

Promoting repertoires of talk about writing

How guiding and shaping talk supports developing writers

Ruth Newman offers insights from a recent project on classroom talk about writing and argues for supporting teachers to make purposeful, informed choices about the repertoires of talk they use in their classrooms.

We have known for a long time that the quality of classroom talk is critical — not only because it develops students' speaking, listening and broader communication skills, but because purposeful talk fosters and deepens learning. As Geoff Barton notes in his foreword to the 2024 Oracy Education report, 'there is very strong evidence that oracy education helps children in learning to, through, and about talk'. Yet whilst there is gathering momentum to strengthen oracy in schools, recent evidence from the National Literacy Trust suggests that speaking and listening opportunities have declined, particularly at Key Stage 3.

Over the last few years, the University of Exeter have been working on an ESRC funded project to explore and develop classroom talk at Key Stage 3. Arising from our previous writing research, this project focused on a particular kind of talk – talk about writing. The role of talk in the teaching of writing has long been recognised, with a range of publications, including the *Talk for Writing* series by Pie Corbett and Julia Strong, highlighting the various ways that talk can support developing writers. There is a symbiotic relationship between spoken language and the development

of children's reading and writing skills. This relationship is emphasised in the DfE's Reading and Writing Frameworks, and in the Curriculum and Assessment Review's call for a framework that combines oracy, reading and writing.

Yet as the National Literacy Trust and other advocacy groups point out, teachers need support and guidance to promote the quantity and quality of oracy in their classrooms. For teachers, fostering classroom talk that supports learning, develops communicative skills, and raises awareness about language is a complex task. It involves orchestrating talk for a range of curricular purposes, engaging and eliciting student responses, and modelling talk in various forms.

Recognising these challenges, our research project involved collaborating with seven English teachers over several years to develop the quality of talk about writing in their classrooms. The aim was to promote talk that helped to deepen students' understanding about the relationship between language choice and meaning — what we call 'metalinguistic' understanding. We also focused on using talk to support the writing process, developing students' capacity to think about and reflect on their own writing choices.



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Strengthening the dialogic quality of classroom talk was a particular focus, so that students were actively supported to express their ideas. We explored whole class discussion, various approaches to teacher-led modelling, and supported students in engaging in reader-writer conversations with their peers. We focused on supporting students to verbalise their writing choices and respond to the choices of others, raising students' awareness of how to talk as readers and writers. In this way, our approach centred on teaching writing through talk as well as teaching talk about writing.

The relationship between talk and writing

Whilst writing is often seen as a solitary act — something done alone and independently — it's actually a highly social activity. Writers write for someone, whether real or imagined. Writing draws on shared resources — language, genres, disciplinary norms — and writing is developed through social interaction. Emphasising the social nature of writing and learning to write, Teresa Cremin and Debra Myhill note in their book *Writing Voices* that 'a vibrant writing classroom creates a learning environment which gives space not just for writing, but also for talking and thinking about writing'.

Talk about writing can take various forms and serve various purposes. Dialogic discussion about model texts can 'open up' students' thinking about the multiplicity of choices and

effects available to writers. Talking about model texts can help make visible often covert writerly decisions, developing students' understanding about authorial intention and the relationship between language and meaning. Talk surfaces students' ideas and understandings, allowing teachers to address misconceptions and extend partially formed or emerging ideas. Talk has an important role before, during and after the literal act of writing. Talk helps students to generate and refine ideas — to think through what they want to say and how they want to say it. Formulating ideas verbally and in writing raises awareness of the difference between spoken and written language. Conversations about their own writing can heighten students' sensitivity to audience and reader response, supporting students to review and evaluate the text according to its purpose and intentions. It is also through talk that teachers model writing, making explicit the cognitive and linguistic processes involved in writing. Talk then can be harnessed to support writing and writing to support talk — a reinforcing relationship.

