GOING META: DIALOGIC TALK IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM
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Abstract

The rich body of research on dialogic, exploratory talk points to its significance in developing and securing student learning (Alexander 2018; O'Connor and Michaels 2007; Reznitskaya et al 2009; Gillies 2016).   More recently, this body of research has begun to consider dialogic talk specifically in the context of literacy education (for example, Juzwik et al 2013; Boyd and Markarian 2015; Wilkinson et al 2015; Edwards-Groves and Davidson 2017).   However, there remains a dearth of research which considers the role of dialogic talk in the teaching and learning of writing, and particularly its role in supporting developing writers' metalinguistic understanding of how linguistic choices shape meaning in written texts.   This article will report on qualitative data draw from a national study, involving a randomized controlled trial and an accompanying process evaluation.   The study involved an intervention which was informed by a Hallidayan theoretical framing of metalinguistic understanding which sees grammar as a meaning-making resource, and which promoted explicit teaching which made purposeful connections between grammatical choices and their meaning-making effects in writing, and which promoted the role of dialogic talk.   Specifically, this article will consider how teachers manage this metalinguistic dialogic talk about language choices in the writing classroom.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, understanding of the importance of talk for learning, and specifically dialogic talk, has gained significant purchase in both research and teaching in many countries, though perhaps especially in Anglophone countries. This rich body of research on dialogic, exploratory talk points to its crucial role in developing and securing student learning (Alexander 2018; O'Connor and Michaels 2007; Reznitskaya et al 2009; Gillies 2016). But curiously, given that talk is essentially about language, there has been relatively little research considering the role of dialogic talk in literacy. More recently, an emergent body of research has begun to fill this gap (for example, Juzwik et al 2013; Boyd and Markarian 2015; Wilkinson et al 2015; Edwards-Groves and Davidson 2017). However, there remains a dearth of research which considers the role of dialogic talk in the teaching and learning of writing, and the decision-making that writing necessarily involves. Our own research has considered the benefits of explicit functionally-oriented grammar teaching in the teaching of writing, one element of which has been examining the role of talk in supporting developing writers' metalinguistic understanding of how linguistic choices shape meaning in written texts. We have argued that 'metatalk', the verbalization of metalinguistic thinking about choices in writing, is critical to enabling the transfer of learning about grammatical choice into students' own writing (Myhill and Newman 2016; 2019). We have also argued that such metatalk needs to be dialogic as the goal is to open up the individual writer's capacity to make linguistic choices, not to teach normative patterns of language choice. This article explores how teachers manage whole class dialogic metatalk, drawing on lesson observation data, and looking particularly at how teachers open up and build opportunities for student learning through sequences of talk. The findings are significant in showing that teachers adopt both monologic and dialogic discourse patterns within a lesson, and we suggest that redirecting attention to refining talk repertoires may be a more constructive way to enable dialogic metatalk.

THE ENGLISH CURRICULUM CONTEXT

The value of dialogic talk for learning is generally well-known within the teaching profession in England, largely due to the significant work of Robin Alexander, Neil Mercer and their colleagues, and many teachers espouse a dialogic pedagogy in their own classrooms. At the same time, Pie Corbett's *Talk for Writing* approach (Corbett and Strong 2017) has generated awareness of the relationship between talk and writing, and has been adopted by many primary schools. However, in both cases, teacher uptake in practice does not always fully realise the pedagogic principles, with Corbett and Strong's approach sometimes being reduced to rather banal imitation of model texts, and dialogic talk being squeezed about by more monologic instructional practices.

Of course, both are themselves influenced by the National Curriculum and national assessment. The revised National Curriculum in England is in many ways a regressive curriculum, and out-of-line with the English curriculum in other Anglophone countries. Talk does not feature strongly in the curriculum, and tends towards an emphasis on presentational talk and the use of Standard English, although it does require children '*to use spoken language to develop understanding through speculating, hypothesising, imagining and exploring ideas*' (DfE 2013:7) which has some resonance with dialogic talk. The writing curriculum for primary children is heavily technicist, with a major emphasis on handwriting, spelling and grammar. There are 22 pages outlining the expectations for spelling,

including statutory word lists to be learned. There are required grammar terms specified to be learned in each year of primary (DfE 2013: 64-69) and a national grammar test taken by all eleven year olds. Writing is teacher-assessed at the end of primary education, within a national assessment framework, which has led to heavily-scaffolded teaching, and some rather formulaic writing. It is this context which frames the professional experiences of the teachers involved in the study reported here.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK
The relationship between writing and grammar
As this article focuses on dialogic talk about language choices in writing, it is important to establish first our theoretical thinking about the grammar-writing relationship. In contrast to historical tendencies to see grammar in the classroom as a form-focused tool for ensuring accuracy in written expression, we adopt a functional view of grammar, where grammar is a resource for shaping and crafting meanings in written text (Myhill et al 2012; Myhill 2018). This stance draws heavily on Halliday's theory of functional grammar, where '*grammar is seen as a resource for making meaning'* (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004:49), in other words, from *'a standpoint of how it creates and expresses meaning'* (ibid:20). Macken-Horarik et al (2011: 1) explain that Halliday offers a way of thinking about grammar which is '*a deeply contextual one where language functions to enable us to interact with others, to express and develop ideas, and to comprehend and create coherent texts*'.   This view of grammar shifts thinking from one where grammar is essentially concerned with compliance with rules of language use, to one where grammar is conceptualised as essentially about understanding the implications of grammatical choice on meaning creation.

