Promoting talk *about* writing in the secondary English classroom

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Overview

- Explore the importance of ***dialogic metalinguistic talk*** as a tool to promote metalinguistic thinking about how to shape and craft written text

- Bring together conceptual and empirical insights from the fields of dialogic talk, and of metalinguistic understanding

Drawing on a recent study:

- offer a characterisation of metalinguistic talk **repertoires** and how these function together to develop metalinguistic thinking and writing

- offer insights from two strands of the research: how teachers' **talk moves** can generate dialogic metalinguistic talk about model texts; how teachers utilise **metalinguistic modelling** to make explicit metalinguistic thinking and scaffold writerly independence

Dialogic Metalinguistic Talk

Dialogic because it involves learning together through sharing and exchanging ideas, solving problems, and challenging each other to build shared understanding (Alexander, 2020).

Dialogic talk can be used '*to teach students to think—to make knowledge*' (Resnick et al., 2015) and to '*open up discourse space for exploration and varied opinions*' (Boyd & Markarian, 2015, p. 273).

Dialogic Metalinguistic Talk

Metalinguistic because it involves reflecting on language and what it means to be a writer.

It is focused on developing specific (*metalinguistic*) understanding of the relationship between language and meaning in writing (Myhill & Newman, 2016, 2019; Newman & Watson, 2020).

It foregrounds the reader-writer relationship: how language choices shape our response as readers; how we craft our writing to align with authorial intentions.

It makes language choices visible and available for learning discussions: it is talk which promotes *thinking* about writing.

Our previous research

- Dialogic metalinguistic talk about writing characterized by questions and interactions which opened up, widened, and deepened space for metalinguistic thinking.

- Teachers varied in the extent to which they sustained dialogic metalinguistic talk, with many examples of the co-occurrence of monologic and dialogic talk about writing within a lesson.

- Teachers who were less confident with grammatical and textual knowledge were often less dialogic in their interactions, and more inclined to close down the line of thinking.

- Curriculum and high-stakes assessment pressures seemed also to limit dialogic metalinguistic talk, triggering tightly teacher-controlled interactions instructing students what to 'put in' their writing.

- Students can struggle to verbalise the reasons for their linguistic decision-making, and that this needs particular support.

- The nature and quality of student talk may hinge on the extent to which teachers' model and scaffold dialogic interactions.

(Myhill et al., 2012; Myhill et al., 2016; Newman, 2017, 2018; Myhill and Newman, 2016, 2019; Myhill et al., 2020; Newman and Watson, 2020).

The Current Project

ESRC funded study to develop an evidence-based pedagogy for the development of **metalinguistic talk;** explore the impact of this talk on the development of **metalinguistic understanding** and **writing**.

Involved working with English teachers to promote **high quality classroom talk** that helps learners to **think** about and **understand** the **choices** they make in their writing.

