



Will adopting Pie Corbett’s ‘Talk For Writing’ improve non-fiction writing across the curriculum for pupils in our school, including for PDG pupils?

Deborah Forse.

Context

In the lead up to the introduction of the LNF I was confident, as Literacy Co-ordinator, that it would not have a major impact on our style of teaching, as we had always approached language in a cross-curricular way rather than slavishly following a published scheme. However, on closer examination of the detail of pupil work, it soon appeared that this was not so and that for example the writing in history might merely amount to a diary entry or a poster for a banquet. The breadth and quality of writing was not as evident as I had thought. I discovered that I had been guilty of taking the ‘pretty’ option when planning topic work instead of using the opportunity to extend their writing skills. This situation underlines the purpose of action research as outlined by Brigley [2016]:

‘Action research is a way of checking your assumptions to make sure that The principles you hold dear are at the heart of your practices; it is a way of checking that your work is as you would like it to be.

Many of the children in Cadoxton Primary School come from a deprived area. At present approximately 37% of our pupils qualify for Free School Meals and many do not have the life experiences that many people take for granted. There are a significant number of pupils who start school with a restricted language code, who do not understand basic prepositions and instructions because of the poor start they receive. We need to provide a rich environment of experiences and learning in order for these pupils to have the best start in education possible. Due to their poor language skills many pupils lack a broad vocabulary and understanding.

Closer examination of pupil work gave me a starting point to re-assess our approaches. My conclusions on having scrutinised work were that:

- some forms of non-fiction writing were well covered such as instruction texts and simple recounts
- some areas such as discussion and explanation only had a light touch
- pupils lacked confidence and enthusiasm for writing when they did not have the experience and knowledge to start work.

I wanted to ensure that all pupils had full access to a broad range of text types that could be applied to any subject area or situation, that they had a solid structure that could be internalised and, therefore, easily adapted. As adults when charged with the task of writing something we all like to see something similar so we can use it as a model to give structure to our own writing. I was convinced that using models and talking about them could be a way forward.

Influences

Many years ago, the Vale of Glamorgan had organised a conference by the Literacy specialist Pie Corbett. During his work in schools he had discovered that many pupils

could not retell a traditional story such as Red Riding Hood. To counteract this trend, he developed his *Talk for Writing* technique whereby he would teach children a story which they would internalise using pictures and actions to help them remember the structure. This would give them a basis which they could use to adapt to their own stories. We had taken this back to school and found it was successful in improving the standard of creative writing.

More recently, Pie Corbett has transferred his three step approach to non-fiction writing. I attended a further days training at Ty Dysgu on using this methodology with the non-fiction text types. The overwhelming message delivered by Literacy expert, Ruth Best during that day was the reinforcement of the philosophy that ‘if children cannot say it then they can’t write it’. This was another lightbulb moment and I returned to school intent on making this my mission. I needed to improve standards of writing across the curriculum, and this approach offered a way forward. The school purchased the new manual and I used this to organise a structured approach to my research. My research question was now honed to:

Will adopting Pie Corbett’s ‘Talk for Writing’ improve non-fiction writing across the curriculum for pupils in our school, including for PDG pupils?

My approach

First of all I familiarised myself with the three step process that Pie Corbett advocates, *Imitate, Innovate and Independent Application*.

- At the ‘Imitate’ stage pupils are immersed in the text type to be studied with a wide range of activities covering word and sentence level work before learning a model text type, covering an imaginary situation. The reason

behind this is that the children don't need to concern themselves with accuracy of content, merely structure and language.

- The 'Innovate' stage involves the children using the same structure, good quality phrases and connectives they have learnt to change in order to change the text slightly, again in an imaginary situation so focus is on structure and vocabulary.
- Finally, during the 'Independent Application' stage they apply the structure, vocabulary and connectives embedded during the previous two stages to writing across the curriculum. By now, the structure and vocabulary associated with the text type is so firmly embedded the pupils are ready to tackle a factually accurate piece of work!

Corbett's technique are shown in his book but below is a quick summary

- Imitation, Innovation, Invention
- Story-maps
- Boxing text
- Shared drafts
- Word walls
- Washing lines
- Systematic word and sentence work
- Emphasis on audience
- Formative assessment

It was important that I should take a baseline before commencing my research, so a 'cold task' was necessary. I told the children that they were going to write a discussion text, I gave them the title 'Should children have to stay in school for an