We have described this emphasis on grammar as choice as one which enables teachers to give young, developing writers access to *'that repertoire of infinite possibilities which is at the heart of creative, critical shaping of text*' (Myhill, Lines and Watson 2011:10).   In doing so, we stand alongside researchers and teacher-educators in Australia who have worked in classrooms with Halliday's ideas, linking grammar and genre (Martin 1984; Rose 2009), and seeing genres as '*the ways in which we achieve our social purposes through language*' (Derewianka and Jones 2016:7).   The teaching and learning cycle at the heart of this approach emphasises metalinguistic talk, particularly through modelling how language choices work to shape meaning in a genre and through joint construction of texts (Derewianka & Jones, 2016; Jones et al 2018).   Derewianka talks of grammar as '*an array of possibilities'* (2011:1), and similarly, Humphrey et al are concerned with exploring '*how patterns of language choice construct meanings in different contexts'* (2011:1). It is a view of grammar as empowerment (Myhill 2019), giving young writers' greater autonomy and ownership in the choices they make in writing.

Metalinguistic understanding
Whilst all native speakers have a rich resource of implicit grammatical knowledge upon which to draw, and whilst recognising that reading is itself a source of implicit grammatical knowledge for writing, our interest has been in the value of explicit teaching of grammar as choice, and its impact on students' attainment in writing (Myhill et al 2012).   Conceptually, then, we are concerned with developing students' metalinguistic understanding of choice in written text. As part of this, grammatical terms give '*access to a metalanguage – a language for talking about language - which allows teachers to be*

explicit about how language functions' (Humphrey et al 2011:7), although it is also important to acknowledge that young writers can express metalinguistic understanding in everyday language, without using grammatical terminology. Nonetheless, the grammatical terminology provides a shared language for talking about choices in writing, and as a shared language, it is useful in a teaching context because it creates possibilities for discussing, reflecting on, and solving-problems relating to linguistic decision-making for writing.

To focus particularly on this metalinguistic talk about writing, we have appropriated the concept of 'metatalk' from second language teaching (L2) for use in first language classrooms. Swain (1995) coined the term, metatalk, to refer to metalinguistic reflection on language use, creating what Storch (2008:96) describes as a *'deeper level of attention'* to language use. However, because of the L2 context in which it is used, it is essentially form-focused. We have re-conceptualised it as talk *about* writing which creates opportunities for children to verbalise, explain and justify their linguistic decision-making writing as writers (Myhill and Newman 2016). In this way, children are supported in developing metalinguistic understanding of the subtle effects realised by different linguistic choices, and are better able to match linguistic choices with their authorial intentions for a piece of writing.

Dialogic talk in authoritative situations

The concept of metatalk, then, is a particular kind of talk about writing, which is characterised by the verbalisation of metalinguistic thinking about linguistic choices and how they realise the writer's authorial intention and intended effect on the reader. Metatalk is also, therefore, a pedagogical resource, which allows teachers to open up shared discussion about language choices, and to determine levels of understanding across the class. In her exploration of metalinguistic activity in language classrooms, Camps (2015) draws attention to the value of talk to develop metalinguistic understanding: she links it to Mercer's idea of exploratory talk (Mercer 2000) and describes it as *'collaborative reasoning … that enables knowledge to be constructed jointly'* (Camps 2015:11). In connecting metalinguistic talk with exploratory talk and collaborative reasoning, Camps is situating her thinking firmly with the parameters of dialogic talk and dialogic teaching. Our own pedagogic model for teaching grammar as choice positions discussion as one of the four key pedagogical principles (Myhill 2018), and in our professional development work with teachers we have attempted to promote metatalk as a form of dialogic talk about writerly choices.

Teacher-facilitated metatalk, therefore, is an enabling tool for fostering metalinguistic thinking about language choices in writing. Metatalk, managed well, creates what Wegerif (2013) calls '*dialogic space'* for thinking, discussion and reflection. Teachers' questions, comments and invitations about language choices can be '*opening dialogic space'*, through posing a critical or reflective question; or can be '*widening dialogic space'* through bringing other students' views; or can be '*deepening dialogic space'* through inviting a reflection on assumptions (Wegerif 2013:32). In similar vein, Boyd and Chiu talk of teachers' '*discourse management of a language of possibility space that encourages student dialogic exploration'* (Boyd and Chiu, 2019:26). They analyse how one teacher establishes this kind of space through the use of words which promote speculation about possibilities, reasoning , and elaboration of thinking, and they argue that this is a '*linguistic feature of exploratory talk and a marker of classroom discourse conditions in which dialogic interactions are likely to occur'* (ibid:27). However, our own

research (Myhill and Newman 2016; Myhill et al 2016), and the work of others (Lefstein 2009; Sedova 2014; Resnick and Schantz 2015) have shown that managing purposeful dialogic talk can often be challenging.

