THINKING LIKE A WRITER:

THE IMPORTANCE OF

METALINGUISTIC TALK IN BECOMING

A WRITER

Debra Myhill

Overview of Session

❑   Introduction: grammar as a resource for writing

❑   Grammar as Choice: Embedding Grammar Meaningfully

❑   Metalinguistic Writing Talk

INTRODUCTION

Grammar as a resource for teaching writing

Writing: the Big Picture

❑ Teaching grammar terminology will not improve children's writing: knowing what a noun is, or what a clause is will not make a learner a better writer.

❑ Embedding attention to how grammatical choices craft and shape meaning within the teaching of writing does help to improve writing;

❑ Teaching writing is more than teaching grammar - even when the grammar is meaningfully embedded. There is a need to:

  ➢ create space for engagement, imagination, freedom of choice

  ➢ treat children as authors with something to say

  ➢ give time for writing

  ➢ address other skills such as spelling, or how to revise effectively

  ➢ provide effective feedback that learners understand

  ➢ establish a positive community of writers in your classroom

Crafting Writing

❑ Writing is a craft that can be taught.

❑ Being a writer means being able to shape and craft language to achieve the effect you want

❑ Being a writer means being respected as an author who can make choices.

❑ Being a writer means developing an increasing understanding of how different language choices work in different texts or contexts

❑ There is a lot of focus in the UK national advice on explicit teaching of writing, but in practice too much attention on teaching what should go into a text, and not enough attention to learning about writing and learning about being a writer?

❑ Kellogg: we need to teach children '*to think as well as write*'.

❑ Classroom (metalinguistic) talk is critical in developing student thinking and student understanding about writing.

Crafting Sentences

With the suitcase in one hand and the trumpet in the other, he dashed out of the cave.
He dashed out of the cave, with the suitcase in one hand and the trumpet in the other.

Taking infinite care, the BFG unscrewed the top of the glass jar…
The BFG unscrewed the top of the glass jar, taking infinite care…

Roald Dahl – *The BFG*

Talk Time

Look at the green sentences which are Roald Dahl's choice of sentence shape, and at the alternative versions in black. Both are grammatically correct.

Discuss how the green and black sentences differ in structure and why you think Dahl might have chosen to shape his sentences this way. What effect does his choice have on the reader?

A Key Message

Embedding grammar within the teaching of writing is about making the craft of writing visible to students; and it is about showing them the repertoire of choices available to them.
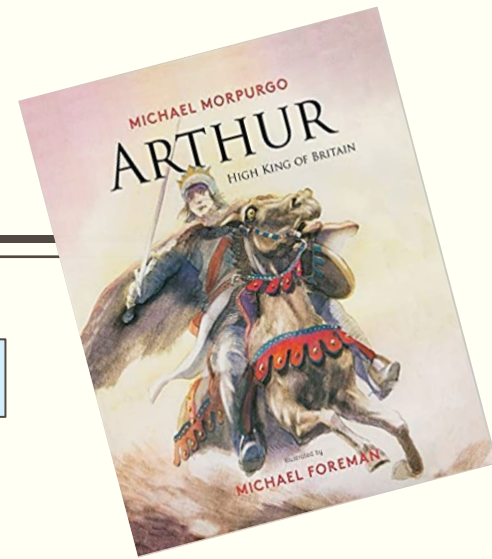
This is teaching grammar as a choice.

GRAMMAR AS CHOICE

Principles and Practice

The Possibilities of Grammar

And out of the mists came a figure in flowing green, walking across the water.

- ❑ Read this sentence aloud – where will you put the emphasis?
- ❑ What possibilities are there for re-ordering this sentence?
- ❑ How does this change the emphasis?

And a figure in flowing green came out of the mists, walking across the water.
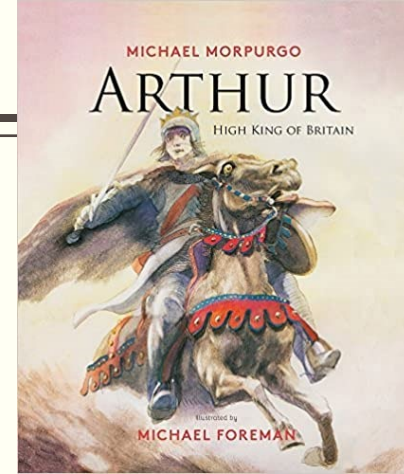
- ❑ Read both these sentences aloud – how do they portray this moment in the plot differently? How might you film these two sentences?

