

Background and Context

The majority of the young people who are supervised by the youth justice system, that is to say, have been convicted of an offence by Her Majesty's Court Service, are vulnerable, disadvantaged and disproportionately belong to the not in education, employment, or training category (NEET). There is an ever expanding evidence base to support this view, data having been compiled since 1998 at the conception of the Crime and Disorder Act delivered through the Youth Justice Board (YJB) for England and Wales. A series of studies were commissioned by the Youth Justice Board (YJB 2001a: YJB 2001b) which have helped to enlighten us about the needs of young people who have offended. The evidence indicated that the attainment in basic skills (English, maths and information technology) correlated to the length of offending history. Equally it may be that there is a 'significantly higher proportion of acquired or innate learning difficulties beset these young people' (Stephenson, Brown 2003, p. 29), a sentiment reflected by The Communication Trust in their studies of young people who offend, where at least 60% of young people in the youth justice system have an identified communication need (Bryan and Mackenzie 2008), and more recent evidence suggest that it may be as high as 90% (Hughes et al 2012). In the most recent survey of learning difficulties for a cohort of young people released from custody during 2009 in Nottinghamshire the figure was 96%. Building on this, and taking into consideration that many young offenders have a reading and reading comprehension age below the age of 10 (*ibid*) it is easy to understand the difficulties young people in the youth justice system encounter when trying to re-enter education, training or employment.

When designing and implementing programmes for young people who offend the YJB used evidence collected through large meta-analytic surveys to reduce recidivism (McGuire 1995). From this, youth justice interventions are based on the Scaled Approach, they are 'interventions (...) tailored to the individual, based on an assessment of their risks and needs' (Ministry of Justice 2012). There are inherent challenges for those working in youth justice to reconcile these approaches which are predominantly based on the development of healthcare policy and using medical terms such as: intervention, dosage and multi-modal, to the principles and context of education. The idea of providing a more intervention based approach to teaching, rather than a curricular one may help to re-engage young people who offend by facilitating learning and building basic skills in a step by step approach.

The Nottinghamshire Youth Justice Service has a structured approach to meeting the education and training needs of young people supervised on statutory court orders. Although the service does not deliver direct statutory education provision (focussing instead on a brokerage system in conjunction with schools and other universal education providers through a bespoke education and training team), it does deliver intensive supervision and surveillance (ISS) packages on behalf of Her Majesty's Court Service. ISS is used as a community based alternative to custodial sentences. These integrated intervention packages do require an element of education and training to assist young people in their rehabilitation into society, reduce re-offending, and provide

them with better life chances. It is within this context that the Rapid English programme was procured with an aim of providing intensive basic skills catch up programme for young people with the hope that they would then go onto mainstream courses¹. Previous basic skills interventions have relied heavily on a worksheet approach, using the national adult literacy and numeracy curriculum (ALAN) based on a curricular, scaffolding approach to learning. Rapid English provided a digital intervention and modular approach to learning and could be delivered by non education staff, in a variety of environments on a one to one basis. Nottinghamshire Youth Justice Service recognised a need for a different approach to teaching basic skills, for example, when basic skills of a young person are assessed as requiring a statutory intervention (when an Asset score in the education, training or employment section is 2 or above) then this must be addressed in the young person's intervention plan. Typically, study programmes in the community include access to the ALAN curriculum, but retention is difficult and young people tell us that they find the basic skills lessons difficult and boring, compounding their earlier educational failure (YJB 2006). In addition to this Davies et al (2004) found that the literacy levels in the offending population they sampled were below the level at which they could meaningfully learn from their own in-house offending behaviour programmes. There was a mismatch between the literacy demands of an offending behaviour programme and the levels of understanding in the offenders participating i.e. the interventions were not effective. This research strengthens the argument to establish effective basic skills interventions which not only enable young offenders to access and participate in wider, more mainstream courses but also to deliver effective offending behaviour programmes.

