away from pre-set formulae for greeting clients at the checkouts and encouraged all employees to have their own conversational style and to decide whether to be brisk and businesslike or whether to chat in a friendly way as they checked the goods through the till. The rate of work was automatically monitored but good customer service was important as well as speed.*

Level of demand on oral skills

There were some jobs in the survey where the amount of talk required was limited: a trainee chef in a hotel largely worked behind the scenes and only very informal talk was needed at that stage in his career. Overall, 11% of the young people reported that the language demands of their job were routine and they never or rarely had to undertake demanding levels of discussion.

However, three quarters of the young people reported that they had to tackle a difficult conversation at least once a month. They were asked to identify situations in which the level of demand on their oral skills was high, whether dealing with a complex technical problem or a difficult social situation. For some it was a daily or weekly event, particularly in firms which dealt with money or credit.

Complex tasks

Those tasks which were rated as complex (rather than difficult because of handling actual or possible confrontation) usually related to technical complexity:

> *A young marketing manager reported that he found it demanding taking complex order specifications over the phone. He needed to be sure exactly what the customer wanted and made notes to help him remember.*
>
> ---
>
> *In a chemical plant the clarity of talk was critical to successful problem solving. An apprentice and his experienced co-worker needed to make a temporary repair in a huge pump which extracted material from waste before it was deposited on lime fields. If the pump failed polluted waste would be discharged. They decide to make a rubber ring to put in the pump as a temporary seal so that it could be restarted and function safely. They discussed materials and chose very thick rubber reinforced with steel. The experienced worker talked the apprentice through the procedures of measuring and cutting; gave him advice without spoon feeding him and then accompanied him while he fitted it to the pump.*

Dealing with others' sensitivities

- Most of the interviewees gave examples where discussion at work was sensitive or difficult. Those who were in supervisory posts and their supervisors all commented on the need for diplomacy in their work. They needed to mediate between groups within the workforce: managers and shop floor workers, or between clients and workers, without causing offence but dealing with problems. The skills of handling potential disputes were built into the NVQ training package offered in one region in units on team leadership and assertiveness.

- Talking to senior managers was stressful, for example when young employees had to discuss a report they had written.

- It could be difficult persuading skilled workers (or even your boss) to try a different method. Part of the sensitivity here arose from a young person managing a team of experienced workers.
"All the skilled men you work with have different ways of doing things. So if you use a quick way that one man has shown you, you may have to try and suggest this method to another skilled man without sounding like you are telling him his job."

- A small number of interviewees mentioned the need to defend decisions made or to defend themselves against being blamed for faults.

Handling complaints and angry customers

These were predictably the greatest source of stress for many young employees. For all firms, minimising or resolving disputes was a priority but the young people had to work within company guidelines:

- They might have to explain why a customer had been refused credit or why claimants could not be satisfied. They might need to persist gently with a customer in debt until an agreement had been reached.

- They had to remain polite but not be deflected.

- They might need to deal with unreasonable demands as well as justified irritation.

Those who were observed at work demonstrated considerable skill, sensitivity and persistence in dealing with customers. Company training supported existing interpersonal skills and confident oral skills to negotiate the best outcome in the circumstances.

Employee perceptions of oral skills

The relative importance assigned by the interviewees to a list of oral skills in the questionnaire generally reflected the demands they described:

- Careful listening and clarity of speech were very highly rated.

- Friendliness was rated much more highly than formality.

- Most did not rate highly the ability to keep discussion focused though observation of people at work and points they made in discussion suggested that they underestimated the extent to which this skill was routinely deployed.

- They often needed to find several ways of explaining an issue or approaching a sensitive problem to get their meaning across to a confused or reluctant listener.

- They needed good questioning skills to probe for information and clarify points.

- They sometimes needed to summarise information or the decisions made.

- They needed to be able to keep discussion on track.

> *Young employees who held meetings with benefit claimants spoke feelingly of the need to keep the discussion from moving off the subject. They actively avoided encouraging people to offer their own ideas since it got in the way of resolving the problem under debate.*

Speaking and listening in tandem with other communication skills

Speaking to customers was often supported by access to information which could be read from a screen.