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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.
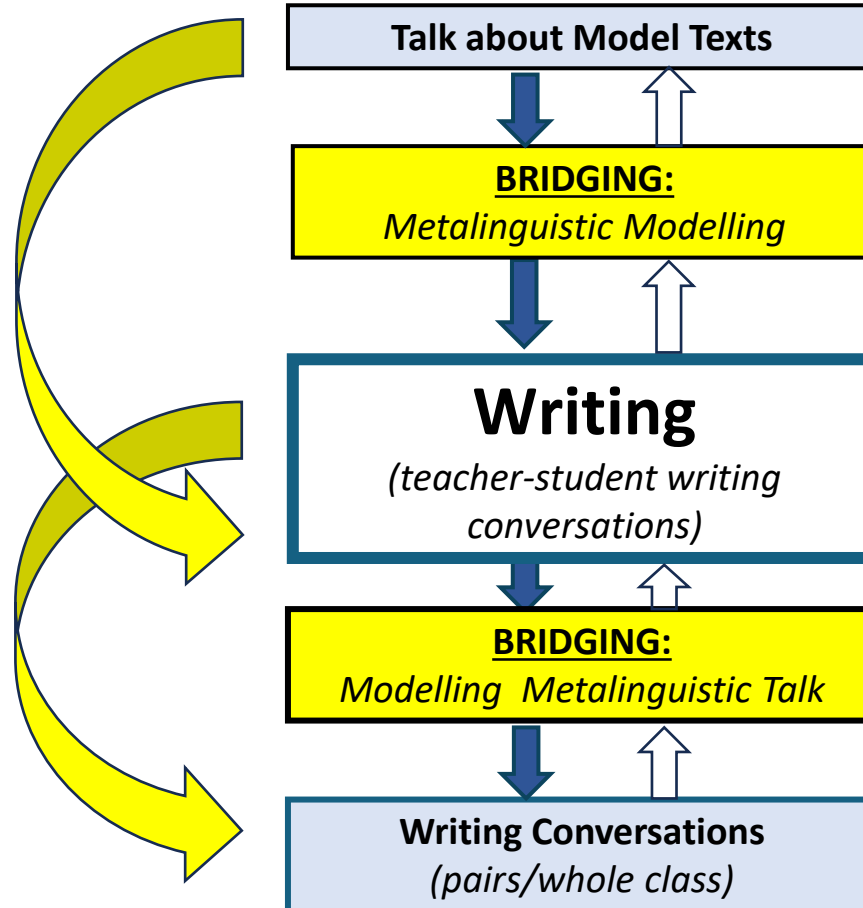
Three phase design spanning 3 years; literature review conducted in year 1 (Newman, 2024):

1. Exploratory phase: explored metalinguistic talk in the context of teachers' classrooms (14 lessons)
2. Development phase: using strategies developed, teachers designed lesson sequences for their own content and contexts (63 lessons)
3. Intervention phase: underpinned by the arising principles, interventions were co-constructed and implemented (54 lessons)

- Sub-sample student dyads (56 students: 28 phase 1, 28 phase 2; range of prior attainment)
- Data capture: Audio/ video of lessons; audio/video and live writing of sub-sample student dyads; students' writing
- By the end of the project, negotiated theoretically generated pedagogical principles for promoting metalinguistic talk

Repertoires of Talk

Guiding Principle		Example
Whole class talk about model texts	Talk about model text stimulates metalinguistic thinking, emphasising different linguistic possibilities and effects; model texts as springboards for students' own writing.	*What is your impression of this character? Why? How does writing in third person contribute to the atmosphere? How would it be different if it was written in first person, from Winston's point of view?*
Teacher-led metalinguistic modelling	Explicit modelling of writing to support metalinguistic thinking; supports learners to transition from talking about a model text, to the act of writing.	*Teacher: 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>.*
Modelling metalinguistic talk	Explicit modelling of metalinguistic talk supports learners to talk about and reflect on their writing choices.	*Teacher: Let's explain our choices. Let's have a go at doing this together. Let's have one volunteer to read out their sentence and then we can think about what kind of questions we might want to ask that person.*
Writing conversations	Writing conversations encourage learners to verbalise their writing choices, supporting metalinguistic thinking and writing.	*S: One of my noun phrases was 'constant, persistent fear' to show that my character's always in fear of what's going on.* *T: Why did you choose to use constant and persistent?*

Bridging Student Learning

Talk about Model Texts

BRIDGING:
Metalinguistic Modelling

Writing
(teacher-student writing conversations)

BRIDGING:
Modelling Metalinguistic Talk

Writing Conversations
(pairs/whole class)

Data Analysis: Metalinguistic Sites

opposite, or you want to try and make it contrasting. Yeah, but this is lovely. *'The water is freezing. The waves are crashing on the hard rocky beach whilst the storm glooms above me.'*