The Rapid English Programme

The Rapid English programme is a communication course delivered through software based resource. It is designed to be delivered by youth justice staff within an integrated intervention package by young people serving community based sentences following a conviction in Her Majesty's Courts. Within the course there are a range of different modules to choose from and includes: quick diagnosis, essential phonics, handwriting, reading development, sentences and paragraphs, description and narration, public speaking and presentation skills. It covers most aspects of speaking, reading, listening and writing. The programme has evolved from TEFL pedagogy and therefore does not assume any prior knowledge of the language by the student. More importantly it is delivered via short one to one sessions, not necessarily by an education professional, and not necessarily within traditional learning environments. This is most important for youth justice professionals as these resources (access to teachers and classrooms) are not usually available.

This study is particularly interested in the assertion of Rapid English as having 'a proven track record in reducing NEET figures' (Rapid English) an assertion the Reading Report (Reading YOS 2013) upholds through their quantitative analysis of education, training and employment progression of the young people who took part in the programme over four years.

¹ Mainstream in this context refers to Education Funding Agency (EFA) courses such as Study Programmes, Traineeships, Apprenticeships, and other Further Education course available within specific localities in Nottinghamshire.

In Nottinghamshire the programme is delivered by a team of trained staff, but is predominantly used by a basic skills tutor based within the ISS team to young people subject to ISS packages. Some delivery occurs in the wider Youth Offending Teams (YOT's) to young people on other statutory orders but practice is not yet fully embedded. The programme has been in use for 11 months, and has delivered interventions to 17² young people.

Review of current evidence and research

Reading Youth Offending Service has recently released an evaluation report on their use of Rapid English as part of the YJB directory of effective practice (*ibid*). The report is a quantitative analysis of the use of Rapid English programme in their youth offending service (YOS). The YOS compiled extensive evidence over a period of four years since the implementation in April 2009 up to the end of the financial year 2013. The analysis captured the destinations of the young people involved to show the education, training or employment (ETE) progressions at the end of the intervention. The report concludes that the use of Rapid English has helped young people to make 'significant academic progress in aspects of the language which have previously been holding them back' (*ibid* p. 23).

The report also offers an interesting analysis of the re-offending data for the four years of the survey. Although the difference in the re-offending rates was not necessarily significant over the entire four year period, there was a considerable positive effect found in the final year 2012/13. In this year the data shows a reduction of 21.8% in the re-offending rate compared to the average rate within the whole cohort³. This could possibly be explained through Maguire's principles (Maguire 1995) of programme integrity and dosage, in that by the end of year four Reading YOS had started to get the intervention 'right', offering delivery at the optimum level where it has started to make a real difference to the young people participating.

However, this analysis and report is predominantly a quantitative study and although there are some interesting qualitative research regarding the thoughts of the practitioners involved the voices of the young people who have participated are absent.

Therefore, and to add to the evidence regarding the effectiveness of Rapid English, this study has taken a qualitative approach in order to include the young people participating in the programme. This is an attempt to provide triangulation to the existing data and knowledge, and has deliberately utilised a variety of qualitative methods.

Research Aims

A validation group was formed, comprising of the two researchers (basic skills tutor and ETE coordinator), a YOT team manager, and ISS manager, to identify the parameters of the study and identify specific research questions. The validation group agreed to a

² The cohort may be higher due to locality delivery not captured by centralised team.

³ Rapid English cohort 18.2%, YOS average 40%

clear terms of reference⁴. The primary aim of the study was to evaluate the effectiveness of the Rapid English programme with young people in the Youth Justice System and therefore the following was agreed as the over-arching research question:

Can the Rapid English programme demonstrate a positive progression in the communication skills of young people in the youth justice system?

This was broken down into 3 more specific objectives around which the methodology could be designed:

1. Can Rapid English re-engage young people how have previously experienced fixed, permanent or grey exclusions from school?
2. Does Rapid English help young people to feel more confident with their speaking, reading, writing and listening skills?
3. Does Rapid English, as part of an integrated intervention package, support young people into mainstream education, training or employment opportunities?

Methodology

Qualitative methods are more interested in the experience of those taking part, rather than a quantitative approach which often relies on the sample size. In this evaluation the sample size was always going to be small because of the amount of young people who have been through the programme. Therefore, some of the findings are described as tentative because of this.

The methods used have produced data which is displayed often in a quantitative way. This has been used to be able to provide the findings in an easy and digestible way. However, the point of a more qualitative evaluation is to find rich and descriptive data – this is of particular importance in this case study because the programme is situated within a complex system of integrated interventions.

