Metalinguistic modelling in writing instruction: a pedagogical strategy for bridging learning about text and individual writing.

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ESRC Metatalk about Writing

Study to explore the impact of high quality **classroom talk** on the development of **metalinguistic understanding** and **writing.**

- In the context of writing, '**metalinguistic understanding**' involves learners both: *recognising* how written text is crafted for meaning and effect; and, drawing on that recognition to inform choices in their own writing; **writing** emphasised as a process of decision-making and problem-solving

- **Metalinguistic understanding** helps writers to **control** and **craft** their **writing** (Myhill & Jones, 2015)

- **Dialogic talk** a pedagogical tool for promoting understanding through interaction and collaboration (Mercer & Littleton, 2007; Alexander, 2020)

- *Metalinguistic* **talk** *about* **writing** develops specific (*metalinguistic*) understanding of the relationship between language choices and making meaning in writing (Myhill & Newman, 2019; Newman & Watson, 2020)

- Teachers' management of **metalinguistic talk** is critical in framing learners' capacity to think metalinguistically; a principle of contextualised grammar teaching; it is challenging to implement and manage, demanding linguistic and pedagogical expertise (Myhill et al., 2020)

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Aims:

- Develop understandings of how metalinguistic talk (or 'Metatalk') impacts metalinguistic understanding and writing

- Develop an evidence-based pedagogy for metalinguistic talk

Research Design

A sample of 7 English teachers and their KS3 classes (21 classes; students aged 11-14, range of prior attainment), from 7 different secondary schools in the South-West of England.

Exploration: exploring strategies for metalinguistic talk/ how talk manifests across classes (14 lessons)

- 2 lessons planned and taught by each teacher

- Audio/video of lessons; audio/video of sub-sample student (n = 28) dyads; students' writing

Development: refining pedagogical principles/ how talk influences writing (63 lessons)

- Data capture from **3 Writing Cycles** (3 lessons per cycle): 1) Questioning Model Texts 2) Collaborative Writing 3) Conferencing

- Audio/ video of lessons; audio/video and live writing of sub-sample student (n = 28) dyads; students' writing

10 professional development/ review days

Data analysis: integration of datasets underway, followed by open and axial coding processes in NVIVO.

Exploration, Phase 1:

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• **Exploring use of model texts**

Learning from imitating writers; explicit teaching about writers' choices develops metalinguistic understanding; model texts as scaffolds for later writing (Myhill et al., 2018; Graham et al., 2016)

• **Devising/ exploring instructional sequences**

Using model texts and modelling the writing process e.g. deconstruction, joint construction, independent construction (Martin, 2009); shared writing, guided writing, independent writing.

Talk about Model Texts

↓

Writing

Development, Phase 2:

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Talk about Model Texts

Bridging: Metalinguistic Modelling

Explicit modelling of writing supports learners to transition from talking about a model text, to the act of writing.

Writing

A black shadow dropped down into the circle. It was Bagheera the Black Panther.

Task: Thinking about noun phrases and verb choice, create a first impression of either a wolf, buffalo or elephant.

'I want my character to be really different so he <u>crashed</u> into the circle, and I picked that word <u>crash</u> because I wanted to show how much damage he was doing, but also because of the sound of <u>crash</u> as well, so I like the sound of the word too, so that's why I picked that <u>verb</u>.'

A massive mammal stumbled into the circle. It was Rotundo the elephant.