The water is freezing, The waves are crashing
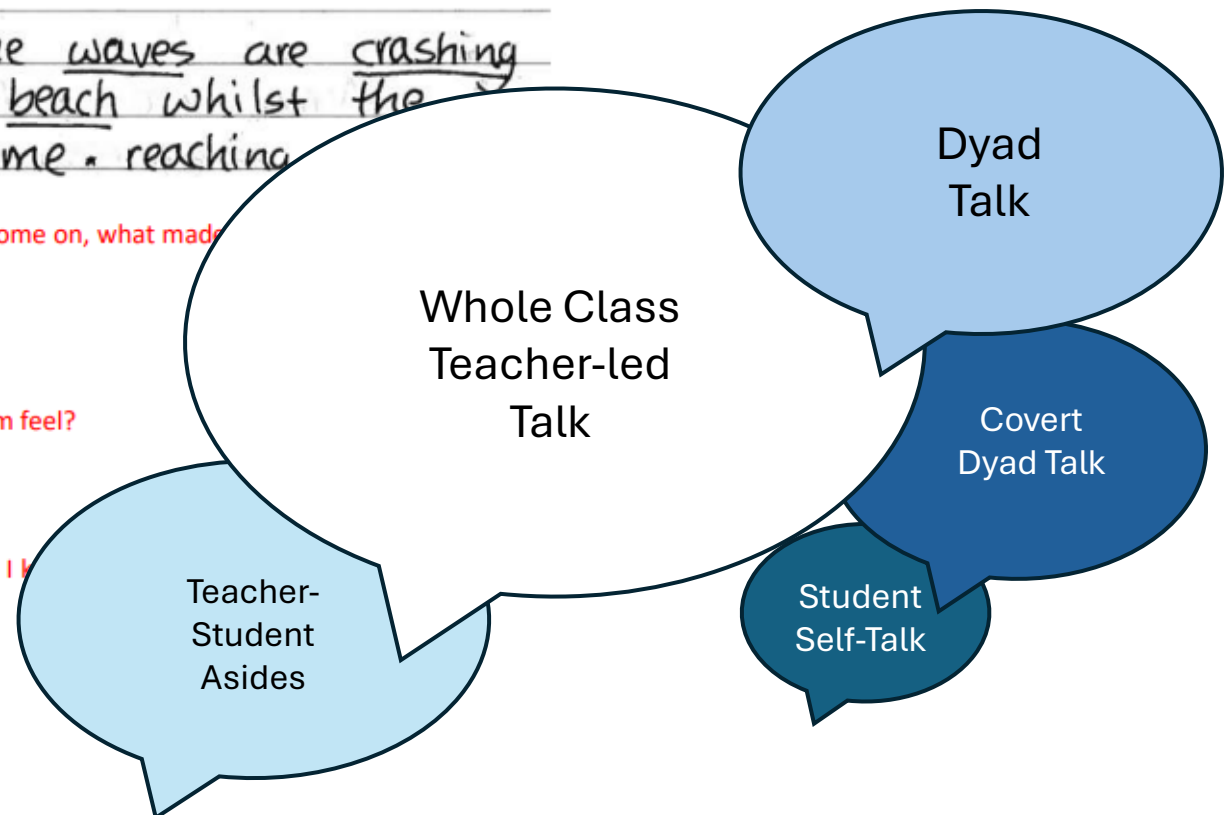nto the hard, rocky beach whilst the
storm glooms above me. reaching

I like that. What made you choose glooms? Come on, what made
What did it make you feel?

er: I don't know.

Does it make the... what does it make this storm feel?

er: Like... like stormy.

What makes it feel stormy? It makes it feel.... I

Whole Class Teacher-led Talk

Dyad Talk

Covert Dyad Talk

Student Self-Talk

Teacher-Student Asides

Strand 1: teacher talk moves in whole class talk about model texts

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Explored:

- How **talk moves** generate dialogic metalinguistic talk

- how differently **framed questions** manoeuvre and variously foreground 'attention' to linguistic choice

- how differently framed dialogues are sustained and developed by teachers' **responsive talk moves** to develop metalinguistic understandings

Framing Questions

Framing Questions drive the dialogue by inviting learners to consider or respond to a linguistic choice. They draw differently on learners' understandings and vary in the extent to which they scaffold learners' thinking.