- Questionnaires. In total 11 questionnaires were completed (52% response rate), these were based on a scoring system (1 to 10) with a variety of questions designed to try and answer research question 1.
- One to one interviews. In total 3 in depth interviews were undertaken. These were designed to answer research question 2 (although some answers from the questionnaire also covered themes in this question).
- Practitioner questionnaires. In total seven questionnaires were completed (39% response rate), nine questions were asked and a scoring system of 1 to 10 was utilized. The questions were designed to give a wide practitioner view of the programme and to aid the answer for research question 1.
- Control Group Comparison. A random sample of young people on ISS⁵ was taken and compared to the ISS Rapid English group (sample group of six each).

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- Provide a consistent overview of the ethical guidelines of educational research.
- Provide a robust scrutiny of data.
- Critically evaluate any emerging themes.
- Provide clear arguments for any future claim to knowledge.

⁵ The ISS group was chosen because they were a more like for like group compared to those young people on a variety of orders across the YJ system.

The audit included Asset scores from beginning of order to end, length of time on ISS, length of time on Rapid English, if there were any breaks in the delivery of the programme, ETE status at the end of the order and the re-offending rate. The data set was designed to answer research question 3.

- Observations. Three young people were observed (in an overt and naturalistic context) using Rapid English. An observation crib sheet was used to standardize findings and enable an analysis without too many variables. To reduce the possibility of variables further the same tutor was observed three times, this helped to minimize the programme integrity. The observations helped to triangulate the rest of the findings and the crib sheet designed primarily to look for engagement through verbal and non verbal means.

Findings

Research Question 1

Can Rapid English re-engage young people – **Yes**

Young people (on average) did think that the programme was better than they had thought it would be before they started. Half of them would recommend it to a friend. Those young people who embarked on the programme outside of an ISS package have tended to be the most positive commenting on their improved confidence. When asked what was in for them:

'my education, my confidence, my reading and writing, my speaking skills'

'help to get my maths GCSE'

'Learning, feeling confident, my writing has got better. Sometimes speaking (...)'

All who participated in the questionnaires have experienced previous failures within the education system, all had been subjected to fixed term exclusions, on average at least six, and all apart from 2 had been permanently excluded from mainstream school.

The highest scores on average across the questionnaires were based on what the young people thought about their own abilities, so for example, the highest scoring question was: *I am able to read confidently*, scored 7. The next two highest scoring questions were equally about their own abilities: *I can talk to people I don't know*, and, *I can listen and follow instructions*. This is an interesting dynamic in relation to how the young people view themselves particularly when viewed from the perspective of their low basic skills standard (the cohort ranged from Level 1 to Entry Level 1). This reflects the findings of the Children's Commissioner report (Hughes et al 2012) that , on average, young offenders have a reading age of a 10 year old (or below). The understanding of the young people and the realities of their abilities in relation to the rest of society is stark.

In the practitioner questionnaires responses identified that the programme is useful for young people on the lower end of the spectrum (in terms of basic skills), for example below level 1. If the majority of young people supervised by the Youth Justice system are below level 1 this suggests the programme is valuable for all. It also suggests that practitioners may not be fully aware that practically the whole cohort are on the lower

end of the basic skills spectrum. It is also important to remember that the programme can accommodate young people above a level 2 and therefore can cover the entire cohort! Practitioners told us that they would recommend the programme to colleagues and on average all can see the benefit for young people.

The engagement of young people was clear from the observed sessions. All the young people displayed more positive behaviour than negative. The majority of communication was positive and non-verbal; some of the observed sessions were notable by the quietness. The main behaviours displayed included (top four ranked) concentrating on task, concentrating on the computer screen, smiling, and answering the tutor’s questions. The task that all concentrated on for the longest period of time was the handwriting practice. All of these positive behaviours can be described as presenting engagement. Although the observation data was not a complete opposite of what the young people were telling us, it did paint a different picture to what the young people had said (see table 1). This adds to the hypothesis that what young people say is not always congruent to how they behave.

