

# Developing students' understanding of command verbs

**Derek Rodger** discusses the work Heathlands School has been doing to develop students' understanding of command verbs. This became a key part of the School Development Plan (SDP) in terms of vocabulary development across the curriculum

Bloom's Taxonomy has been widely used as a guideline in designing examination questions relating to different cognitive levels. It is established practice at Heathlands for learning objectives to be displayed in the classroom giving deaf students a greater level of exposure to the language used in framing the learning objectives. Despite giving exposure to a range of verbs, some deaf students continue to experience difficulty in understanding what the verbs mean. Many of the verbs displayed in learning objectives are commonly used in writing exam questions. Exam boards provide a list of command words (they are verbs) that are used in exams that tell students how they should answer a question. This is an area of literacy some students find hard which impacts on their exam performance, not only in terms of recording a comprehensible response but also in terms of their ability to fully appreciate exactly what information a question requires in a response. During an assessment week for Key Stage 4 (KS4) students, when requesting questions to be repeated in British Sign Language (BSL), it emerged that several students did not 'understand' what the command verb was requiring and, as a result, failed to answer some of the very simple questions correctly. The command verb is usually the first single word of a question, eg 'describe', 'justify', but this one word is crucial in dictating what sort of response is required. This was further confirmed when subject teachers undertook an examination analysis activity with students, taking the time to reflect on question responses and identify why and where they failed to be allocated marks, eg what information was missing and why was this missed. Some students identified a difficulty in understanding what they were being asked to do in relation to the command word. Other reasons included misreading the question and lack of confidence in answering through failing to study a concept in enough depth. This could be a possible explanation for deaf students' consistently poor performance in examinations compared to hearing peers, and prompted us to undertake a baseline assessment with students to ascertain where they were in their understanding of command verbs and their definitions.

## Addressing the issue in the School Development Plan

The following stages outline the process:

**Stage 1** – Assessment procedures were agreed and explained to staff to

ensure the assessments were administered consistently.

**Stage 2** – Bloom's Taxonomy and the guidance from the GCSE exam board were used to devise the baseline assessments. Three baseline assessments were created using Bloom's Taxonomy:

- The 'red' baseline level assesses verbs from the 'remember' level
- The 'green' baseline level assesses verbs from the 'understanding' level
- The 'blue' baseline level assesses verbs from the 'applying' level

Videos of all command words in BSL were created to ensure consistency across the whole school. Statements in the baseline assessment were also provided with BSL translations.

**Stage 3** – A schedule for baseline assessments was set up and carried out by the English teachers.

**Stage 4** – Baseline assessments were analysed and shared with staff in the curriculum meetings. Staff were asked to consider intervention activities they could do in their lessons to develop students' understanding of command words. Effective practice sessions were scheduled to take place in the school curriculum meetings.

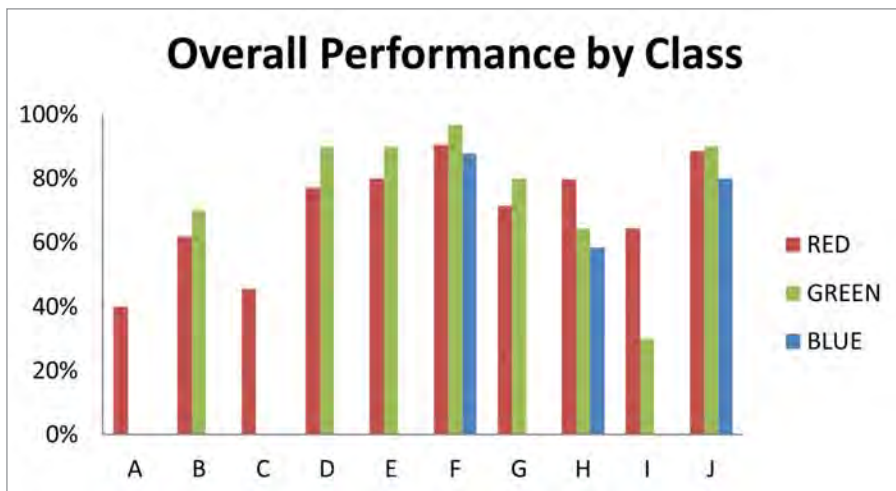
## Baseline assessment results

Overall performance by each class is shown below.