Effects open [EO]: Invites an open response about the effect/impression created by the model text
What is your response to this piece? What is your impression of the character?

Choice open [CO]: Invites learners to identify linguistic features that contribute to a particular effect or impression
Which words or phrases contribute to the impression that...?

Choice focusing [CF]: Focuses attention on a specific linguistic feature and invites learners to explain its effect
How does this noun phrase contribute to our impression?

Choice alternative [CA]: Initiates consideration of how an alternative linguistic choice might alter effect
How would the effect change if I used this verb instead?

Responsive Talk Moves

Responsive talk moves sustain and advance the dialogue.

Elaborating [E]: An invitation to a student, or a peer, to expand on their answer, offering a fuller explanation of their metalinguistic thinking.
So what else does that say about the atmosphere...?

Justifying [J]: An invitation to a student, or a peer, to justify their metalinguistic response with reasons or evidence.
Why/how does that choice contribute to the impression that...?

Reformulation statement [RS]: Offers a repeat, paraphrase or reformulation of a learners' response.
The verb creates a sense of urgency.

Reformulation question [RQ]: Seeks confirmation of a repeat, paraphrase or reformulation of a learners' response.
So you think the character seems nervous?

Teacher verbalisation [RV]: Verbalises the effect of the linguistic choice under focus.
The sequence of minor sentences works here to heighten tension for the reader.

Example Lesson

Lesson focused on developing understanding of how J.R.Tolkien develops an uneasy atmosphere through setting description in an extract from *The Lord of the Rings.*

T: **What we're going to do is have a little look at this and try and figure out what it is, what atmosphere the writer's trying to create, what feelings they want the writer to have, what expectations, the reader, not the writer, what expectations do they want the reader to have after having a look at this [EO] [ ]**

[*Model Text:* 'The air was gleaming and sunlit, but hazy; and they could not see to any great distance.']

[Students annotate a paper copy of the sentence individually; afterwards, they are invited to annotate the sentence projected on the whiteboard, positioned at the front of the room]

T: All right, what have we got? '***The air was gleaming***'. So [reading students' annotations from the whiteboard], we've got, 'desert', 'hot', 'humid'. 'Contrast', we'll come back to that in a minute. '***Hazy***', we've got 'eerie', 'foggy', 'gloomy', 'confusing'. Oh, that's interesting, 'vulnerability', okay. Well, who was that one? Yeah, that's really interesting. Tell me why you think that? [J]

S: Well, like, it's like the gleaming sun, like a nice day, but then it's hazy, you literally can't see anything, so we're just, like, something seems a bit off.

T: Okay. **[…] if we stop here at sunlit, what would we be expecting? [CA]**

S: A summer day.

T: A summer day. Sarah?

S (S): Feel relaxed.

T: Something relaxed, yeah. […] So, we're expecting something quite happy [RS]. **But it changes, doesn't it ? What's the word on which it pivots? [CO]**

S: *'But'*.

T: *'But'*. Okay […] and that shifts our direction. Oh, that's lovely, it's gleaming, and something, *'but', 'but'* then something… [RV]

Example Lesson

The teacher initiates a discussion about the opening of a written version of a speech by Greta Thunberg. The teacher draws particular attention to the effect of personal pronouns.

T: **I would like you to look at this opening […] What do you notice…? […]**

Does it engage you and make you want to hear more? […] [EO]

[Model text: 'My name is Greta Thunberg. I am 16 years old. I come from Sweden and I want you to panic'.]

[…]

S (C): If it was a book, I wouldn't read it. It's not the best way to come across…

T: Why not? [J]

[_]

S (C): It's… I don't know, it's just like, not the best way to come across.

T: Why not? [J]

S: It's a bit rude.

S: It's just weird.