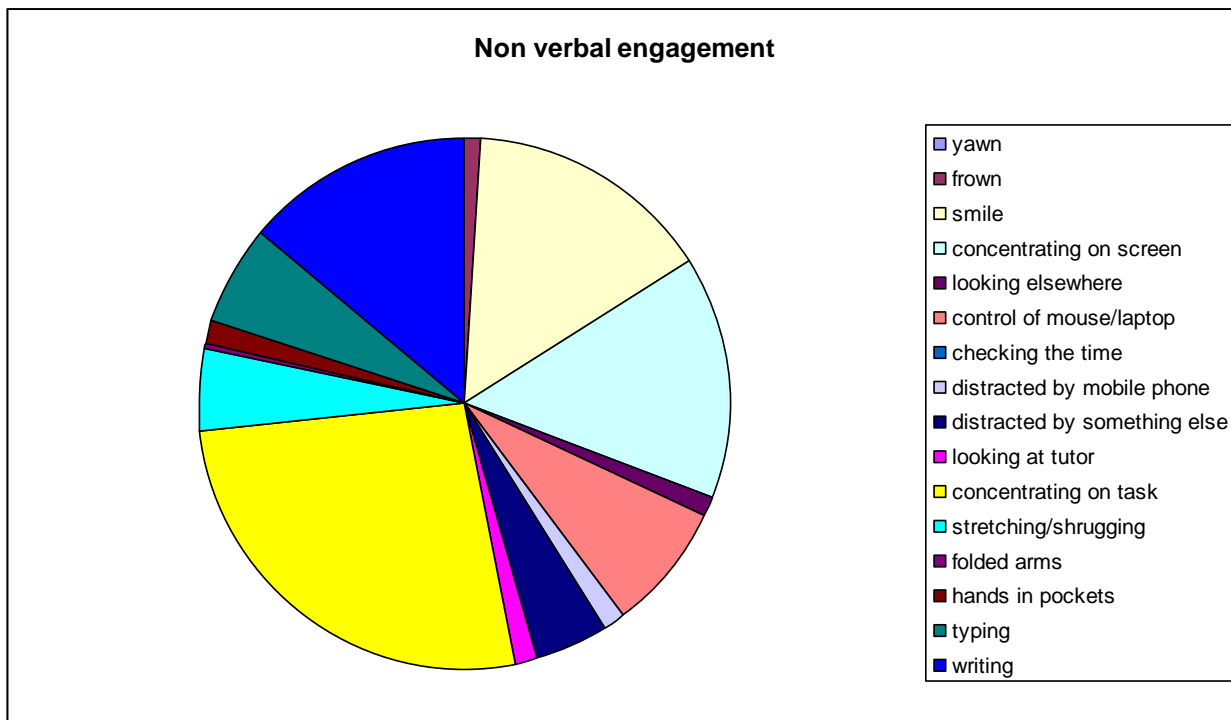


Diagram 1

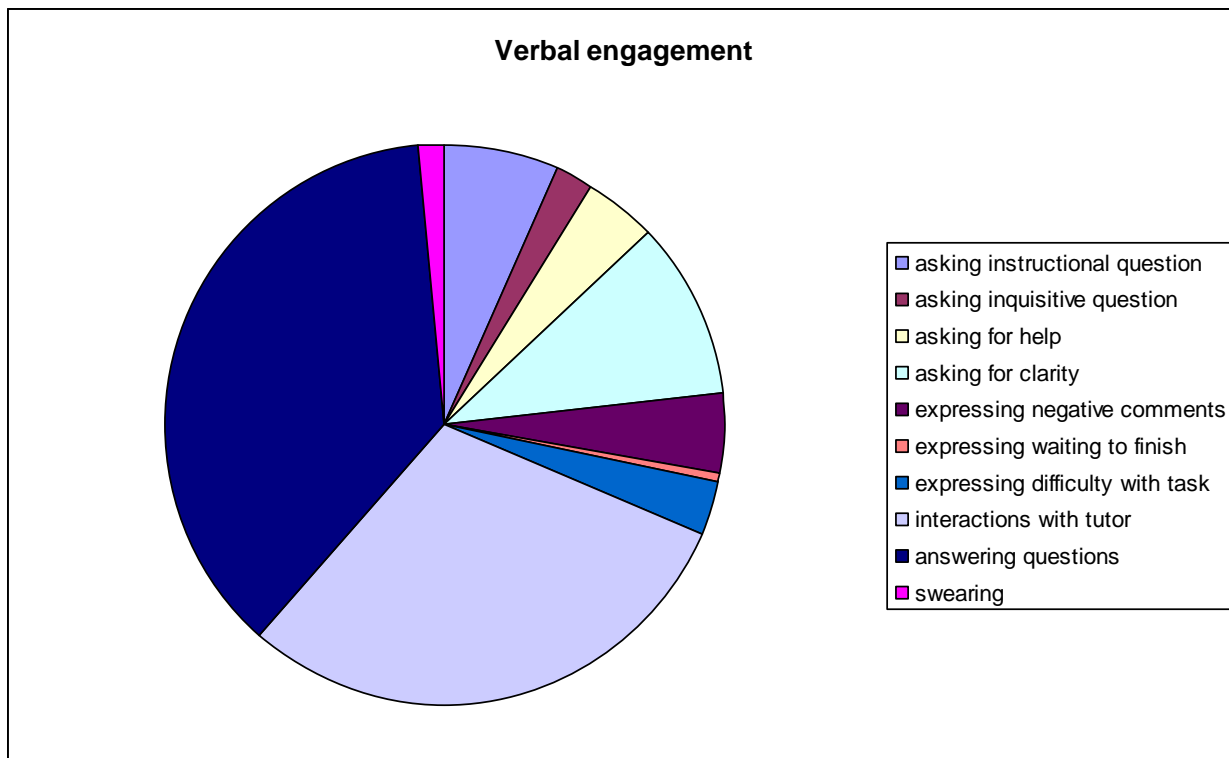


Diagram 2

Research Question 2

Does Rapid English help young people to feel more confident – **Yes**

If the only analysis was from the data collected through the one to one interviews then the answer would have been inconclusive. There just wasn't enough clear evidence. However, when triangulated with data from the questionnaires, '*learning, feeling more confident*', '*helped with my confidence*', and, '*my education, my confidence*', and the observation data, a more conclusive result can be claimed.

The one to one interviews were broken down into individual statements, in total 56, and coded into categories (help, confidence, other positive comments, negative comments, and neutral comments).

| General thoughts about RE in relation to ISS package | Thoughts about school | Thoughts about what has been learnt | Thoughts about positive effects of RE on their future | In Total |
|--|-----------------------|-------------------------------------|---|--------------------|
| Neutral & positive | Negative & neutral | Negative & confident | Neutral & positive | Neutral & Negative |

Table 1

The general thoughts about the Rapid English programme were neutral and positive. The observation data was designed to look and find elements of engagement rather than confidence. However during one session a young person shared a story about how