Driven by the potential benefits outlined above, this project explored different 'repertoires' of talk about writing in English classrooms. Drawn from Robin Alexander's extensive work on dialogic pedagogy, the notion of 'repertoire' emphasises the range of ways that teachers use talk to stimulate thinking and advance understandings. Yet, as noted above, orchestrating repertoires of talk is a highly skilled task, and integrating

an explicit focus on writing — something many English teachers have traditionally felt less confident about — perhaps adds an additional layer of complexity. This project then involved working closely with teachers to understand more about how talk functions to support writing, but also to develop strategies that enabled teachers to promote the range and dialogic quality of talk about writing in their classrooms.

Repertoires of talk about writing

Repertoires of talk focused on developing students' metalinguistic understanding of the relationship between language and meaning, helping learners to think more carefully about their own writing choices. The focus was mainly narrative writing, but with some attention to persuasive forms of writing. Part of the research

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involved characterising repertoires of talk about writing at a broad 'macro' level: for example,

whole class talk about model texts, metalinguistic modelling, reader-writer conversations, and explicit modelling of talk about writing. We also explored more 'micro' level repertoires, looking, for example, at teachers' 'talk moves' in whole class talk, or different approaches to modelling writing.

The aim of the project was not to prescribe particular approaches but to support teachers to utilise talk repertoires flexibly and purposefully to support learning in their classrooms. In the sections below, I share some features of the repertoires explored. The aim here is to give an insight into the principles underpinning the approaches we explored, and to offer some practical strategies that teachers might use to promote the quality of talk about writing in their classrooms.

Whole class talk about model texts: framing questions

Whole class talk about model texts aimed to stimulate thinking and support students to explore, verbalise and develop understanding about the relationship between language choice and effect. Model texts also served as springboards for students' own writing, both as scaffolds and stimulus. In whole class talk about model texts, teachers used a range of 'talk moves' to invite students to respond to the text, to 'open up' thinking about the writer's choices and to verbalise explicitly the effect of those choices. Whole class talk was developed through teachers'

'framing questions', but also through 'responsive talk moves' that sustained and extended the dialogue. We found that teachers' framing questions worked differently to elicit students' thinking, and focused students' attention on different aspects of the text under focus. Framing questions, supported by responsive talk moves, were often sequenced to scaffold students' understanding of how model texts were working to create meaning. By observing lessons and examining transcripts, we could see that the 'initiating' question — often used at the beginning of a discussion — was important in eliciting students' exploratory or speculative responses. This prompted students to offer ideas, sometimes partial or tentative, that teachers could build upon. In the discussion that followed, teachers might ask 'connecting' or 'focusing' questions that encouraged students to verbalise how language choices explain their initial ideas and impressions. Where students struggled to understand the rhetorical effect of a particular language choice, it was helpful to 'pose alternatives', so prompting students to consider the effect of a perhaps subtly different, or even contrasting, choice. In general, prompting students to explore the differences between language choices was a useful scaffolding strategy that also promoted the dialogic quality of discussion.

The important thing to emphasise here is that these questions do not represent a checklist of talk moves, and there is not a 'best' order in which to ask questions. We draw attention to these talk moves to support teachers in thinking more explicitly about how they might open up discussion about text, and manage whole class talk in a way that is responsive to the understandings expressed by their students. Further information about framing questions and responsive talk moves can be found on our webpages and in related publications.

Metalinguistic modelling: live and dialogic modelling

We used the term 'metalinguistic modelling' to describe teacher-led modelling that makes explicit writerly decision-making. It involved teachers verbalising their own language choices and writing intentions, helping learners to think about and develop control of their own writing choices. This modelling was considered an essential pedagogical step in teaching sequences to support students' independence, for example, 'bridging' the transition between whole class talk about a model text and a related writing task.

Teachers modelled writing in different ways: sometimes by sharing a previously written piece of writing, sometimes by writing 'live' — when a teacher simultaneously writes and narrates their

Teacher: Okay, so these are all things I might perhaps expect to find in a classroom. Now I'm going to act like it's after school and everyone's gone... I don't want my reader just to think it's the weekend, I might have to make it quite clear that... that we're in school, mightn't we [] so, maybe I'll have to put in a little bit of context for this one. Was it all locked? So, I'm going to, I'm going to decide which of my nouns I'm going to start with, which of the ideas. I might, I might have this kind of impression of somebody who's stood in the middle of school and perhaps a bit oblivious to there not being other people around, but the first thing they notice is that there's no bell telling them to get to lessons. So, it might be that it's, [writing on the board] 'it's nine AM and there is no bell telling me to hurry', because it's that sense of getting there quickly, hurried to my lesson. And then we're going to walk along the corridors...we can build on this by saying

Student 1: No shoving.