- ❑ What do you think is the effect of moving the adverbial 'out of the mists' to different places in the sentence?

- ❑ What do you think is the effect of the putting the subject (a figure) after the verb (came) in the first sentence?

LEAD Principles

PRINCIPLE	EXPLANATION	RATIONALE
LINKS	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 connect grammar with meaning and rhetorical effect
EXAMPLES	Explain the grammar through **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
AUTHENTIC TEXTS	Use **authentic** texts as models to link writers to a broader community of writers	To integrate reading and writing and show how 'real' writers make language choices
DISCUSSION	Build in dialogic metalinguistic **discussion** about grammar and its effects	To promote deep metalinguistic learning about why a particular choice works, and to develop independence rather than compliance

In Practice: Teaching

And out of the mists came a figure in flowing green, walking across the water.

❑ Read this sentence aloud – where will you put the emphasis?
❑ What possibilities are there for re-ordering this sentence?
❑ How do these changes vary the emphasis?

And a figure in flowing green came walking across the water, out of the mists.

❑ Now read both these sentences aloud – how do they portray this moment in the plot differently? How might you film these two sentences?

❑ What do you think is the effect of moving the adverbial 'out of the mists' to different places in the sentence?
❑ What do you think is the effect of the putting the subject (a figure in flowing green) after the verb (came) in the first sentence?

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LEAD Principles

PRINCIPLE	EXPLANATION	RATIONALE
LINKS	Make a **link** between the grammar being introduced and how it works in the writing being taught	Making a link between syntactic structure (verb/subject inversion; fronted adverbial) and what is emphasised for the reader/
EXAMPLES	Explain the grammar through **examples**, not lengthy explanations	Creating new versions of the sentence by moving things around; Highlighting the adverbial, verb and subject in colour
AUTHENTIC TEXTS	Use **authentic** texts as models to link writers to a broader community of writers	Using Michael Morpurgo's novel, *'Arthur, High King of Britain'*
DISCUSSION	Build in dialogic metalinguistic **discussion** about grammar and its effects	Allowing multiple discussion opportunities: about the sound/rhythm of the sentence; what changes can be made; comparing the two versions; effect of syntax change

DIALOGIC METALINGUISTIC TALK

Metalinguistic Understanding for Writing

❑ **Metalinguistic understanding** is the capacity to reflect on, analyse and think about language

❑ With metalinguistic understanding, **language itself is the focus**, rather than simply being the medium for communication.

❑ Metalinguistic understanding is **explicit** (not the implicit knowledge of grammar that all language users have)

❑ The primary focus for metalinguistic understanding about writing is **an understanding of how language works in written texts**, not the naming and identification of grammar or other aspects of language;

Metalinguistic Talk about Writing

❑ Metalinguistic understanding is being **explicitly** aware of how language is used; the ability to analyse and consider language as an artefact;

❑ It is about reflecting on and thinking about written language

❑ Metalinguistic understanding about writing is enabled, in part, through opportunities for metalinguistic talk about linguistic choice.

❑ Metalinguistic talk in the classroom allows language to be used for cognitive purposes: it is thinking talk where thinking is made visible through verbalisation.

❑ Metalinguistic talk allows for the verbalisation of metalinguistic thinking about choices in writing.

❑ Our studies show it is critical in enabling the transfer of learning about grammatical choice into students' own writing.

❑ This metalinguistic talk is dialogic as the goal is to open up the individual writer's capacity to make linguistic choices, not to teach normative patterns of language use.

Dialogic Talk

❑ Historical recognition of the importance of talk in writing development: '*reading and writing float on a sea of talk'* (Britton 1983:11).

❑ Dialogic talk (exploratory talk; accountable talk) emphasises the role of talk in all learning (Mercer 1995; Wegerif 2013; Reznick et al, 2015);

❑ Dialogic talk is exploratory, collaborative and open-ended, not about finding the answer in the teacher's head (O'Connor and Michaels, 2007)

❑ Dialogic talk mediates learning (Alexander 2018); dialogic metalinguistic talk about writing mediates learning about writing (Myhill et al 2020).