T: Why is it weird? [J]

[Teacher projects questions on the whiteboard; students first write their responses]

T: **So, Greta places herself firmly as the subject, why does she do this? […] What could you tell me about why she begins with 'I' - what's she doing there? Greta provides 3 pieces of information about herself – how does this make her sound like a 'normal' girl? How does Greta change the tone of the piece when she says 'I want _you_ to panic'? [CF]**

S: I wrote down that she uses herself as the subject to make herself seem worthwhile to listen to, like she is somebody important that you should listen to even if she is someone who is just like us.

T: So, she's setting herself up as an authority [RS] **Why might she switch to the second person pronoun '_you_' later on? [CF]** Yeah, Luke?

S (L): Direct.

T: It's very direct. [RS]

S (L): Because she isn't like making it about herself, she's making it [about] her audience of people that want to make a change.

Teacher talk moves in whole class talk about model texts: conclusions

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- **Talk moves** may help teachers to manage metalinguistic dialogic talk more strategically

- **Speculative, exploratory discussion** functions to surface personal responses, and tacit or partially formed understandings, through which teachers can connect and extend metalinguistic thinking

- It is important to make **explicit connections** between learners' impressions and the linguistic choices that might be attributed to those impressions.

- Suggests the importance of interactive sequences that **interweave** metalinguistic foci and discursive moments that give rise to tentative, intuitive, less explicit responses.

Strand 2: the mediating role of teacher-led metalinguistic modelling

Explored:

- How teachers **enact and manage** metalinguistic modelling of writing tasks

- How metalinguistic modelling may foster **metalinguistic thinking**

- How metalinguistic modelling functions in instructional sequences to **bridge** learning about model texts with students' writing

A typology of metalinguistic modelling

Modelled writing: teachers model writing and writerly decision-making.

- **Live modelling:** teachers make explicit their metalinguistic thinking as they write 'live'

I will show you...I might write something like, 'the grotesque...' because I want to create a sense that it's unpleasant...

- **Retrospective modelling:** teachers make explicit their metalinguistic thinking as they reflect on/explain a previously written text

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 typology of metalinguistic modelling

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Dialogic modelling: exploratory and generative talk.

- **Exploratory talk:** teacher-student dialogue about the teacher's choices
T: Is there anything you want to ask me about my choices?
S: Why is it 'unforgiving'?

- **Generative talk:** teacher leads the class in co-constructing/developing written text
T: So the air was…?
S: Thick
S: Sharp
T: Ok, good, that adds to the impression we're trying to create…

Simulated thinking: teacher simulates thinking about narrative world and language choices
I want you to see your character arriving…what can you see…that shows what they're thinking or feeling?

Example Lesson

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

A _____   _____ into the circle.

It was _____the_____

Using the text, fill in the gaps to create a first impression of either a wolf, buffalo or elephant.

What impression do you want to create of your character? What word choices will create that impression?

Think about:
the **nouns** and **verb** you use to create an impression of the character;
the **name** you choose and what this suggests about the character;
as an additional challenge, consider changing the articles.

Retrospective modelling and exploratory talk

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Teacher: So, I'm going to show you what I came up with. I'm very proud of this. Okay, so I chose the buffalo. So, I changed it to **a snorting giant crashed into the circle**. **It was Tofu, the short-sighted buffalo.** Alright, so I'm going to talk to you about some of the choices that I've made...so I wanted to give this impression of the buffalo that he was... quite clumsy and a little bit uncaring about others around him. So... whereas Bagheera, we want him to be quite athletic and we want him to be sinuous and beautiful, he dropped into the circle, **I want my character to be really different so he crashed into the circle, and I picked that word crash because I wanted to show how much damage he was doing, but also because of the sound of crash** as well, so I like the sound of the word too, so that's why I picked that **verb**. And **I chose... that he was a giant to demonstrate how big he was**, that's quite a simple choice really for my **noun**, but **I just added into the noun phrase a snorting giant because I wanted to give the impression that he was quite annoyed about something**.. So, that's me talking through some of the choices that I made.