Judgements are based upon the extent to which a student is showing a grasp of red/green/blue word commands, using a 'best fit' approach.

Percentage of the criteria in which a student is showing a grasp:

Below (–30), Emerging (30–50), Developing (50–70), Securing (70–90), Mastering (90+).



Three levels of baseline word command assessments			
	Red	Green	Blue
A	Emerging	X	X
B	Developing	Developing	X
C	Different test administered: simple verbs		
D	Emerging	X	X
E	Securing	Developing	X
F	Securing	Securing	X
G	Securing	Securing	Developing
H	Emerging	Developing	X
I	Developing	Developing	Developing
J	Emerging	Below	X
K	Securing	Securing	Developing

Key: X = not tested

Some of the common errors students made in the baseline assessments:

For red assessment: 'write' for 'label' and 'label' for 'draw'

For green assessment: 'explain' for 'describe' and 'explain' for 'show'

For blue assessment: 'explain' for 'evaluate' and 'show' for 'decide'

Baseline assessments helped staff to implement a variety of activities in lessons to support the learning of command words, which were shared in the curriculum meetings as 'good practice'. These meetings encouraged teacher collaboration and provided a platform to share what strategies worked well with different classes. The Covid pandemic impacted some of the development work in the autumn term and the first half of spring term. We did not want to lose the momentum of this very important development work; therefore we used a blended approach to enable us to come together face-to-face when it was safe to do with Zoom online sessions.

A folder was set up on the staff network drive to enable staff to share teaching resources and complete the sheet (see below) about the activities they did with the students and what the impact was.

### Sharing good practice word commands – Wed 10th March 2021

See chart below.

### Assessing the impact of the School Development Plan priority

Analysis of sharing good practice, resources and information showed a hierarchical ordering of cognitive challenge in the activities staff used with their students to develop their understanding of command verbs. It was good to see shared examples that encourage students to think and function at the first three levels

of the taxonomy.

Below are examples of activities related to helping students to understand command words utilising Bloom's Taxonomy.

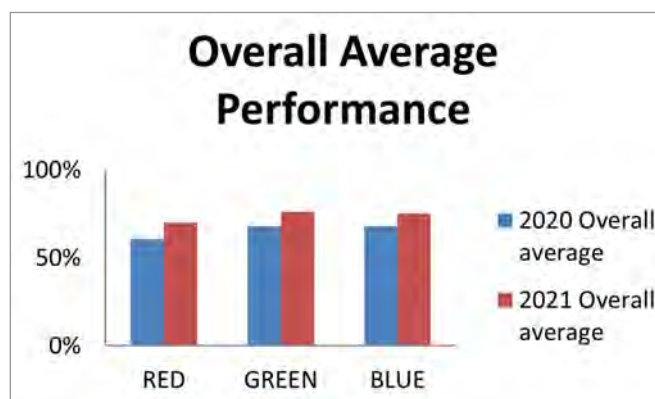
- Remembering: There have been activities where staff provided opportunities for students to recall the command words and signs. Through these activities, students were more likely to retain the meaning of the command words.

Example activities at this level: recalling signs for the command words, recalling their meaning.

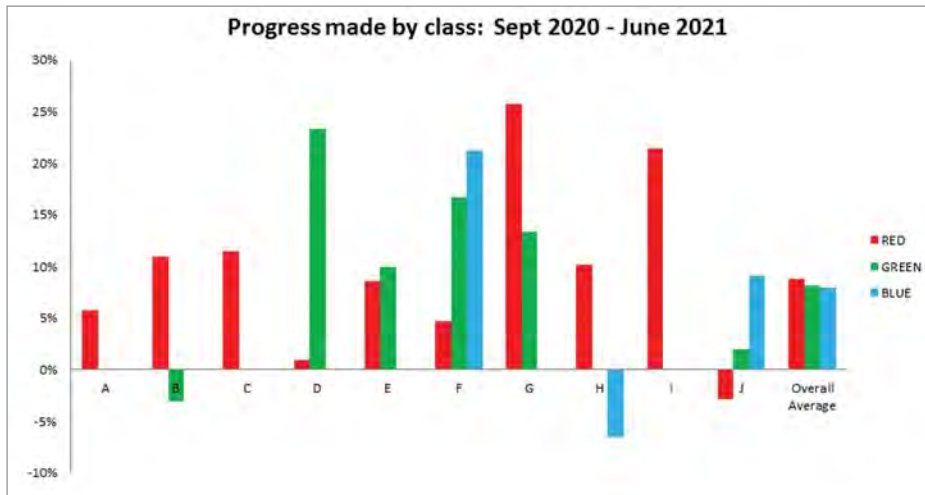
- Understanding: Activities to help students understand the command words were shared. There were many examples where command words were identified and understood in the context of questions. Through these activities, the students were introduced to different style exam questions. They learnt how to answer them correctly, making sure the answers matched the command word/exam question expectations. Excellent resources were shared on helping students to self-assess their understanding of the command words, also a good template was provided for teachers to write feedback on students' understanding of specific commands.