THE RESEARCH

The data reported here are taken from a sample of 17 classes of 10-11 year olds, in the final year of their primary education. The teachers involved attended three professional development days to develop understanding of and confidence with the pedagogical principles of grammar as choice. These pedagogical principles draw on Halliday's functional theory of grammar and on the idea of dialogic metatalk, as discussed earlier. As an aide-memoire for teachers, we refer to the acronym *LEAD* (**L**ink; **E**xamples; **A**uthentic text; **D**iscussion) but the full set of principles and their rationale is outlined below:

PRINCIPLE	RATIONALE
Make a ***link*** between the grammar being introduced and how it works in the writing being taught	To establish a purposeful learning reason for addressing grammar, and to connect grammar with meaning and rhetorical effect
Explain the grammar through showing ***examples***, not lengthy explanations	To avoid writing lessons becoming mini-grammar lessons, and to allow access to the structure, even if the grammar concept is not fully understood
Use ***authentic*** texts as models to link writers to the broader community of writers	To integrate reading and writing and show how 'real' writers make language choices and build relationships with readers
Build in dialogic ***discussion*** about grammar and its effects	To promote deep metalinguistic learning about why a particular choice works, and to develop independence in linguistic choice, rather than compliance

Table 1: the Pedagogical Principles underpinning our approach

The teachers then taught two units of work developed by our research team: one focused on fictional narrative writing, and the other on persuasive argument, and both embedded attention to grammar as a meaning-making resource purposefully within the teaching of writing.

Observations of the teaching of fictional narrative unit were conducted: Each lesson was approximately one hour long, and 17 lessons from 17 teachers in different schools were observed. The lessons were audio-recorded and professionally transcribed. For clarity, the transcriptions do not retain the characteristics of spoken language but are presented in a form amenable to reading. The research focus informing the data capture was the nature of the metatalk evident in these classrooms, and the three research questions are outlined below:

RESEARCH QUESTIONS
How were teachers opening up rich dialogic discussion about metalinguistic choices?
How did teachers build students' learning through sequences of talk?
How confident were the teachers in managing the grammatical knowledge required?

Table 2: the research questions informing this analysis

The transcribed observations were analysed, using Nvivo, and a process of open and axial coding was followed (Strauss and Corbin 1998). The initial open coding process allocated codes to segments of the classroom talk, using a bottom-up process, rather than predetermined categories. Following this, these open codes were clustered into axial groups, reflecting over-arching themes. Where an open code did not naturally fit an axial theme, it was left as a free-standing code. A final process checked that any segment of interaction allocated to a code aligned with the meaning of that code. The outcome of the coding process is presented below in Table 3: the numbers are included, not to imply any form of statistical significance, but to offer full transparency regarding how many teachers were represented in each code, and how commonly that code recurred.

CODE NAME	DESCRIPTION	NUMBER OF TEACHERS	NUMBER OF INCIDENCES
Teachers' Talk Invitations			
Questions checking Understanding	Questions which do have a right answer, or closed set of answers, but which are nonetheless checking understanding in order to open up the next space	11	39
Directive Closed Questions	Standard closed questions, often in a quick fire stream and limited response to answers; sometimes none	12	42
Invitation to Elaborate	Teacher prompts which push for more detail after an initial response: explanation, elaboration and justification.	14	65
Opening Up Invitations	Invitations which attempt to frame an open-ended response; often why questions; but also what do you think? How? What if?	13	36
Student-initiated Discussion	Students initiate a question or line of enquiry within whole class talk	3	5
Missed Opportunity	Incidences when an opportunity to probe or extend a line of enquiry in a talk sequence was missed	17	76
Peer to peer discussion	Incidences when the teacher sets pair talk to generate dialogue; and sequences of the peer talk itself.	16	69

CODE NAME	DESCRIPTION	NUMBER OF TEACHERS	NUMBER OF INCIDENCES
Teachers' Talk Invitations			
Curriculum/Assessment Impact			
Effects of Assessment	Evidence of national assessment procedures shaping teaching	9	12
Teachers' Grammar Knowledge	Incidences when teachers' grammatical subject knowledge caused them problems	4	10
Checking Grammar Knowledge	Incidences when the lesson was more about grammar terms than writing; just checking, not relevant to learning sequence	7	15
Giving writers ownership and choice	Incidences when the teacher invitation or response signal the writer's right to choose	8	10
Modelling thinking	Incidences when the teacher shares her own thinking, including confusion	5	10

Table 3: the final set of themes and sub-codes from the analysis.