Teacher: Is there anything that you would want to ask that I could explain a little bit further?
Dylan: Why did you choose short sighted and why not something like, more like, intimidating?

Example Lesson

The class explore an extract from the post-apocalyptic novel *The Day of the Triffids* by John Wyndham (1951), beginning:

"But this morning was different. Disturbingly because mysteriously different. No wheels rumbled, no buses roared, no sound of car of any kind, in fact, was to be heard. No brakes, no horns, not even the clopping of the few rare horses that still occasionally passed..."

Students draft a narrative opening that captures a setting of their choice, but that establishes an uneasy atmosphere.

Live Modelling

T: 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, but <u>actually it's</u> the middle of the day and there are no students and there are no teachers, all these things have gone. So, it would be a bit like it is at the weekend, but <u>actually it's</u> not the weekend, it's in schooltime. **That's something important to <u>consider actually, because I don't want my reader just to think it's the weekend, I might have to make it quite clear that...</u>** 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.

Generative Talk

T: ...we **can build on** this by saying

P: No shoving.

T: Yeah, [writing on board] "*no shoving students in the corridors*", and I can progress on up the corridors to the classrooms. No, what can be missing from the classrooms? [writing on board] "*No work projected on the whiteboards*", yeah, no work [...] So, no work projected on the whiteboard, no teacher. What would the teacher frantically be doing at the beginning of the lesson?

P: 'Quiet down, quiet down!'

P: Pacing.

T: Okay, [writing] "*no teacher pacing around, frantically shushing students*". Yeah.

P: How about – Veronica said – waiting at the door?

T: Okay, yeah, so before we go in, [writing] "*no teachers waiting at the door*". Okay...**Do I need to add anything else or is that enough in my list to show this is a very weird setting?** Yeah, I feel like there should be something quite short just to punctuate the ending of that.