Thinking and Talking Together

Learning about writing through talk

- Talk to generate ideas

- Talk to compose text together

- Talk to read text aloud

- Talk to share writing and celebrate authorship

- Talk to explain language choices in text

- Talk to reflect on and evaluate text

- Talk to think about the writing process

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The Dangers of Explicit Teaching

A Teacher's Instructions to her class of 10-11 year olds.

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 … 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? You all should have noun phrases, because 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.

Explicit Teaching: Fronted Adverbials

Suddenly, my alarm clock rang. Immediately, I jumped out of bed and pulled on my clothes.

Hurriedly, I ran down the stairs…

With the suitcase in one hand and the trumpet in the other, he dashed out of the cave.
He dashed out of the cave, with the suitcase in one hand and the trumpet in the other.

Taking infinite care, the BFG unscrewed the top of the glass jar…
The BFG unscrewed the top of the glass jar, taking infinite care…   Roald Dahl

The difference between *forced* writing where the writer has just taken the message of putting an adverbial at the start; and *crafted* writing where the position of the fronted adverbial has a creative, communicative purpose.

Grammar as Choice

Use a fronted adverbial!

X

Why use a fronted adverbial?

✓

With the suitcase in one hand and the trumpet in the other, he dashed out of the cave.
He dashed out of the cave, with the suitcase in one hand and the trumpet in the other.

Taking infinite care, the BFG unscrewed the top of the glass jar…
The BFG unscrewed the top of the glass jar, taking infinite care…

I used a fronted adverbial.

I used a fronted adverbial here to draw attention to the carefulness of the BFG's action.

❏ The first is linguistic labelling (form) but demonstrates no real understanding of crafting text;

❏ The second is understanding of the choice (rhetorical function/effect) and does demonstrate understanding of crafting text.

A Key Message

❏ Teaching grammar as choice is **not** about telling children how they should write; it is about showing them the repertoire of choices available to them, and discussing how those choices create different meanings.

NOT: *You should use fronted adverbials to make your writing better,*

BUT: *What happens if you move that adverbial to the front of the sentence? How does it change how we read this sentence? Why did you choose to put that adverbial there?*

Missed Opportunity for Metalinguistic Talk

Teacher:	So it's like he's got bars in front of his eyes; like vines in front of them.
Student:	Like he's in a jail.
Teacher:	Like he's in a jail. Great description.

Student:	'*A big wavy tree*'.
Teacher:	See, I like 'wavy'. 'Wavy' was a great word.

Student:	'*My eyes scan the room. The teacher's out. Creativity fills my mind as I hear someone scream let's give this room a makeover. We scattered out. Let the fun begin*'.
Teacher:	Ooh, this is great. Well done.

Meaningless 'Metalinguistic' Talk

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

Does he want his 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…'*

Why will it be better?

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'*

Why is it brilliant?

Student: *'at his enemies'*

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

What has the student learned about writing through this talk episode?

Constructive Metalinguistic Talk

James: *And she's wearing a gown of wine-red.*

Teacher: *OK. Talk about that a bit more?* | Inviting Elaboration |

James   *She wouldn't wear a white dress.*

Teacher: *Why?* | Inviting Justification |

James: *Because if you was not evil, you would, like, wear yellow.* | Inviting Elaboration |

Teacher: *Anyone got something else to comment on Anna's wine-red colour?   Ahmed?*

Ahmed: *It's like blood.*

Teacher: *So perhaps the 'wine-red' reminds us of blood, of danger or evil? So think carefully when it comes to yours: think about what your choice of colour suggests to your reader when describing your characters.* | Verbalising the link between choice and effect/purpose |

[Like blood. So think carefully when it comes to yours, think about the colours of what your writing is using]

Dialogic Metalinguistic Talk Moves

TALK MOVE	EXPLANATION
Initiating	A question or elicitation which opens up a line of thinking about a language choice
Elaborating	An invitation to a student, or a peer, to expand on their answer, offering a fuller explanation of their metalinguistic thinking
Justifying	An invitation to a student, or a peer, to justify their metalinguistic response with reasons or evidence
Challenging	A question or elicitation which offers a counter metalinguistic perspective on a student response, inviting students to re-think or raise new questions
Verbalising	An invitation to students to articulate the link between a grammatical choice and its rhetorical effect, with or without grammatical metalanguage
Reflecting	A question or prompt which invites students to reflect on, evaluate and consolidate their learning about language choices
Aligning	A question or statement which steers the metalinguistic talk towards the learning focus, perhaps through re-orienting the line of enquiry, or through a correction

Initiating Metalinguistic Talk

A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.