he had learnt to spell the word ‘because’ whilst he recounted this story his confidence was clear to see as he made eye contact with his tutor (one of the only occasions during the hour long session) and became animated. He had been unable to spell ‘because’ in his previous session, so he taught himself by texting his friend the word over and over again throughout the course of an evening. His friend got a bit ‘freaked out by this’, ‘because WHAT THE (insert expletive)?’ the young person found this hilarious, and he could now spell that particular word. We told him he had just completed his first bit of homework for years – without realising!

Research Question 3

Does Rapid English support young people into mainstream ETE opportunities – **No but it does reduce re-offending rates**

| Data Set | RE Group | Control Group | |
|---|--------------------------------|---------------|---|
| Has the overall asset score been reduced? | Yes | No | |
| Length of time on ISS | 10.1 months | 4.2 months | |
| Length of time on RE | 16.3 weeks | | |
| How many breaks in the programme | 1 break (average = 5 weeks) | | |
| ETE status at the end of order (%age) | 66.6% | 66.6% | |
| Re-offending rate | 16.6% | 83% | 19.5% (YJ average Q1/2 13/14) |

Table 2

The data produced through the Reading study showed a clear positive effect on re-offending rates, and the control group comparison also showed a reduction in the Rapid English group when compared to the control group. There is little information regarding why this should be other than the two studies discussed, although it is certainly an interesting area for further research (a conclusion also reached by Reading YOS).