Teacher: Yeah, [writing on board] 'no shoving students in the corridors' ...what would the teacher...?

Student 2: 'Quiet down, quiet down!'

Student 3: Pacing.

Teacher: Okay, [writing] 'no teacher pacing around, frantically shushing students.' Yeah.

Student 4: How about...waiting at the door?

Teacher: Okay, yeah, so before we go in, [writing] 'no teachers waiting at the door'. Okay.... Do I need to add anything else... I feel like there should be something quite short just to punctuate the ending of that.

Student 5: You could put a big loud thing, you put the time thing.

Teacher: Oh, okay. So, the bell is loud.

Student 5: ... you could say no ticking of the clock or something.

Teacher: At the very end, and that would get the... get to the sense of urgency as well, wouldn't it. Really lovely suggestion.

Left: A transcript of a teacher live-writing a setting description.

thinking. It was interesting to see how modelling manifested differently and conveyed different things about the writing process. Talking about a completed piece of writing involved teachers describing their choices retrospectively, while writing 'live' involved much more hesitant, exploratory forms of explanation, as teachers narrated their thinking (as you can see in the transcript below). This live modelling may have been particularly valuable for making visible the process — and challenge — of both generating ideas and formulating these for writing. In fact, there were a few occasions when this live writing seemed to help teachers to gain a more procedural perspective, helping teachers to think through the writing task. Though challenging, this live modelling did seem to have benefit for both teachers and students.

Whilst what I've described here is a very 'teacher-led' approach, we used another term — dialogic modelling — to describe how teacher and students discussed or developed the teacher's writing, or co-constructed text. This sometimes happened quite spontaneously, particularly when teachers were writing live, perhaps because students would 'step in' to offer suggestions as the teacher grappled with the task. This dialogic modelling may be valuable because

it engages teacher and learners in thinking together about writing.

We can see an example of this in the transcript (above) where the teacher is live writing a setting description in the style of John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids*. The teacher first verbalises her thinking about her setting (she's chosen a school) and the unsettling atmosphere she'd like to create, before students offer suggestions which the teacher then incorporates in the writing.

Student talk: modelling reader-writer conversations

We were keen for students to talk to each other, for various purposes: for example, to share and generate ideas, engage in collaborative writing, to reflect on their choices. Conversations about their writing often helped students to consider the response of a reader — to see more the impact of their choices. For many students, sharing and talking about writing was quite unfamiliar so we focused on teaching students how to engage in reader-writer conversations, for example, by modelling peer discussion first as a whole class. We found that students needed support to move beyond sometimes superficial turn-taking in paired talk, to engage more meaningfully with each other's writing. So, we tried out strategies

to promote the interactive quality of students' writing, for example, modelling guiding questions that encouraged students to verbalise their choices and ask questions as both readers and writers. Students also benefitted from a focused steer,

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aligned with the learning objective: the prompts below might support students to discuss, for example, how they structured sentences to delay the arrival of a character.

Prompts to support pair discussion about sentence structure

- Ask the writer: When I read this sentence, I imagine...was that you wanted your reader to think?
- Ask the reader: When you read this sentence, what do you imagine? When I wrote this sentence, I wanted the reader to see...is that what you imagine?
- Verbalise: I structured my sentence this way because I wanted my reader to imagine the explorer emerging from the mountains.

Like the metalinguistic modelling described above, modelling was a bridging mechanism that supported students to engage more independently in talk about their writing.