> *In telephone banking guidance on what advice to offer together with client information was available on screen to read. But the young bank clerks had to handle the information quickly. They were helped by the structured nature of the possible response, written down for them, though they needed to be alert to what information was sensitive.*
>
> ---
>
> *Staff in front line telephone contact with customers were under pressure because they knew there was constant monitoring of their efficiency in terms of the number of calls handled in an hour, and their standard of communication in terms of both politeness and successful outcomes. Their efficiency rating contributed to their appraisal and often to performance related pay.*

Presentations

Only a quarter of the young employees had to make more extended presentations as a regular part of their job, for example to explain information at some length The likelihood of doing this increased with age and responsibility. Those most likely to do so were in supervisory roles or involved in sales or promotion of some kind. A fifth said they made a presentation once or twice a year. Four out of ten had never had to take responsibility for a presentation.

Forms of presentation included speaking to audiences outside the company, reporting internally to managers or teams of managers, or to the team of which the employee was a member.

11 of the interviewees described more informal presentations which seemed to be part of their general training. These either took the form of presentations to their peers, for example feeding back on a course they had attended, or taking groups of visitors around the firm. No-one found such tasks very stressful though most felt that they required extra effort; one young employee reported that she actively enjoyed doing them.

A project officer working for a county council had to talk to newly qualified teachers at recruitment fairs, promoting the local authority as a potential employer.

An environmental health officer talked to groups of complainants.

Sales staff made presentations at sales conferences.

Skills for presentations

Most of those interviewed felt they needed a range of skills to talk effectively to a larger group.

The most important skills identified were:
> -the selection of appropriate material;
> -notes to prepare;
> -coherence and clarity of presentation;
> -the ability to focus on key points;
> -dealing with questions.

Less important skills were:
> -the use of a formal style of English;
> -the use of notes to speak from;
> -audio-visual aids to illustrate the talk.

This perhaps reflects the fact that most of the presentations were informal. Where presentations were formal, formal speech was rated more highly and notes and audio-visual aids were more likely to be used as prompts for speaking.

Training for Speaking and Listening

In terms of training for language skills, by far the greatest emphasis was on speaking and listening. It was clear that the relationship between speaking and listening and effectiveness at work was well understood. Theories about oral communication were well established and expert trainers who designed training packages had a clear rationale often linked to effective team working and management. Employees' social skills were seen as an asset. The best training gave detailed guidance on strategies and approaches and large companies where oral skills were critical to business often had very sophisticated training packages. In most of the companies which took part in the investigation workers at all levels reflected an awareness of the role of oral communication.

Example of Telephone Skills for Customer liaison.

All advisers in a financial services firm followed a six week course in telephone techniques. This provided sophisticated and thorough preparation in responding to clients and managing calls. It included models, examples, practice and written advice. The purpose was to help employees to be confident, flexible and well informed; the training approach was to advise, not over-prescribe. For example advice on keeping the customer informed:

Inform the customer what will happen next
Notify the customer of what you're doing now
First ask permission before putting call on hold
Offer to call back if appropriate
Reassure customer they won't have to wait long
Make sure you keep the customer fully "inform"ed.

Detailed advice was given on how to ask questions and how to structure the overall call for example, by reviewing it part way through.

REVIEW
-Breaks the call into relevant parts
-Directs the call
-Demonstrates that you have been listening
-Demonstrates understanding
-Allows you to clarify confusing statements
-Gives you time to think.

Advice like this helped telephone sales staff understand both the social elements of talking to a client on the phone and how to structure and manage an elusive medium like talk. The lessons of the course were explicitly reinforced by monitoring of the work of individual advisers: active listening, spoken communication and control of the conversation were specifically evaluated in appraisal.

There was some match between the examples of workplace training and elements of the unit Take Part in Discussions and Make Presentations (Key Skills Communication) Levels 2 and 3, particularly: *keep to the subject, focus on the purpose, show you are listening, use standard English; structure ideas and information in presentations*. Each of the elements in the telephone course above could serve as a specific illustration of the more general skills and processes described in the Key Skills unit.   There was a match also with some elements of the grade descriptions for GCSE English and the higher levels of Attainment Target 1, Speaking and Listening, especially: *match talk to context, organise talk to communicate clearly ; confident use of standard English*.   However, in training in the workplace all these skills are confined to quite tightly prescribed circumstances and subjects.