It is also difficult from the data collected to be able to ‘isolate’ Rapid English from the integration of the ISS programme as a whole to conclude that it is purely this intervention that reduces the re-offending rates. The data above shows a correlation between the lower re-offending rate and length of time on ISS. It is therefore possible to say that Rapid English, as part of an integrated offer of intervention, can help in reducing re-offending rates.

It is disappointing that this data did not show a positive result on the progression of young people into mainstream ETE opportunities, but this is a fluid picture, for example some of the young people have now progressed into opportunities since the data was collected, and some have dropped out. Retention is the crucial factor in positive ETE destinations, hence the fluctuation in the NEET figures.

Conclusions

- Rapid English can help reduce re-offending rates when delivered as a package of integrated interventions and support.
- There is no conclusive evidence to link Rapid English to a reduction in NEET.
- Young people can be re-engaged using the Rapid English programme.
- Young people are able to concentrate on Rapid English tasks and are particularly engaged when completing handwriting tasks.
- Rapid English can improve young people's confidence in their reading, writing, speaking and listening skills although many do not recognize this as an issue at the beginning.

Recommendations from the Report

- Some of the results may be viewed as tentative because of the sample sizes. However the results regarding re-offending rates are clear, and when put together with the data provided by Reading YOS can be described as significant. The current delivery in Nottinghamshire requires strengthening. Rapid English should be made available to more young people as part of a standard offer.
- The delivery in YOT's should be further promoted and supported. Details of the evaluation to be disseminated to trained staff with the aim of securing their participation in a larger roll out of the programme. As the Reading study has demonstrated the programme intensity and dosage is integral to unlocking the full potential of Rapid English. A fact finding visit to reading should be considered to make the most of any delivery design.
- Further research should be considered including more YOT's, larger sample sizes, to explore the relationship between Rapid English, integrated intervention packages, and the re-offending rate. This may include the interconnectedness between improving language and literacy skills and the effectiveness of offending behaviour programmes. For example, whilst observing a session a young person said that he will be doing '*provation*' soon and won't have to finish ISS, when questioned further about this the conclusion was drawn that he meant probation. This was lost on the young person because he didn't know what either was, and hadn't asked. Often terms are discussed with young people who have little or no understanding of what these words mean. Rapid English, through the use of expanding vocabulary can assist in that growing understanding.

Recommendations from the dissemination to trained staff on 08.05.14

The findings from the evaluation were presented to the trained Rapid English staff in the Youth Offending Teams. Delivery across the localities has been slow and the validation group hi-lighted the need to disseminate the findings to ascertain what the barriers are. The validation group accepted the recommendation to make Rapid English more widely available to young people outside of the ISS programme. The following is a summary of the discussion.

- Some teams have been carrying vacant posts and therefore capacity has been an issue in some areas. However, the service was now involved in a large recruitment exercise and it was hoped that this would mean that more time could be committed to delivery. Some colleagues commented that they had not had any referrals and therefore had not delivered any programmes. The Mashfield Team had recently held a session on the benefits of Rapid English which had resulted in more referrals coming through. The representatives from this team recommended a more wide scale dissemination of the findings to all case managers. However, it is acknowledged that this has to be done when the delivery capacity is available because if referrals are to be made staff must be able to deliver. Therefore the time to do this may not be now, but rather once the teams are fully staffed.
- The access to the technology required to run the programme is currently unavailable in some areas due to changes and upgrades in the operating systems across the Council. This is being addressed but at present has not yet been resolved. It was acknowledged that the handwriting module had been observed as the intervention the young people spent most of their time positively concentrating on, and this can be delivered without the aid of technology. This module could be utilised first to aid the confidence of those case managers who are yet to get to grips with the programme. A further recommendation of more laptops was acknowledged.
- An issue with shorter referral orders was identified regarding the amount of time available to deliver the interventions and that the programme may not be seen as a priority to panel members. A suggestion to resolve this would be to disseminate the finding to panel members, but also to develop some of the handwriting modules to include stories of victim awareness and consequences of offending. This would enable this work to be undertaken on shorter orders whilst using handwriting as the vehicle to deliver this double edged intervention. A development to be followed up by Kay Carter.
- A further refresher training session would be beneficial to 're-launch' the programme. The timing of this to coincide with other promotional activity and dissemination of the findings.

All original data is available on request

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