Orchestrating repertoires of talk about writing

This project, like many others, highlights the challenge involved in purposefully orchestrating repertoires of talk throughout and across lessons. This is why we gave a lot of thought to lesson sequencing — to how different repertoires of talk could be sequenced and connected to mediate learning about and through writing. Lesson sequences featured discussions about model texts, often followed by related writing tasks. Metalinguistic modelling and reader-writer conversations supported transitions between talking about model texts and independent or collaborative writing. There was variation in how activities were sequenced: for example, a lesson could start with students talking together to generate ideas for a writing task, before comparing their ideas to a related model text. There was often more focus on model texts and modelling in early lessons, and more space for

writing, peer talk and reflection in later lessons.

Again, whilst we produced examples and templates to support planning, we didn't prescribe a rigid sequence but supported teachers to plan for talk according to their curricular goals and class contexts. The emphasis was interconnecting repertoires of talk purposefully to support the writing process, ensuring space and time for students to write and talk about their writing.

Some of the things we learned

The project raised various issues for consideration, some of which I reflect on here. Promoting dialogic engagement with the writing of others, and encouraging deep reflection on writing choices, requires modelling ways of talking about writing that make explicit the relationship between linguistic choice and meaning, and that demonstrate the messy, experimental, recursive nature of writing. Teachers need support to develop classroom talk in general, but also in ways that are specific to subject domains.

We also know from the National Literacy Trust's 2025 report on young people's speaking and listening, that many students lack the confidence to contribute to whole class talk, or to take part in discussions, or challenge views. So, we need to think carefully about how we elicit and engage students in discussion. Asking complex analytical questions before students have had time to think about and respond to a model text can shut down the possibility of dialogic discussion. For paired student talk to be purposeful, students need something to say and time to say it. There is often little value, for example, in asking students to 'turn and talk' about their writing choices for 30 seconds. Paired talk needs structure and support, particularly when students are talking about writing for the first time. Focusing students' attention on specific aspects of writing or the writing task can be more purposeful than asking students to talk openly about their choices. Reader-writer conversations may also work better when students discuss writing developed over a sequence of lessons, because they are able to compare previous drafts and explore changes. Students need carefully designed tasks, modelling and support if they are to question and challenge the writing choices of their teachers or peers.

There is a risk that a talk activity can interfere with a student's writing 'flow'. Students may also be keen to commit ideas to paper as they are generated and verbalised, perhaps through whole class talk or peer discussion. We saw several instances of students writing down ideas as the teacher was talking or modelling their own writing. We also found that quite a

few productive moments of peer-to-peer talk occurred spontaneously, or ‘covertly’ as the teacher talked. Ultimately, we generate ideas both as we talk and as we write. We may then need to recognise more that learners may be ‘moved’ to write, verbalise and interact at various points in a lesson — not only in ‘permitted’ spaces — but in spaces ‘opened’ by learners.

Final thoughts

As we know, the removal of spoken language as an assessed component of English GCSE has eroded the position of oracy, and prescribed approaches to teaching may further constrain opportunities for classroom dialogue. With renewed emphasis on oracy, and the relationship between talk and writing, it is important to consider how we embed space and time for students to both write and talk about writing. I use both the words ‘space’ and ‘time’ to emphasise the need for fostering motivational and exploratory learning environments that allow students to generate, reflect on and refine their writing, and to engage with the writing of others. Whilst I emphasise the potential of talking, silence of course has a role here — for listening, thinking, and focused writing — remembering that students demonstrate their engagement in different ways.

There is hope that the current momentum around classroom talk will be reflected in the revised National Curriculum. But teachers need guidance and support: to make choices about the repertoires of talk they use to develop learners’ communicative skills, knowledge about language, and to achieve curricular goals. Promoting opportunities for teachers to talk, think about and reflect on their oracy practices is an important part of this. 🌸

Talk about Writing resources

The Talk about Writing webpages offer guidance and resources for teachers and teacher educators. www.exeter.ac.uk/research/centres/languageandliteracy/metatalkforwriting/talkaboutwriting/

The Metatalk about Writing webpages provide further information about the underpinning research, and links to related publications: www.exeter.ac.uk/research/centres/languageandliteracy/metatalkforwriting/

Further reading

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Modelling ways of talking about writing shows the often messy and unpredictable nature of the process.