Class: Year 9 (age 13–14) mixed attainment; rural, seaside school

Writing Task: To establish setting and character in the opening of a dystopian story

Model Text: 1984, George Orwell

Sub-Sample Student: Flo

Data: Whole class transcripts, Flo's written text and live writing

Focus: Establishing character and setting using noun phrases and verbs

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It was **a bright, cold day in April** and **the clocks** were striking thirteen. **Winston Smith**, his chin **nuzzled** into his breast in an effort to **escape the vile wind**, **slipped** quickly through **the glass doors of Victory Mansions**, though not quickly enough to prevent **a swell of gritty dust** from entering along with him. The hallway smelt of **boiled cabbage** and **old rag mats**. At one end of it, **a coloured poster, too large for indoor display**, had been tacked to the wall. It depicted simply **an enormous face, more than a metre wide, the face of a man of about forty-five with a heavy, black moustache and ruggedly handsome features.** Winston **made** for the stairs. It was no use trying the lift. Even at the best of times it was seldom working, and at present the electric current was cut off during daylight hours. It was part of the economy drive in preparation for **Hate Week**.

1984, George Orwell

What do we know about Winston and the world in which we… he lives?

the feeling is very unsettling and uncomfortable

a world gone wrong, bad feeling what's happened?

Urban setting not homelike (smells of rotten cabbage etc.)

Big posters that don't fit, awkward uncomfortable.

bad feelings, not happy (hateweek).

*What do these [**noun**] phrases suggest about the setting outside and inside Victory Mansions, and what atmosphere is created?*

Discuss ideas for a dystopian setting where you're being watched.

Teacher: **Okay, I'd like to talk about a couple of these [ideas].** Flo?

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Flo: I think it could be a **remote place**…away from everything…not necessarily the mountains, but away from everything…
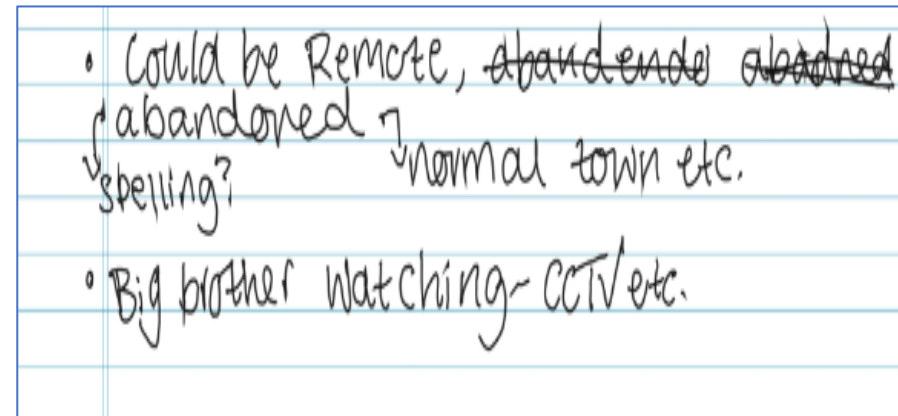
Teacher: Okay. So, a remote place…[**Flo starts to jot down ideas**]

Flo: Or forgotten about…

Teacher: **What is there that *suggests* that not all is well?**

Teacher: Jack?

Jack: People have chips in their brains.

Teacher: Okay. **So, how would we hint at that?** How would we hint at that? Like, we… you know, in this one it says what is there **like the clock striking thirteen that suggests something's not right?** So… because what… there what you've done is you've told me a really specific idea, but we won't want to tell everyone that straight away, we want to show them little… little hints of it. **What could we do to show them that rather than just tell them straight away?** If it's [chips] in their head, what might they be getting a lot of?

Jack: Headaches…

- Could be Remote, ~~abandended~~ ~~abadned~~.
  ↱abandoned↰
  ↳spelling?   ↱normal town etc.
- Big brother watching ~ CCTV etc.

Individually, write three noun phrases to capture something about your setting.

Teacher: You're going to have a go at writing three noun phrases to capture something about your setting. I'll give you a suggestion of what I might do. If I pick one of your ideas. **If I pick the remote town, for example, I might write something like *the grotesque*, because I want to create this sense that it's… again that it's not particularly pleasant, that it's uncomfortable**. **I've kind of stolen my atmosphere from 1984**…So, I'm going to write *grotesque*. **I don't want the buildings to look like, normal, I want to try and describe them as being something slightly different…**(teacher visibly 'thinking' about what to put next)
Student: **Rotten**
Teacher: **Oooh, rotten**
Student: **Rubble**
Teacher: **Oooh, *the grotesque, rotten rubble*.** Lovely, very nice. Better than I was going to write, so thank you. So, we've got *the grotesque, rotten rubble*.