READING

"Reading at college is done in bulk; reading at work is done in bits" (21 year old technical trainee).

Characteristics of workplace reading

Reading was the least visible and least explicitly recognised of the language skills in the workplace. It was generally assumed that employees had a range of reading skills and used them when necessary. Little specific training for reading was provided by comparison with that for

speaking, listening and writing skills, though employees in training, including modern apprentices, read a considerable amount if they were taking courses at college.

Many employees used some reading skills on many occasions each day, albeit in short bursts. Reading was often an incidental support to speaking, listening and writing which were more commonly viewed as 'products'.

In many jobs reading skills were interlocked with and directly mirrored skills in writing. Reading and writing were often in similar and predictable formats, such as faxes, instructions, notes and databases. Employees read in order to be able to record, write briefly for themselves or other colleagues. Some reading undertaken on a few occasions was quite taxing but was made easier because it occured in contexts which were familiar and concrete.

For a complaints administrator in a multinational chemical company the three language skills were interrelated. She dealt with customers making complaints on the telephone and in writing. She read the relevant records and technical information and extracted the key parts, before mediating orally or in writing with the customer and her colleagues. Thorough, clear reading was central to her capacity to give precise, tactful but firm advice and judgement.

Managers' reading

In sharp contrast to the reading which was seamlessly integrated into the day-to-day work of many employees, those in the survey in managerial posts read much more difficult material both for their own knowledge and understanding and often to pass the information on. Characteristically managerial level workers filtered and transmitted information, often reducing the reading demand for other workers.

Middle managers in a large supermarket chain often read a considerable volume of material from head office and summarised this information in short oral reports to other managers in meetings and passed on key points to other workers.

Some managers read widely to be well-informed and 'ahead of the game'.

A manager in the testing section of an electronics firm read industry publications to keep up to date. He needed to have a broad understanding of strategies and ideas in other companies so that he could bring new ideas to his own firm.

A graduate environmental health officer in a local authority read professional journals about local and national issues and kept up to date with new legislation.

Levels of reading demand

A small number of jobs in the survey involved little reading; about one in five read only a few short items each day: some instructions, the reading of handwritten notes about work which has been completed. More detailed or difficult information was usually transmitted orally by supervisors or discussed with experienced co-workers.

For over two thirds of the employees reading took up an hour or more of their daily work. Reading information and notes written by themselves and others were overwhelmingly the most regular kind of reading. Almost half read databases, letters and instructions on most days while about a quarter read reports in various formats.

Modern apprentices' day-to-day reading of technical data or reports of previous shifts was quite slight in terms of amount. However, a quick and precise understanding of what they read at the beginning of their working day was crucial to planning and carrying out the next stages. They

read more extensively for their college work and often applied and interpreted what they had learned from textbooks and courses in their day to day work.

Some young employees had to occasionally use technical manuals, for examle in chemical and car manufacturing, either to become familiar with a new piece of machinery or process, or when something went wrong. These were often daunting tomes with complex sentence construction, formal in style and dense with specialist vocabulary. Blocks of text were often broken up with diagrams and flow charts, which increased readability. The need to solve a particular problem made the reading process more urgent and often more accessible.

Types of reading

For almost 95% of the sample, reading was directly related to carrying out a task or process. This was one of the reasons why reading was almost invisible or taken for granted: it was largely a means of achieving other more tangible goals. Employees largely read and selected information from the memos, forms, letters or customer and product files which circulated in their firms, and passed on information.

Many firms used abbreviated codes which summarised transactions on computer screen as they took place. Employees found these initially difficult to read and write; information taken from them and transmitted had to be accurate. In some firms it had to be read very quickly and translated into ordinary language with a customer on the phone; young employees had to sometimes censor sensitive information as they talked.