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

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

P: Because the clock, you said time, so **you could say "*no ticking of the clock*" or something.**
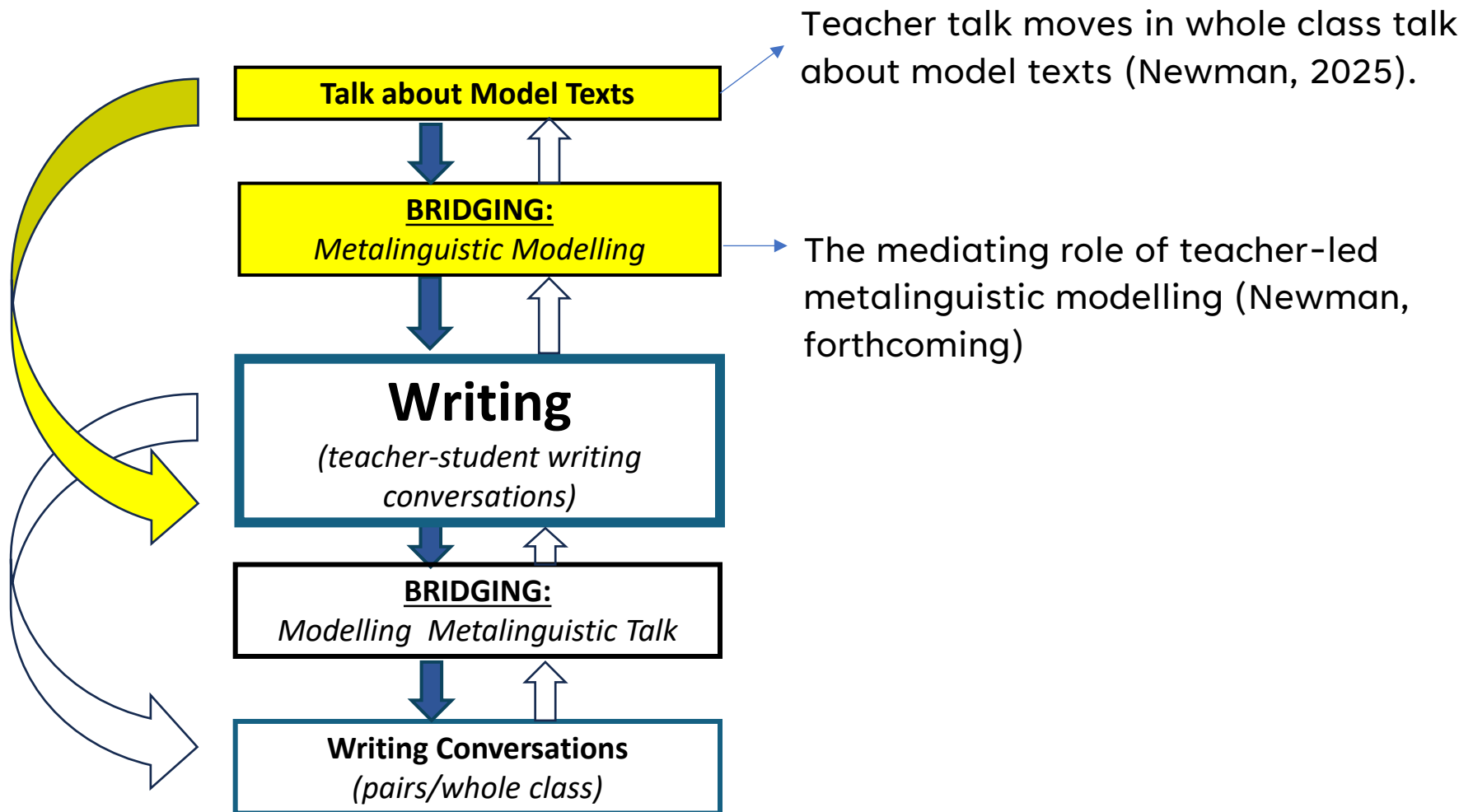
T: At the very end, and **that would get the... get to the sense of urgency as well, wouldn't it.**

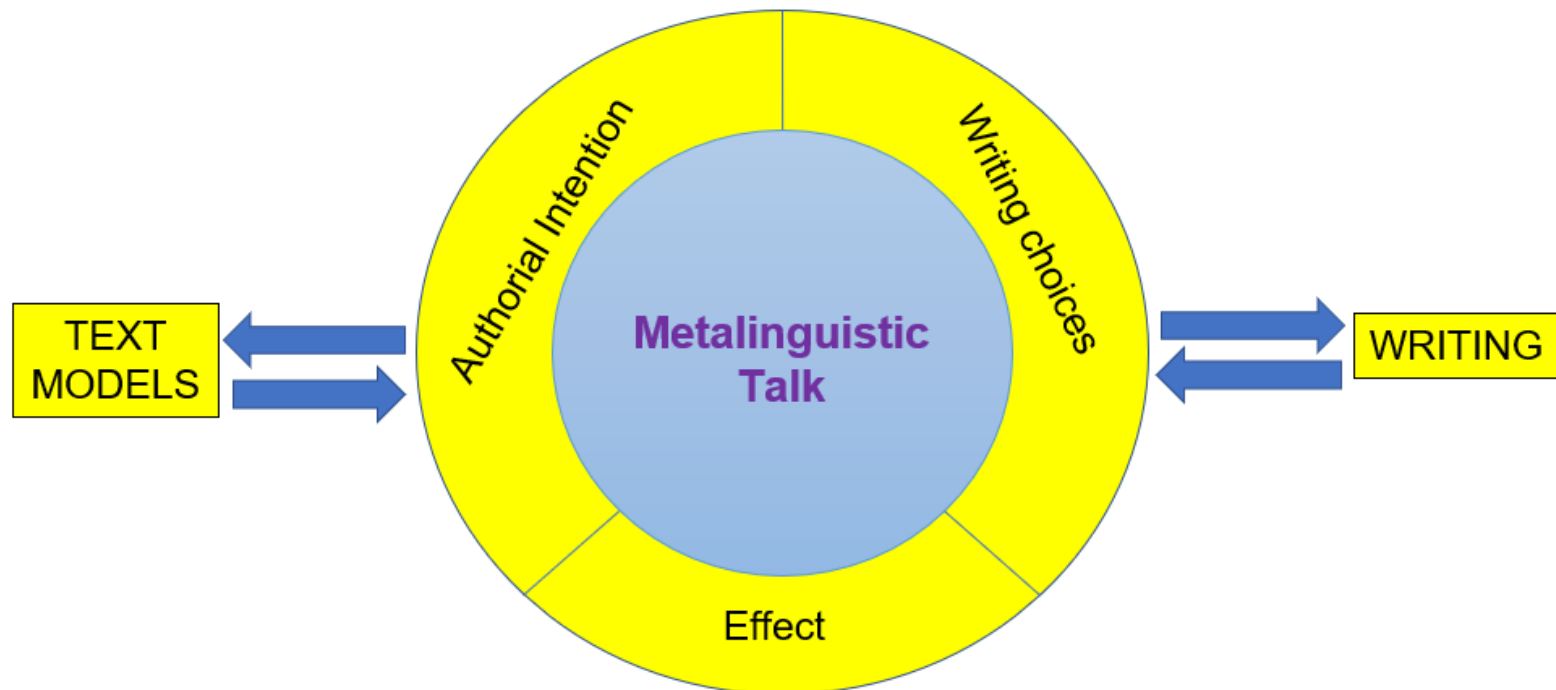# The mediating role of teacher-led metalinguistic modelling: conclusions