Noun phrase.

① eerie, broken down staircase.

② smelt of damp mold

③ It was a dreary bright crisp day in February.

Now write the opening sentence using the noun phrases to help you.

It was a dreary, yet bright crisp morning in the Feburary, and the electricity system has been turned off at 000:14:2am!

→ incorrect timing.

not quite right?

turn over →

It was a dreary, yet bright

It was a dreary, yet bright crisp morning in February, and the electricity system has been turned off at 000:14:2 am.

Leila Carter, her hair tied up in a clustered bun in her best effort to adjust her eyes to the bright harsh light from the day time sun, she rushed quickly to the canopy of trees, though alone, mesmerised by the natural world, that she was often kept from.

Conclusions

- Metalinguistic modelling which makes explicit writerly decision-making may mediate learning transfer from talk about text to writing – mediating what learners can say about language and what they can do in their writing (Watson, Newman and Morgan, 2021).

- Metalinguistic modelling, and particularly co-construction, may be particularly helpful for learners in the 'knowledge-transforming' (Kellogg, 2008) phase of writing development

- Learning transfer likely depends on how sharp the learning focus is, the connection between choice and effect, and how this carries through the learning sequence; students may learn/ 'take away' more/ other than that intended by the teacher

- Does the absence of evidence of transfer indicate absence of learning? Learning from models may not transfer immediately to writing? The act of writing may lead learners to recognise choice/effects in texts –
multi-directional transfer?

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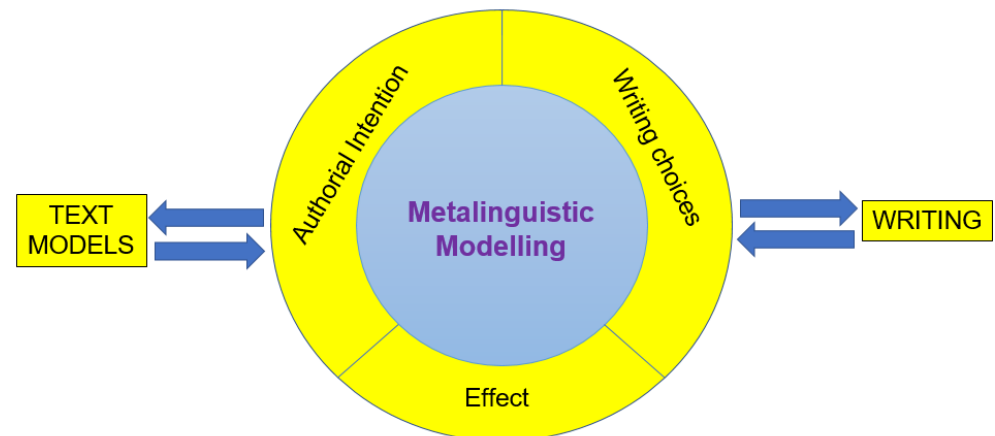
Conclusions

- Metalinguistic modelling as a strategy sits within wider pedagogical sequencing/ principles, the success of which is reliant on the quality and management of classroom talk; metalinguistic modelling a feature of a talk repertoire for the teaching of writing (Myhill, Newman, Watson and Jones, 2020).

- Importance of developing teaching practice in ways that support transitions between talking about text to writing

- Use of model texts - enabling or constraining?

- Metalinguistic modelling may stimulate idea generation and prompt students to write 'in the moment'; less episodic teaching may be helpful

- 'Bridging' – different 'launching points' to extended/ independent writing for different learners

- Difficult to trace connections between what is said and written…

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