Presentation of Results

Overall, the analysis of these lessons presents a general picture of these classrooms of 11-12 year-olds where lots of talking is occurring, both whole-class teacher-led talk, and peer-to-peer discussion. The thematic coding of the data does not quantify who gets an opportunity to talk, but the transcripts do show that in whole-class discussion sequences, the teacher occupies the majority of the talk time, as will be evident in many of the transcript sequences presented below. Equally, the whole class talk is predominantly teacher-student-teacher-student patterns, characteristic of the Initiation-Feedback-Response structure. To that extent, the teacher talk in these lessons could be described as in alignment with previous research reporting the largely monologic and controlled nature of classroom discourse. Of course, the high occurrence of peer-to-peer discussion reverses the whole-class pattern, giving 100% of the talk time to students, unlike in earlier research. Our interest in this article, however, is less in what are often rather crude counts and classifications of classroom talk, and more in the complex and nuanced way in which teachers are, or are not, using dialogic talk to support students' metalinguistic thinking about language choices in writing. Thus, in this presentation of the findings, we will explore three overarching themes, derived from the axial coding, which relate to whole class interaction and teacher management of talk, rather than peer-to-peer talk. These three themes are: how teachers invite and extend metalinguistic discussion; how teachers can miss an opportunity for developing metalinguistic thinking; and how the curriculum and assessment context can constrain dialogic talk about metalinguistic choice. The first two themes link directly to the research questions concerning opening up rich dialogic discussion and building learning through sequences of talk. The

third theme arose from the bottom-up coding process, but it includes analysis which relates to teachers' grammatical knowledge.

Teachers' Talk Invitations

Whilst historically there have been many analyses of teacher questioning, including our own, the analysis here has avoided the categorisation of questions as we now feel this is too limiting a perspective. Instead, we have looked at the initiation prompt for short sequences of talk and considered not the form it takes but the function it performs. Sometimes these are questions, but sometimes they have been statements, and they have been coded based on the nature of follow-up response from the teacher and students rather than classification of question type (see Table 3).

Talk invitations coded as *Directive Closed Questions* were those commonly thought of as typical of monologic talk.   These questions often occurred in a quick fire stream, sometimes giving no space at all for response, and always represented a time where the teacher was clearly targeting a very specific answer. In the sequence below, the intended learning focus is how to create strong visual descriptions of an object using noun phrases, and particularly well-chosen nouns. The teacher initiates a potential discussion of how best to describe a necklace:

Teacher:	*So, I've got the necklace. I'm going to start with a determiner. So, 'the necklace'. But before I'm going to say 'necklace', I'm going to add in an adjective: so how could I describe this necklace? Kim?*
Kim:	*Emerald necklace?*
Teacher:	*Emerald necklace. What else could you tell me about it?*
Kim:	*Jewelled?*
Teacher:	*Yeah, jewelled? Dan?*
Dan:	*Pearl*
Sarah:	*Embroidered*
Teacher:	*Embroidered. Now, going back to what Dan said, is pearl an adjective? What is pearl? It's a noun. So you've actually modified it with another noun instead of an adjective, which is fine. This is just an example of a structure you can use. Now I'm going to say, 'the shimmering…' What does shimmering mean? Someone put their hand up and tell me, please. Kim?*
Kim:	*Sparkling,*
Teacher:	*Sparkling, good, well done. So, 'the shimmering necklace'. So that's my noun, and now I want a relative clause.*

Arguably this is mock dialogic talk, beginning with a question which invites suggestions about possibilities and implies a discussion of choices. But despite eliciting student responses, their choices are not discussed, and in the end the teacher arrives at her own choice, probably determined in advance. Neither the students' suggested choices, nor the teacher's choice are discussed at all, and the teacher's follow through questions appear more concerned with grammatical identification.

This focus on a grammatical structure sometimes became more important than the possible effect of a choice. In the sequence below the teacher is exploring characterisation, and wants them to use a non-finite clause to post-modify a noun and create an extended description. One child has offered a noun phrase with a relative clause and the teacher pursues her wish for a non-finite clause:

Teacher: *'The mystical knight who was standing on his horse', comma. Now you want your non-finite.*

Student: *'The mystical horse swung at his enemies'*

Teacher: *Let's write that down. 'The mystical knight … (pauses while child writes). Right now. I think if we do that non-finite it will be better – 'The mystical knight…'*

Student: *'was'*

Teacher: *Not the 'was', we want the –ing or the –ed that verb –ing or –ed verb – 'The mystical knight…'*

Student: *'swinging at his enemies'.*

Teacher: *Brilliant, 'swinging'*

Student: *'at his enemies'*

Teacher: *'Ooh, 'The mystical knight, swinging at his enemies…'*

The teacher fully controls the sequence, contriving to secure the non-finite clause she is seeking, but again with no consideration of why a non-finite clause, indeed that particular non-finite clause, serves the intended rhetorical purpose. Towards the end of the lesson, the teacher asks the class, '*How are you going to going to create interesting characters in your Arthurian legend that you're going to start writing?*' and accepts with praise the answer, '*You could do noun phrases, non-finite clauses, post-modification, personification and subject verb inversion*' with the implication that effective writing is essentially grammatical deployment.