> *In one large national finance company, customer service operators had access to about forty different written sheets of information on company products and procedures to which they had to make speedy reference while talking to a customer. The sheets were efficiently highlighted and annotated for quick reference.*

Some jobs required more concentrated or intensive reading, sometimes of quite demanding material.

> *Those working as debt collectors in the large banks or credit companies need to absorb and summarise a considerable weight of correspondence and lengthy memos held on file, some of which include legal language and concepts. They have to be able to summarise the situation to date before writing letters or making telephone calls; these outcomes are perhaps more tangible but depend on careful preparatory work rooted in reading.*
> ---
> *In a civil service agency, employees needed to be able to interpret letters from the public some of which were unclear, poorly constructed or misspelt. As the writers were often under stress, reading the letters required careful and considerate attention.*
> ---
> *An editorial assistant for a local newspaper read the paper every day so he could answer readers' queries. He searched paper and microfilm archive files for information to use in in response, and to supply copy for reporters. Once a month, supervised by a sub-editor, he edited readers' letters for publication to remove errors and ambiguities of wording.*

Workplace reading and reading for education and leisure

Employees made a number of interesting points when they compared the reading skills they needed for their work with those they use for leisure and those they developed in formal education:

- reading from computer screens was not more difficult, just different, and that they adjusted to it quickly;

- employees in customer services, banking and debt collection stressed that it was the combination of reading, writing, speaking and listening, often under pressure, which was the key difference;

- some modern apprentices and others undertaking courses were clear that the very considerable amount of reading that the courses demanded was useful for their daily work.

Training for reading

There was little focus on training for reading and no young employees had received specific training in reading. There was an expectation that those in jobs with high reading demands would have the acquired the skills by then, though it was clear from the survey that some young workers, including apprentices in training would have benefited from some specific training in reading.

Some IT programmes in the workplace managed, simplified, and thus supported reading, leading the reader through material by the use of questions, highlights and other prompts.

Several large employees in both service and manufacturing companies had Flexible Learning Centres with self learning packages on video or CD-ROM. For reading, these packages were usually angled at understanding, absorbing and retaining information effectively or increasing reading efficiency and speed.

> *A self-learning package available in a civil service agency learning centre on Taking in Information Effectively introduced people to some basic psychology of information processing, memory and recall. Its module on Reading and Comprehension covered: discovering your reading speed; how we read; reading strategies; hyperstimulation; comprehension -which covered what is it all about? - main idea -what is the author saying about the subject matter? - details - is it true and if so how or why? conclusion - so what? The same course covered note taking as an aide memoire for reading.*

The approach to reading in such packages was similar to that in study skills guides for students, where reading is analysed as a skill to facilitate tasks and achieve objectives beyond the reading itself, rather than the reading for appreciation or pleasure associated with the literary aspects of the English curriculum. However, the reading skills being targeted were similar to those used to support academic learning in general:

- understanding a proposition;
- following an argument to its conclusion;
- evaluating the validity of the argument;
- deciding on its relevance and usefulness to the reader.

These skills matched some elements of *Read and Respond to Written Material* (Key Skills Communication) Levels 2 and 3: *using different reading techniques; identify the line of reasoning and main points from text; judge the relevance and accuracy of what you read.* There was some match with those parts of the GCSE English grade descriptions and the Attainment Targets for the National Curriculum, which are not specifically about reading literature, particularly analysing argument, but the functional context of the training for workplace reading meant that reading was presented as always serving another end.

WRITING

"At school I was always told to write more whereas now I'm told to be concise".

General characteristics of workplace writing

- Much workplace writing, even when it was quite extensive in terms employees' time, was essentially limited in range, scope and variety. Typically it took the form of notes, letters and memos.

- The writing tended to be brief, concise and focused.

- It often went hand in hand with reading so that the two processes were almost simultaneous.

- Though brief, it was often of critical importance to the day to day business of the organisation and could be crucial to a particular operation or to public image and reputation.

- Writing was likely to involve IT, though about one-sixth of the sample never used IT to write. Writing on screen had not completely replaced writing by hand, and computer-based and manual systems co-existed efficiently side by side.