The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door and fitted it easily back into the frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all…

Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone – J. K. Rowling

The first time the reader meets Hagrid.

What impression do we get of Hagrid?

What language choices generate this impression?

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… Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.

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Strong visual image of what he looks like and how he moves.

The detail in noun phrases.

How he moves and what he does through verbs.

We infer his character from the description.

What questions might you ask in a writing lesson to generate metalinguistic talk about this characterisation?

Initiating   Which language choices help you visualise this character?

Elaborating   Tell me more about that.

Justifying   So *why* do you think the noun phrase '*A long shaggy mane of hair'* makes you think he is a fierce character?

Challenging   What do you think of the noun phrase '*the fierce, wild, shadowy face'* and its three adjectives? Are there different ways you could write this?

Verbalising   You've commented on the image of his eyes like '*black beetles'* – but can you explain the link between this noun phrase and what it suggests to you about the character.

Reflecting   Individually, look at the choices you have made in your own draft and prepare to explain to your partner how your language choices build a visual description of your character.

Aligning   Yes, you're right that this is Hagrid – well done! But just for a moment, let's focus on how Hagrid is described here.

PLENARY

Reflection Point

THINKING LIKE A WRITER

1. What have you learned about teaching writing in this session?

2. How might this shape the guidance you share with teachers and literacy leaders?

Space for Metalinguistic Thinking?

A Teacher's Instructions to her class of 10-11 year olds.

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 … 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? You all should have noun phrases, because 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.*

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BUT: *What happens if you move that adverbial to the front of the sentence? How does it change how we read this sentence? Why did you choose to put that adverbial there?*

Grammar as Choice

Effective teaching of grammar as choice in writing has the following characteristics:

➤ It fosters understanding of how language works in written texts, rather than emphasising the naming and identification of aspects of language;

➤ It uses authentic texts to model how texts work to communicate and create meaning and to make connections between reading and writing

➤ It seeks to develop learners' knowledge about language (metalinguistic understanding) to facilitate effective decision-making as writers;

➤ It focuses explicit attention on particular aspects of language, such as establishing character in narrative, foregrounding information at the front of a sentence with an adverbial; or using metaphors to evoke visual images;

➤ It uses teaching strategies which promote dialogic metalinguistic talk and teachers' skill in managing dialogic metalinguistic talk is crucial.

The Importance of Metalinguistic Talk

❑ Our research shows that the quality of classroom talk about language choices is critical to developing understanding which transfers into writing.

❑ Teachers need to create opportunities for metalinguistic talk through:

➢ Asking questions which open up thinking and a line of enquiry;

➢ Inviting students to elaborate and explain their answers;

➢ Inviting students to justify their answers;

➢ Challenging students with counterpoints and alignments

❑ Metalinguistic talk encourages students to verbalise their thinking: this is useful for them in crystallising their ideas, but it is also useful to the teacher in making students' learning visible.

The Importance of Teacher Knowledge

❏ Our research also shows that teachers' subject knowledge and pedagogical knowledge is critically important.

❏ Teachers' subject knowledge of grammar, especially beyond word class (form-focused);

❏ Teachers' subject knowledge of how texts work and the capacity to notice relevant grammatical choices in the text (function –focused);

❏ Teachers' capacity to verbalise clearly the link between a grammatical choice and its possible rhetorical effect;

❏ Teachers' pedagogical skill in managing classroom talk.

Grammar as a Resource for Writing

❑ Teaching grammar is not about obedience to rules but the nurturing of a repertoire which generates infinite possibilities.

❑ Embedding attention to grammar within your writing lessons can help young writers understand how to manipulate and stretch language like putty: it is explicit.

❑ Grammar is the servant of the composing process, a resource for showing how meanings can be crafted.

❑ It acknowledges that startling images, arising unbidden from the unconscious, sometimes surprise the writer, that the turn of a sentence in its first draft may be just right, and that through writing we often discover what we want to say.

❑ It also recognizes that for most writers, such moments of creative flow are balanced by the hard slog of generating, tuning, and refining our writing.

Free resources for teachers:

https://education.exeter.ac.uk/research/centres/writing/grammar-teacher-resources/

THANK YOU!

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