Another cluster of talk initiations were coded as *Questions Checking Understanding,* which at face value might simply be considered as closed questions with right answers. However, these were often short sequences which either recapped learning covered in previous lessons, before moving on to the new learning, or which checked understanding of a grammatical structure before moving on to discuss its use. For example, in the sequence below, the teacher recaps students' understanding of show, not tell as a strategy for characterisation:

Teacher: *Can you remember what we meant by Show not tell? Fay?*

Fay: *Instead of saying what the character looks like, you can say like how they move …*

Teacher: *Yes. Comparing it with something so using the correct words we can infer can't we. What do I mean by infer? We can infer what the character is like by using well-chosen words. Tell me about infer. Andy?*

Andy: *Does it like make a picture in your head without reading the description?*

Teacher: *It does, yes, it builds a visual, you're hinting at things aren't you. By using those really good word choices hopefully you can get a picture in your head that infers something.*

Whilst questioning like this could be deemed monologic, it is qualitatively different from the closed

directive questioning earlier, as sequences such as this are learner-oriented, aiming to ascertain their current level of understanding and the teacher's answers are responsive to what the students say. They frequently precede either whole class talk or peer discussion which is more clearly dialogic and open, and may well be acting as foundational sequences establishing prior learning in order to proceed to new learning. Later in this lesson quoted above, as the class consider inventing and describing a mythical beast, there are multiple talk sequences which are exploratory, set up by the teacher's invitational prompts opening up discussion or pushing for more elaboration.

Those invitations which opened up discussion or sought elaboration represented the most dialogic whole class talk in the observed lessons. *Opening up Invitations* were those which attempted to frame an open-ended response, creating genuine space for thinking. Often these were Why questions, but they included initiations such as '*What do you think?', 'What if...?', 'How?'* and '*tell me'*. The teacher's handling of the responses which followed made it clear that there was no right answer in mind. These initiations were not exclusively related to metalinguistic thinking as some were exploring students' responses as readers to the model texts being discussed. Some examples of these initiations are listed below:

- ❑ *We've been trying to choose our words carefully, haven't we, really carefully. Why have we got to choose so carefully?*
- ❑ *Why would we use simple sentences?*
- ❑ *How could I make that better?*
- ❑ *What are your reactions to what we've just read?*

Typical of these Opening Up initiations are follow-through exchanges where the teacher creates space for uncertainty, and does not necessarily conclude a sequence with a conclusion but an acknowledgement of a possible way of thinking. In the short sequence below, the class have been looking at one particular sentence to consider how Michael Morpurgo described a moment in the plot by foregrounding the mist in the scene through an adverbial sentence start, and using a subject verb inversion to create delay in seeing the subject of the sentence. The class have been experimenting with their own sentence structures to describe a plot moment and below they discuss one student's version. The teacher offers no opinion on Charlie's response but accepts it as a possibility:

Student: *'As she slowly floated away into the mist it was just like she vanished into nowhere.'*
Teacher: *What do you think, Charlie?*
Charlie: *I think it was quite good, but I think he could have like used a better word than 'floated' because when it says 'floating', I can't really imagine how she went away.*
Teacher: *Ok. You can't imagine her floating? Maybe?*

There were also examples of Opening Up initiations which invited no verbalised answer at all, but instead fostered internal dialogue and imagining. Because of the particular emphasis on character description in this unit of work, several of these initiations were guided visualisations, helping students to create their own strongly developed image of their character. But there were some examples which opened up metalinguistic thinking about language choices, closely linked to character development as

in the example below. The lesson had explored Morpurgo's use of the verb 'shiver' to describe the lake from which the sword, Excalibur, rose, and towards the end of the lesson, the teacher opens up thinking about word choices, but in the context of each student's own internal thinking:

> *So, is it the word 'shiver'? What is that precise vocabulary that you're going to use? What is the punctuation that going to let you pause for effect? What is it that's going to get you to 'boom' out their voice? They're the things that you need to now think about. Is it going to be a dragon? Is it a troll? Is it a unicorn? What magical, mythical creature is your thing going to be? It's up to you to decide but now I want you to think about how they're going to act. If mine was a dragon, I need to think about my noun phrases – what kind of dragon? How am I going to describe my dragon?*

In direct contrast to the Directive Closed Invitations, those which *Invited Elaboration* responded to student answers by asking for further elaborations, explanations or justifications. The frequency of incidences, indicated in Table 1, shows that this kind of invitation was very typical of the teacher-led whole class talk. Sometimes, this was done simply by saying '*Because…*?' or '*And…*? and returning to the student. At other times, the teacher brought in another student to comment with a question such as '*What do you think about that?*' The use of repetition of a student answer was very common, and in combination with tone of voice, this seems to create space for further responses. In the sequence below, the students have just watched a video clip by children's author, Malorie Blackman, where she talks about how she uses short sentences to create suspense and longer sentences for description. The sequence is, in effect, exploring what they have understood from the video clip so it is directed towards a particular end, but the teacher's management of the sequence creates space for collective elaboration of thinking, and potential shared understanding. At no point does the teacher give a sense of an expected right answer:

Teacher:	*What have you learned about how to use sentences to describe characters and events?*
Student:	*Don't just use long sentences. Use short sharp sentences.*
Teacher:	*Ok so we need to use long sentences, short sharp sentences, tell me a bit more, Mark?*
Matt:	*When we watched the clip about.. she said that if you use just long sentences it's boring and if you use short sentences its boring but if you use a mixture it's more interesting.*
Teacher:	*Ok, so makes your writing more interesting.*
Student:	*Use long sentences for description.*
Teacher:	*Long sentences for description.*
Student:	*Don't just keep adding short sentences … so you need to add a mixture of long sentences and short sentences.*
Teacher:	*OK.*
Student:	*Short sentences for tension.*
Teacher:	*Short sentences for tension.*

Considering this analysis of Teachers' Talk Initiations, it is evident that in the lessons observed there is both the tendency to monologic closed discourse which is not successfully fostering metalinguistic thinking, and there is talk whose purpose is more geared towards creating dialogic space for thinking about language choices in writing. Nonetheless, it remains the case that the discourse rarely moved beyond the teacher-child Initiation-Response-Feedback pattern, and the thematic coding shows how few Student-Initiated discussion sequences there were – just five occurrences across the whole data set. And at the same time, a close reading of these examples might also suggest that there is scope for classroom metalinguistic talk to be more dialogic, and more sharply aligned to extending meaningful discussion about the relationship between language/grammatical choice and intended rhetorical effect.

Missed Opportunities for Dialogic Metalinguistic Talk

One way in which such meaningful metalinguistic discussion is inhibited is because of *Missed Opportunities* to extend the talk and take the learning to as different level. A sequence was only coded as a missed opportunity when the student's response signalled a significant potential line of enquiry which would take the metalinguistic thinking to a higher level, recognising that in any lesson there will be missed opportunities which are not taken up for a variety of pragmatic and professional reasons. In some sequences, the teacher's response missed the chance to redirect the student's thinking to a more focused and meaningful level of thinking. In the short sequence below, the teacher has been exploring how the tendency to see description as principally about adding more adjectives is limiting, and that very often more precise choice of noun can be more communicative than a generalised noun and a string of adjectives. The teacher initiates a discussion sequence (with something of a leading question!):

Teacher: *Do we put loads and loads of adjectives to make a good description?*
Student: *No.*
Teacher: *No. Why not? …*
Student: *Is it because like, erm, if you have too much description then it will just get boring.*
Teacher: *Yes, it takes a bit away, doesn't it?*

The teacher invites elaboration with 'Why not?' and the student responds with a more extended response. But this response reveals that he has not understood the learning point the teacher was addressing, and instead resorts, as many of our young writers did, to the idea of writing being boring. Here the teacher could have extended his thinking with a follow-through question, refocusing his attention on the well-chosen noun, or perhaps giving an example of two noun phrases, one a long noun phrase with heavy adjectival premodification and a shorter noun phrase with a precise noun. Instead her reply, which closes the sequence, is unclear.

A large group of responses in this category were when an opportunity was missed to explain or reinforce metalinguistic thinking because the teacher concluded a sequence with an affirming, positive statement. Of course, the use of praise and encouragement is part of constructive classroom interaction, but it can often be rather blind or hollow, because it does not make clear what it is that is being praised. Frequently, these responses included affirmations such 'Brilliant!' or 'Fab', which acted

as closing down responses, ending the sequence. Equally typical were ones such as that below where the teacher tells the student something about the child's writing that she particularly liked but does not explain why:

Student: *'As she slowly vanished, the water beneath her cracked open once again. Then, she was gone.'*

Teacher: *I like that bit at ending – 'Then she was gone.'*

Sometimes in sequences like this, the teacher signals something praiseworthy, but then channels the thinking away from the choice-effect relationship to the grammatical form:

Jo*:* *I've written two here: 'Merlin sat there unblinkingly at the old man, he was also staring intently at Merlin's stiff, rigid face'. And the second one is 'Sunlight streamed through the moth-bitten curtains, and flooded the desk with almost unnatural light'.*

Teacher: *Oh, I like that one, 'the moth-bitten curtains'…and you've done what we were talking about this week haven't you – combining the noun and the verb to make an adjective. Oscar, can you read yours?*

Whilst it is true that Jo's noun phrase has creatively combined a noun and a verb to make an adjective, the more significant point is how doing that creates an evocative description of the curtains. Instead, the teacher reinforces a notion that grammatical 'display' is important in writing.