Example activities at this level: identifying command words (also action verbs) in sentences, understanding and answering questions, simple questions or exam questions, using word commands in written work and participating in self-assessment to show understanding of the command words.

- Applying: There were some shared examples demonstrating how students apply their understanding of word commands to their work: for example, mind maps, topical revision work and practising answering exam questions. It was good to see some examples from KS4 students where they participated in analysing and evaluating pieces of work. These activities provided the students with opportunities to apply knowledge to different situations and contexts and develop their ability to answer exam questions and provide evaluations.



Teacher	Class	Activity	Impact on Students
Mr Rodger			
Ms Lee			



word groups, possibly because the students have high literacy skills that may have led staff to focus on this group for their activities more than others.

- Class J focused mostly on green and blue command words. This was anticipated because the teaching of higher-order command words ensured students understood what the command words meant and knew how to answer questions effectively to gain the maximum number of marks. One student in this class performed badly in

Examples at this level: using command words in their own work through written tasks or creating questions as part of extending their own understanding, also challenging them to think outside the box.

Through the focused 'word command' activities staff were able to plan activities successfully to promote understanding and knowledge of word command verbs.

**Overall average performance**

Results of end-of-year word command assessments (June 2021) demonstrated progress had been made resulting from the targeted word command focus in lessons. On average all the groups of word commands showed similar levels of performance.

**Progress made by classes**

The majority of classes showed progress in their understanding of command words, evidenced by the results shown. Not all the classes made progress in all sections; this could have been due to the Covid-19 pandemic as we switched to remote learning, which had a negative effect on some students. We know that communicating directly, face-to-face in the classroom with students promotes positive engagement and progress in learning.

**Issues raised by staff:**

- Two groups of command words were too much.
- Students did not read the questions accurately.
- There was some confusion over signs/similar signs (eg explain/describe, plot/plan).
- There was a question about the reliability of the baseline assessments as KS3 and KS4 were given the same assessment. It was felt there should be a difference as KS4 tended to focus more on exam preparation.
- Class C students did not do the baseline assessment because it was not appropriate for them; they did their own where they focused on simple everyday verbs and 'Wh' questions. They did their own tailor-made assessment, which reflected some progress made in understanding very simple everyday verbs.
- Class G is the only class that made progress in all the

the red command word test and this affected the overall average.

Staff felt the 'sharing of good practice' throughout the year helped them to focus on this SDP leading to a positive impact on literacy planning. A lot of staff planned lessons around developing command words and simple verbs and some classes focused on 'Wh' questions as well. Good cross-curricular work had enabled subjects to work in collaboration – reinforcing the learning of command verbs and providing opportunities for repetition which is very important for our learners. There were also opportunities for staff to apply command words in different contexts. Learning activities in KS4 had a greater focus on highlighting command words in exam questions, practising answering questions and analysing to ensure students fully mastered command words. It is hoped through this intervention that students develop a greater understanding of what is required of them in terms of exam performance when they come across command verbs.

**Next steps for us to continue addressing this very important work in the School Development Plan**

- To further develop effective approaches/strategies to enhance students' understanding and response to command verbs and question vocabulary.
- Implement a consistent approach to introducing command words by 'word of the week/month'. All classes to focus on the same word at the same time in all lessons so language is embedded.
- To include the command verbs in a student word dictionary.
- To make a display of questions in all subjects for each command word (or word of the week, etc.) for students to refer to.



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