

Talking about grammar is a crucial tool in literacy teaching, study shows

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Discussion between teachers and children about writing is a crucial tool to help pupils learn about grammar, a new study shows.

Academics have found "metatalk" can enhance understanding of writing and boost [children's](#) confidence during writing lessons.

But for this to be effective this needs to be in the form of a dialog with pupils, to open up children's capacity to make and discuss their linguistic choices and allow them to reflect and put forward their own views.

The research found that some teachers miss opportunities to use discussion to reinforce literacy teaching and children's understanding, instead relying on "hollow" praise.

Academics from the University of Exeter, who carried out the research, found not all teachers take the opportunity to extend their talk. In some cases the teacher's response to children's questions and answers missed the chance to redirect them to a more focused and meaningful level of thinking.

Researchers witnessed some teachers speaking to children in the form of a monolog, in a "closed" way where they were just making statements. They only sought simple responses from children rather than a discussion. Some teachers gave incorrect explanations about [grammar](#) during discussions, and sometimes closed down discussion when they seemed less secure about their knowledge.

Some teachers concluded their discussion with an affirming, positive statement such as "brilliant" or "fab" or just saying something about the child's writing they liked without saying why. This praise could appear blind or hollow, because it did not make clear what it is that is being praised.

Ruth Newman, a member of the research team, said: "talk is important to literacy teaching, but teachers can occasionally miss the opportunity to use it as a tool to enhance understanding. Talk is crucial for developing

writing."

"Our message for teachers is to see these missed opportunities as growth points, as something to be developed. Learning about writing doesn't need to take place in silence. Talk helps children to think about the choices they make."

However the [academics](#) also witnessed teachers speaking in a "dialogic way," where they engaged in a two-way discussion about the relationship between grammatical choice and intended rhetorical effect. These teachers opened up talk about language, inviting students to explain and justify their thinking. This kind of talk enabled students to make purposeful connections between grammatical choice and its effect

Academics worked with 17 classes of 10 and 11 year olds, in the final year of their primary education. Their teachers attended three professional development days to develop understanding of and confidence with the pedagogical principles of grammar as choice. They then taught two units of work developed by the research team: one focused on fictional narrative writing, and the other on persuasive argument.

Teachers were conscious that the final pieces of writing would form part of the [teacher](#)-assessed writing mark, so interrupted purposeful sequences of learning with instructions about grammatical features that should be included in the writing. The looming presence of the national grammar test for this age group meant teachers used discussion as an opportunity to check grammar knowledge, and this diverted lessons away from exploring grammar-meaning relationships.

Professor Debra Myhill, who led the study, said: "There are many teachers who do open up useful discussions about writing or grammar in the classroom, but some only start closed discussions, and miss

opportunities to build learning through allowing children to give more extended responses. The best discussions about grammatical choice in writing helped children to extend their own thinking, enabling higher-level learning, and greater collaborative participation across the class."

More information: Metatalk for Writing:
socialsciences.exeter.ac.uk/ed.../metatalkforwriting/

Provided by University of Exeter

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