How the curriculum and assessment framework affect dialogic talk

The context in which this study occurred, as discussed earlier, includes a national grammar test and teacher assessment of writing, used for accountability purposes. There was clear evidence of the *Effects of Assessment* shaping and influencing the talk in these classrooms towards less dialogic discourse. Teachers were conscious that the final pieces of writing would form part of the teacher assessed writing mark, and the widespread belief that there are a set of features that must be included in order to achieve the expected standards meant that writing lessons in this project sometimes veered away from the pedagogical principles underpinning the research. Instead, teachers interrupted purposeful sequences of learning with instructions about grammatical features that should be included in the writing:

Before you do your final draft, you're going to have to make sure you've got all our different writing checklists in your writing to make them … (referring to board) so we need the 13 uses of punctuation, ok, if you haven't can you work out which one you're missing and can you put it in by editing your work? Can you, you all should have noun phrases, cos we spent so long doing noun phrases, and adverbial phrases because we spent so long putting adverbial phrases in, remember, if you haven't got a passive sentence, you need to change one to get a passive sentence in. Has anyone got any modal verbs?

Right, I want you to go back through that, and I want you to put your commas in for your clauses. There are relative clauses in there that are not punctuated at the moment.

It might be a time to get an exclamation mark to make it more dramatic. Obviously Michael Morpurgo knows more about it than we do, but it would be a chance to get an exclamation mark in if we were the writer.

Not only did monologic interruptions like this disrupt the development of metalinguistic thinking, but it also had a direct impact on what students were learning about what is valued in writing, including for example the student whose evaluation of a peer's writing was *that 'there should have been more commas and stuff'*.

Similarly, the looming presence of the national grammar test for this age group diverted lessons from exploring grammar-meaning relationships into *Checking Grammar Knowledge* for the test. There were many examples of a discussion sequence including questions such as '*what is a noun?*' or '*what was that called?*' where the question did not seem to be linked into the learning sequence (by checking understanding, for example) but seemed an opportunist way of discrete checking on knowledge of the grammatical terminology required for the test:

Teacher: *What kind of word is which? Grammar? Hands up, go on, what is… somebody… which is an example of a, something something? Go on?*
Student: *Relative pronoun*

Both the discussions linked to the grammar test, and the more dialogic talk exploring grammatical choice sometimes revealed the challenge of meeting curriculum requirements because of problems with *Teachers' Grammatical Knowledge*, particularly around noun phrases, non-finite clauses and verbs. So one teacher, trying to help students think about using abstract nouns, rather than adjectives, to describe the dragon in their stories offered them not a noun phrase as an example, but a complete sentence – '*The dragon had both intense fury and aggression*'. A different teacher, also exploring post-modification of noun phrases explained to her class:

'The dragon, angry and aggressive,' and this is the non-finite clause bit, 'breathed fire, breathed, ok, breathed fire on Excalibur'.

One obvious consequence of this is that students' metalinguistic thinking about the grammar-meaning relationship is disrupted by incorrect explanations such as these. However, another consequence is that teachers sometimes closed down discussion or became more monologic when they seemed less secure with the underpinning grammatical knowledge.

It is important, however, not to overstate the impact of curriculum and assessment frameworks, and teacher subject knowledge on the dialogic discourses in these classrooms. Table 2 shows that less than half the teachers were represented in these three codes and frequencies were not high. This is in contrast to the coding of *Teachers' Talk Invitations* and *Missed Opportunities*, which are highly representative of the whole sample, and which are most illuminative of how teachers managed metatalk, the dialogic discussion of metalinguistic choice in writing.

Discussion

The analysis of the teacher-led whole class talk presented here offers a complex picture of dialogic metatalk in these writing classrooms: there is evidence that teachers still revert to more monologic discourses with closed directive questioning, but also that teachers are frequently managing talk sequences which are open and exploratory, and which invite more elaborated responses. At the same time, there are many examples of missed opportunities to build learning through more extended responses. And importantly, Table 2 shows that this mix of monologic and dialogic patterns, and the tendency to miss an opportunity to extend learning are spread across most of the teachers: in other words, these patterns do not seem to be a characteristic of particular teachers' discourse patterns, but a more general pattern of classroom discourse.

By coding teachers' initiations and prompts for discussion in terms of their function, and by looking across sequences of talk rather than simply at an utterance, it has been possible to explore the nature of learning more effectively. Boyd and Markarian (2011:27) also argue that we should focus less on the form of teachers' questions because '*a teacher might ask what students think, but if students' ideas are never built upon, then students come to know that their ideas are not really valued and that student sharing is a kind of performance talk rather than active engagement in the exploration and application of ideas under examination'*. What is encouraging in these lesson observations is that there are many incidences of teacher invitations which invite open responses and which ask for further elaboration, and the sequences quoted in the previous section show children genuinely responding to these prompts. However, they do also show that these sequences retain the teacher-child-teacher-child interaction pattern, though these are not necessarily I-R-F sequences as the teacher's response often triggers further thinking.