- The **typology of metalinguistic modelling** a useful tool to support teachers

- **Live** modelling may permit a particular insight into the messy, iterative process of text construction, whilst aligning the **teacher's writing experience** more closely with that of her students

- During **dialogic modelling** learners *engage with* the teacher's verbalisation of her choices or *participate in* text construction.

- **Generative talk** positions teachers and learners *ahead* of the text, perhaps scaffolding the abstraction of thought to written form

- **Metalinguistic modelling** can operate to both externalise metalinguistic thinking but also draw learners *into* metalinguistic 'co-thinking', perhaps supporting the internalisation and control of a writer's 'inner dialogue'

- Metalinguistic modelling may represent an essential **pedagogical step** in instructional sequences

Bridging student learning

Talk about Model Texts

BRIDGING:
Metalinguistic Modelling

Writing
(teacher-student writing conversations)

BRIDGING:
Modelling Metalinguistic Talk

Writing Conversations
(pairs/whole class)

Teacher talk moves in whole class talk about model texts (Newman, 2025).

The mediating role of teacher-led metalinguistic modelling (Newman, forthcoming)

Summary

- More attention to dialogic metalinguistic talk in the teaching of writing can support students to become more metalinguistically aware of the relationship between linguistic choice and rhetorical effect

- Dialogic metalinguistic talk comprises a **repertoire** of talk forms

- Dialogic metalinguistic talk is a **mediating mechanism** that supports learning through writing and about writing

Project Publications

Chartered College Article – Impact (2024)
[Developing metalinguistic talk through teacher–researcher partnership : My College](#)

Newman, R. (2024). The Impact of [Meta] Talk about Writing on Metalinguistic Understanding and Written Outcomes: A Review. *L1-Educational Studies in Language and Literature*, *24*(1), 1-27.

Newman, R. (2025). Developing metalinguistic understanding in the secondary English classroom: the role of teachers' framing questions and responsive talk moves in dialogic metalinguistic talk about written text. *Research Papers in Education*, 1-26.

Newman, R. (forthcoming). Bridging talk with text: the mediating role of teacher-led modelling in a metalinguistic talk pedagogy for writing.

Project webpage under development - videos and resources to follow.

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