- Some of the skills and processes required in typical workplace writing over-lapped with those in education the need to:
    * communicate meaning clearly;
    * write appropriately for the particular audience and purpose;
    * understand the features of different genres.

- There were important differences in emphasis:
    * originality did not feature extensively; much writing was predictable and followed standard models designed to expedite routine business efficiently;
    * workplace writing tended to be very public and young employees had to get used to their writing being open to many people;
    * authorship could be a joint affair and the writing need not necessarily 'belong' to an individual.

Range of demands

- The writing demands on the young workers varied considerably in volume, type and level of difficulty. Variations were linked to workplace type; office based work was generally more demanding of writing skills than other types of employment.

- A critical factor across workplaces and job levels was whether young employees were receiving formal training, as this increased the writing demands. Some of the most demanding writing was required by modern apprentices as part of their training.

- The most important factor was the level of job responsibility. Where an employee had some supervisory, management or technical responsibility the writing demands were likely to be both more extensive and more complex.

Very Limited Writing Demand

None of the 18 'Basic' jobs required extensive or demanding writing, and 6 of those involved only very limited writing. Jobs at this level either had overall limited communication demands for example, machine operation, or craft process jobs or they mainly involved speaking and listening, such as telephonist and reception roles. Writing was restricted to entering numbers or letters on a paper form or computer, filling a few sentences on a job card, ticking items off on a list, writing brief notes or messages to colleagues and was for internal communication only.

Whilst there was a very small number with limited skills, the majority of workers at this level had writing skills beyond the demands of the job and around three-quarters had GCSE English at grade A* to C. Some people whose jobs involved very small amounts of writing said their NVQ portfolio was the most demanding writing they had to do.

Occasionally very limited writing was also of potentially critical importance, such as completing product traceability sheets in the food industry so all ingredients could be tracked back to source if necessary.

Most common forms of workplace writing

Informal notes were the commonest form of writing. Over 90% of the sample wrote notes of some kind, usually for colleagues, on paper or screen, on most days. They were described as informal, and undemanding of writing skills. A small number used e-mail. Two-thirds wrote memos at least once a week which were seen as rather more formal, requiring a particular layout, were word-processed and might be kept on file.

Informal Notes
- *for record-keeping*. For around half of the sample note-writing was also part of organisational record keeping; The writing often had to be done quickly, follow specific conventions, and communicate meaning clearly and concisely. The audience was internal, ranging from a small team to the whole organisation. Where IT was used, notes could be accessed and added to by others in the company, so the writing was very public.

> *Workers on out-going shifts in engineering, chemical and vehicle manufacturing companies, and a hotel wrote notes for the incoming shifts, on paper or screen, usually logging jobs done or in progress, or machine readings. They had to be brief, accurate and precise for the next shift to act upon them.*

"The writing is not that important as long as the message is understood by the skilled men involved" (Apprentice mechanical engineer).

In service organisations notes recording communication with customers were built up on computer files. Individual entries were usually limited to a few lines, often in a form of company shorthand sometimes referred to as 'memo lines'. They used abbreviations, specialist jargon, or numerical codes. In some workplaces they had legal status. Young employees found this writing demanding because it was unlike any writing they had done before and was often done under pressure.

> *Telephone advisers with a utility company made notes whilst answering customers' telephone queries. They had to translate the nub of the call into memo lines, enter the records on screen as the caller was speaking, and read back earlier coded notes, probably written by somebody else, in ordinary English to the caller, thus using skills in all language modes more or less simultaneously.*

- ***for the writer's own use.*** Some people made notes for their own use. These included lists, annotations and logs. Though this writing was informal, limited in length and style and purely for the author to read, it was also writing being used in the service of thinking and was closer to writing in education than some of the more public types. It was also a form of writing which managers saw as characteristic of employees who took the job seriously and were likely to progress.

> *A trainee engineer and some craft apprentices recorded new knowledge of how to do things. An administrative officer annotated letters and notes she received with her thoughts on what action to take. A trainee shop manager kept a note-book and wrote down ideas as they struck him, for action later.*

Letters

After note and memo writing, letters were the most common form of writing, Slightly over half the sample wrote one or more letters at least once week, and just under half did so most days. A quarter wrote letters about once a month or occasionally and around another quarter said they never had to write a letter.