The missed opportunities theme is a salient one, as it represents those moments when a step-change in the learning sequence might have been achieved. Sfard (2015) discusses the idea of meta-level learning, when everyday learning moves to a more abstract level. This is particularly true for metatalk as it shifts the focus from using language, to examining how language is used. Sfard argues that '*when the student faces the need for meta-level change in discourse, the situation is quite different*' and that it is not possible to rely on student discovery of the new learning: rather there is a need for '*scaffolded co-participation'* (Sfard 2015:241). Missed opportunities were often discourse moments when scaffolded participation might have enabled this higher-level learning, or when the teacher might have extended the students' own thinking on a line of enquiry or invited collaborative participation across the class. Greater use of the speculation and reasoning invitations discussed by Boyd and Chiu (2019) could have opened up this thinking further. The missed opportunity theme, in particular, raises questions about learning sequences in talk, and how teacher questions can change the level of learning occurring. Michaels and O'Connor (2015) call these shifts in learning 'talk moves' and argue for further research to understand better '*how to help teachers know when to use which moves in the service of deep conceptual understanding of core disciplinary ideas and practices'* (2015:344).

Moreover, generating meta-level learning and pedagogically timely talk moves represent one of the five principles of dialogic talk, as described by Alexander (2018). In *cumulative* talk, participants '*build*

on their own and each other's contributions and chain them into coherent lines of thinking and understanding' (Alexander 2018:566). Reflecting on his sustained body of research and work with teachers on dialogic talk, Alexander observes that cumulative talk may be the most challenging of the principles because '*cumulation attends to its meaning and, therefore, simultaneously tests teachers' mastery of the epistemological terrain being explored, their insight into students' understandings within that terrain, and their interactive skill in taking those understandings forward*' (Alexander 2018: 567).

For the teachers involved in our study, a further complicating issue was that of subject knowledge, which may particularly have impacted on their capacity to lead cumulative lines of enquiry. As explicit grammar teaching in the primary curriculum is new (and required by the 2014 National Curriculum), many teachers themselves have no grounding in grammar and there remain basic subject knowledge problems with the grammatical terminology. Moreover, our own pedagogy of grammar as choice requires teachers to understand the relationship between a grammatical choice and how that particular choice works in a particular text. This is a new way of thinking about writing and linguistic choice. This knowledge was scaffolded on the professional development days and in the teaching units themselves, but the transcripts reveal that teachers were not always secure in this knowledge. Camps (2015:28) draw attention to the significance of verbalisation in metalinguistic activity, and note a continuum, from talk where metalinguistic verbalisation is indirect, through restatement or repetition, through verbalisation in everyday language, through to verbalisation with the specific use of metalanguage. The teachers in our study varied in where they stood on this continuum, and in how confidently they could articulate the link between grammatical choice and rhetorical effect. This undoubtedly will have acted as a constraint on dialogic metatalk, as it is hard to extend a discussion when you are struggling to verbalise the learning point yourself. If, as Sfard claims, '*the teacher's demonstration of what the new discourse is all about is an indispensable first move in the process of initiating the student to this discourse'* (Sfard 2015: 241) is needed to achieve meta-level learning, then insecure teacher subject knowledge limits this capacity.

CONCLUSION

In terms of the research questions informing this analysis, the data show that teachers are using talk initiations which open up metalinguistic discussion, and they ask questions or use prompts which invite students to build on their learning through elaboration and extension. It is also worth recalling here that there was a high level of peer-to-peer discussion in these lessons, which is not analysed here, and these offered students further opportunities to engage in dialogic metatalk and to build learning collaboratively. At the same time, the data indicate that monologic discourse patterns remain present in many of the classrooms observed and the teacher-child-teacher-child interaction pattern dominates. Teachers' knowledge of grammatical concepts, but more particularly their knowledge of how grammatical choices link with rhetorical effects, is not always secure and is likely to be acting as a constraint on how they lead dialogic metatalk.

That the data show a high number of missed opportunities to extend students' learning is significant, but it is also important to acknowledge the challenge of genuinely cumulative talk, and to recognise that these teachers were testing out for the first time a very new way of talking about writing.

Alexander argues that there is a '*need for every teacher to develop a broad repertoire of talk-based pedagogical skills and strategies and to draw on these to expand and refine the talk repertoires and capacities of their students'* (Alexander 2018: 563). One way to consider these missed opportunities is to reconceive them as 'growth points', as pointers to next steps in refinement of their talk repertoires. It is also important, of course, to be pragmatic and remember that firstly, teachers have limited time and significant curriculum pressures which may mean that not all missed opportunities can be pursued; and secondly, that it may be unrealistic to suppose that *any* sustained stretch of teaching discourse would be free of missed opportunities.

In conclusion, the analysis suggests that these teachers adopt both monologic and dialogic discourse patterns, and that simplistic dichotomising of the two may be unproductive. Rather it may be more constructive to think less about binaries, and more about talk repertoires, and to direct greater attention to supporting teachers in building their talk repertoires so they gain confidence with cumulative talk and with enabling meta-level change in learning. In this way, dialogic metatalk about linguistic choice in writing might become genuinely empowering, giving agency to young writers.

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