Letter-writing across workplaces made wide-spread use of ***pre-set formats***. Computer technology has made it possible to store banks of commonly used standard paragraphs which can be accessed as needed and customised on screen. It is likely that this has led to greater numbers of staff now being involved in writing that goes outside the organisation. Half the sample used pre-set letter formats with few changes always or most times and a similar, largely overlapping number, used a basis of pre-set formats which they customised with self-composed additions. This mixture of formulated and free text writing was a common pattern, especially in customer service industries.

In some workplaces, particularly manufacturing companies, only managers had to write complex, entirely ***free-text letters***. In others such as banks, financial services, a Civil Service agency, this was an occasional part of many people's jobs and they were expected to learn to judge when a situation required an entirely individual response. Some young workers occasionally wrote letters which could take them several hours or even days to gather the facts together and the letter could be the culmination of interaction of all the language modes. Being required to write free text letters sometimes signalled a young employee had reached a certain stage of responsibility.

> *A project officer in a local authority who had been promoted four times cited the increase in free-text letter writing as a feature of her growing responsibility.*
> ---
> *A debt recovery negotiator in a bank wrote letters ranging from standard requests for payment through to complicated individual insurance queries.*
> ---
> *An administrative assistant had telephone conversations with a client, read letter files, annotated a form received, read up to check the legal position, discussed with colleagues her proposed reply, drafted a three page letter, had it checked by her team leader and edited it to the final version.*

Difficult letters. Almost half of those who identified a demanding writing task mentioned letters. Difficult letters were challenging in terms of organising and explaining information. They were stylistic balancing acts which attempted to maintain a polite tone whilst achieving the desired result, often against a background of sensitive circumstances.

Skills for letter writing

- Letter writing was one of the few workplace writing tasks which significant numbers mentioned as having learnt at school or college. They felt they had the basic letter writing skills when they began work and were grateful for this.

- Although no-one explicitly mentioned it, many young workers in the sample demonstrated an implicit understanding of the features of persuasive writing and found it quite natural to think in terms of audience and purpose, though it was not possible to determine how much came from their formal education and how much from experience of work.

- Their recognition of the function of standard paragraphs and pre-set formats could be seen as an implicit understanding of genre features. Interestingly whilst this understanding was widespread for letters it was much less common for other workplace writing such as reports or minutes. Letters were challenging in terms of textual organisation.

- Young employees were aware of the importance of tone in letters and that achieving the right tone was part of what made some letters difficult to write, though they appeared to work towards the right tone through instinct or through using colleagues' letters as models, rather than through conscious use of particular strategies.

- Explaining something to a lay person was seen as taxing and some young employees had learnt how to explain the same thing in several different ways. Here they were clearly employing choices about sentence construction and vocabulary, though they did not explain it in those terms.

More demanding writing

Only a third of the sample had to organise points in a paragraph on a frequent basis. This was partly because the independent writing that some did was too limited to require paragraph structuring, but also indicated that having control over the all the *detail* of composition was less widespread than assembling pre-set and free text elements. This was borne out by the lower incidence of more complex writing forms.

Reports

Over a quarter wrote reports of some type once a week or more, and another third once a month or occasionally. Just less than half never needed to produce written reports in comparison with a quarter never writing a letter. Writing reports was not limited to particular sorts of workplace but was associated with higher levels of responsibility or with jobs which involved a lot of writing.

> *A production engineer had to write both summarising and more detailed reports for senior staff.*
> --
> *An editorial assistant on a newspaper had written a report on changing the company's computer systems.*
> --
> *A graduate entrant in a chemical company regularly prepared reports and a university administrator had written a report as part of a project funding bid.*

People in training also had to write in a reporting style. Modern Apprentices kept log books, records of what they had done and learnt, which were regularly monitored by managers and industry training bodies. Log books reflected a belief that when young workers write about what they have done using specialist language, they consolidate what they have learned to do but also extend theoretical and conceptual understanding. Apprentices, particularly in the early stages of training, mentioned their log-books as a demanding writing task.

Apprentices were also on day release training, working towards external qualifications. They had to take notes, report experiments, prepare projects and undertake quite ambitious assignments. Not surprisingly they frequently drew the parallel between these writing demands and those of school. Apprentices in an engineering firm had to write technical reports to the directors and their authorship was acknowledged.

Skills for report writing

Reports were seen as difficult to write, bringing together various reading and writing skills. Specific aspects which young workers found difficult included how to re-present information; what degree of formality of style to adopt; conventions of presentation such as numbering and layout.

Generally young workers felt they had had to learn how to write reports in the workplace from scratch. Whilst they recognised that there were separate stages, including locating and selecting information before writing, they did not necessarily have strategies for the stages and did not have the same sense of the genre features of a report as they had of a letter.

There did not appear to be use of pre-set formats for reports as for letters. Young employees studied other people's reports but it was less easy to replicate the report model because of its greater complexity. Some managers recognised that report writing was something that benefited from specific training, but one company had decided it was best offered to those who had reached NVQ Level 4, rather than to younger workers.

Managers with responsibility for apprentices saw log book writing as a means of developing writing skills generally. They believed that apprentices needed well-developed writing skills if they were to progress internally or gain promotion elsewhere. In companies where the core business was not about writing, as much as where it was, competency in writing was seen as necessary for career progression.

Other higher level writing

There were few other examples of higher level writing. Only 10 people frequently wrote at length organising their own ideas; half the sample did so occasionally and a third never wrote in this way. Some people's jobs required them to make use of notes to turn them into **reports or minutes**. In each case around half the sample had to produce them occasionally and a small number (13%) did so at least once week.

> *A departmental administrator wrote minutes of quarterly meetings.*
> ---
> *The personal assistant to a director of an engineering company took minutes regularly.*
> ---
> *In a few organisations minute-taking for team meetings rotated and was mentioned by some as their most demanding writing.*

Higher level writing skills associated with organising thoughts, ideas and information were required least often. People studying for qualifications such as HNCs or HNDs mentioned 'college work' as the writing which stretched them most and involved the greatest range of skills.

There were a very small number whose day to day jobs demanded extensive and varied independent writing ,and usually communication was the central focus of their jobs.

> *A training manager in a large retail store prepared a monthly newsletter for staff.*
> ---
> *A flexible learning centre manager, a graduate entrant, in a large chemical company had to write induction manuals, pitching the style, tone and content to suit different levels of staff entry from NVQ Level 1 to degree.*
> ---
> *A university administrator wrote a wide range of reports and papers, in which he had to condense and present dense information clearly for individual colleagues and committees.*

Training for writing

Skills on entry

Employees generally thought they had the necessary basic writing skills when they started work, 'I was able to write'... 'learnt basic business letters at school/college'....'already had the process skills...just utilise them in a different way'.

However, a majority of the sample identified skills they had needed or still needed to learn. These tended to be a combination of specialist knowledge: house-style, pre-set conventions, company shorthand and composing ability 'how to put it all together so it makes sense for the reader'. The compositional aspects were the more challenging. 'I have learnt how to phrase a letter so it is diplomatic but truthful. This has taken some time to develop'. There were examples of business letters which showed young employees (some graduates) struggling to achieve a suitably formal style but falling into the trap of convoluted sentence structure and stilted expression.

Context for training

There was less emphasis on formal training for writing than for speaking and listening and fewer young employees had had such training for writing. Whereas for speaking and listening there were examples of extensive formal training which all staff doing a particular job underwent, this was much less common for writing, where formal training was more likely to be on an individual basis when the need was identified by employee or line-manager. The general assumption was that employees would already have or would develop the necessary skills through practice, and more formal training came into play either when they encountered problems or sometimes when they were promoted or moved jobs internally.

> Examples of courses
>
> *Employees in a financial services company had attended a 'Passion for Pen' course, which focused on the use of positive language, and applied linguistic theory of connotation in demonstrating the effects of choosing 'tasty words' in letters to customers. It appeared to be the equivalent for writing of an accompanying telephone skills course.*
>
> ---
>
> *All customer service staff with a public utility had an induction course which included letter writing skills and the same company had a central training service which ran report writing courses.*
>
> ---
>
> *A local authority provided a rolling programme of courses, including letter, minute and report writing, which were also open to local university employees. A manager in one company had identified that the writing skills of graduate entrants needed improvement and had requested a course in letter writing for debt collectors to improve clarity and fluency. One company sent managers on report writing courses run by the Industrial Society.*

Self learning packages. There was considerable use of training packages on paper and CD-Rom. These were based on the assumption that to be able to write in a particular genre learners needed to be conscious of the features of that genre, so they could replicate them, organising and presenting their content within the framework of the genre. But they recognised that the process of writing choices about vocabulary, sentence length and structure, paragraph length and structure, layout and presentation. They attempted to offer some fairly straightforward principles about making those choices, aimed at clear communication of meaning, appropriateness of tone and style for genre, audience and purpose, avoiding overworked phrases and clichés. The combination of some analysis of features and how to reproduce them, with a functional context which employees recognised and identified with made these packages successful examples of workplace training.

In terms of their parallels with teaching for writing in the education system, they combined some of the approaches of English teaching used to familiarise pupils with features of different types of writing, with the sort of teaching which happens in many subjects, especially at Key Stage 4 and beyond, on topics such as how to write a good essay or exam answer technique.

The qualities of writing these packages aimed for were a close match with some of the Writing element for Key Skills Communication Level 3 on presentation, textual organisation, style and tone, relevance, technical accuracy and writer awareness. There was also a good match with some aspects of the grade descriptions for writing in GCSE English, grades A and C and for Levels 7 and 8 of the Attainment Targets for Writing at Key Stage 4:

- adapt style and register to form and contex;
- achieve coherent and appropriate textual structure;
- choose a range of vocabulary and grammatical structures to convey shades of meaning;
- spell and punctuate accurately.

The importance of technical accuracy

The degree of emphasis placed on *correct spelling, grammar and punctuation* in the workplace tended to depend on the context, audience and purpose for the writing. Workplaces had evolved their own tolerance norms, usually related to the nature of the business, whether the writing was for an internal or external readership, and the balance of importance between presentation and meaning.

Three quarters of the sample said they needed to spell and punctuate correctly always or most of the time and evidence suggested that this is what they aimed to do and that they took these aspects of writing seriously in the work context. However, there were several examples of young employees expressing these sentiments in writing which itself contained a number of errors.

The reality tended to be that although all the workplaces would have preferred their young workers to all write accurately and correctly all the time, the degree of error tolerance depended on context and less than 100% accuracy was sometimes off-set by other factors judged to be more important. This was especially true where the communication was internal and important, as between shifts. In such cases the ability to get the message across clearly and unambiguously was the bottom line. As long as errors did not impede communication of *meaning* they tended to be tolerated.

In workplaces where written communication with the customer was an important aspect of the organisation's public face, accuracy was highly valued. Young workers in these organisations could usually draw on more experienced colleagues such as team leaders to check the technical accuracy of their writing as well as its content, and some had always to seek approval before any writing was sent out. In a newspaper office preparing advertising copy total accuracy was necessary even where writing demand was minimal. Careful proof-reading systems were needed, as experience had shown that most young workers did not arrive with reliable or proofing skills. Where written communication had a legal status this checking process was particularly important. For self-checking, most young employees relied heavily on computer spell-checkers and did not always seem aware of their limitations.

Training for technical accuracy

There was less evidence of training to reinforce technical accuracy than for composition. This seemed to be a sensitive area. The only example of specific face to face training for these sorts of skills was through a YT programme, where additional TEC funding could be bid for for trainees who needed extra tuition with literacy skills, to go on courses with a commercial training provider. One training manager with a financial services company said he occasionally received requests to put on courses in this area but admitted shying away from them as he did not feel equipped to devise or deliver training on 'grammar or punctuation'. For the small number of firms which required very high levels of spelling accuracy there appeared to be no examples of specific training.