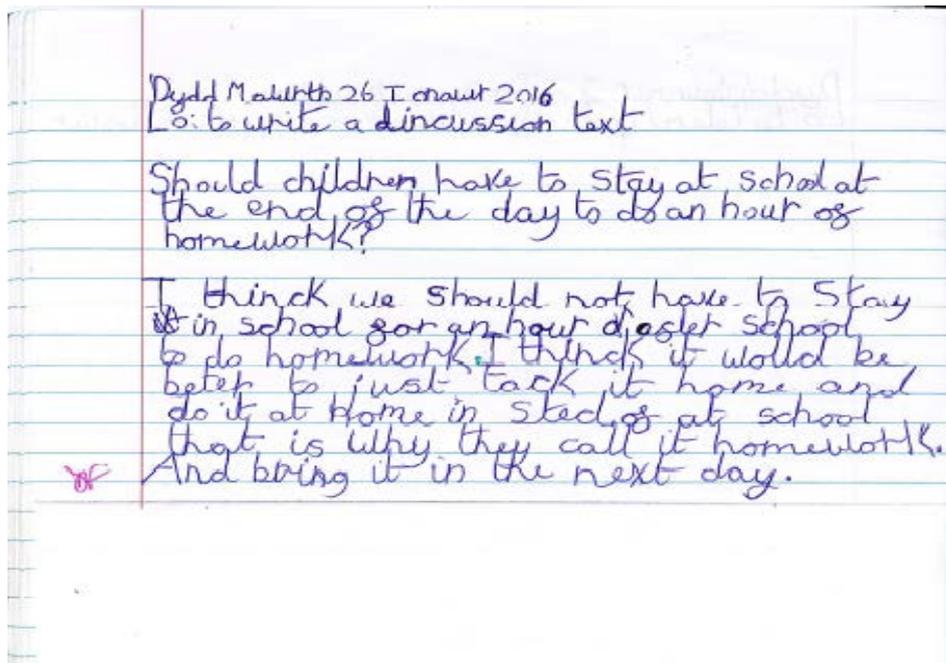
hour after school to do their homework?’ There was much muttering, comments such as ‘I don’t know what to do!’ ‘I don’t know what to write!’ and ‘I can’t do this!!’ were heard from all areas of the classroom. After some persuasion and reassurance that I needed to see what they could do first so that I knew what I needed to teach them, the children started to write. I only gave them a short time so as not to prolong the agony and everyone attempted the task. I questioned them as to how they had felt when I asked them to write without any support, one of the children with Additional Learning Needs said that he ‘just got on with it and felt proud of what he had done’, another boy said ‘I didn’t know what it was but I thought I should just get on with it, but then I felt nervous because I didn’t know if I would get it right.’ The majority of pupils managed a very short amount, about three sentences, and only gave one point of view.

I applied the Imitate process as outlined by Pie Corbett by drawing the discussion text map ‘Should Daleks be allowed to live on Earth?’ on a large piece of paper and began the process of learning it with the class. The class worked together to develop a series of actions for the text map, which they found great fun; a class of 27 Year 5’s acting and speaking as Daleks was hilarious and as they had worked collaboratively when choosing the actions they felt they had ownership of the text which made it easier for them to internalise.

Word level work on the specific phrases followed and even the ALN children could identify and use ‘raging controversy’ accurately. Once the children had learnt the text map, we moved onto using the boxed up planning. Boxing up the text involves the children identifying which part of the text map applies to different areas

of the structure i.e. giving three arguments for and three arguments against the question being discussed. This further clarified the structure of the text in the children's minds.

Cold Task prior to teaching Discussion text



Example of Cross curricular discussion text after Pie Corbett teaching

method.

Dydd Mawrth 17 mai
L.O: to write a discussion text
S.C paragraphs
punctuation
wow words

IS tourism good for Greece?

Since the tourists have been visiting Greece there has been much discussion on whether they should be allowed to carry on or whether it has to stop completely. So after all of the discussion it shall be decided by the Greek economy and most the people in Greece... not supposed to be there.

Our first reason is the tourists are spending money and the more jobs are getting opened for the younger generation. Our second reason is the money is new jobs and the rides in the summer gets a lot of money brought in because they are going on them. not supposed to be there

On the other hand this is why it is bad. Other people suggest that it is bad because they are visiting ancient temples and they are starting to crumble, because they are touching them.

AS a result of having listened to both sides I believe that tourism is good for Greece because having considered that it opens jobs for younger year younger year people and more people get paid, that is should be allowed to carry on.

Use more different punctuation than normal.

It was at this point that I asked the children how they felt about writing now. Could they tell me what was going well and how it would be even better? They identified these areas as to what was going well

- We can use the *wow* words from the text map in our writing.
- Actions help you to learn the text so you can remember how it is written.
- I enjoy showing other classes.
- It helps you to write and you feel more confident.
- Boxing up the text helps with planning.

The children were enjoying using the technique and their ways forward were equally positive:

- I would like to do more types of writing like this.
- I would like to spend more time doing this.

Looking again at their cross-curricular writing I could see definite improvement in the quality of writing. However, I also noticed that, although the pupils were using the genre specific vocabulary and sentence constructions, they were still missing important basic punctuation. As by now, I was working alongside CSCJES as an outstanding teacher of Literacy I sought their advice. They demonstrated that by adding the ‘Kung Fu Punctuation’ moves favoured by Ros Wilson’s Big Writing techniques you could also embed the punctuation at the same time. Another adaptation was that I took to colour coding the different paragraphs of the text map, to assist with writing in paragraphs.

As the Head teacher could see the success the method was having with my class, I was asked to deliver Inset in order to introduce Talk for Writing to the whole school. This was done in the Autumn term 2015 and Talk For Writing books were purchased for each year group. Teaching the text map for Instruction writing (How to trap a Stone Giant.) to a group of teachers was hilarious!

The method was taken back to their classes, I interviewed the teachers after a term to evaluate the effect the technique was having and the responses were clear:

- The text maps introduced language they wouldn't normally use and these, together with the structure was transferred into topic work.
- The children feel empowered to write.
- Children know where to go and there is instantaneous evidence of improvement.

I also interviewed Nicola Robinson, a Year 4 class teacher in more detail. She could see that using Corbett's frameworks gave pupils:

'a starting point because lots of children become very nervous and they seem to close up if they are just asked to write a piece of writing but following a certain structure gives them that confidence'

She could see the merit of having such an approach with young writers because of an emphasis on:

'changing bits in and out from the text that you are doing, giving them the confidence and then also the freedom to put in the bits that they want so it becomes their own piece of writing'

This is reminiscent of T.S.Eliot's observation that:

'Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different. The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from that from which it was torn'

Eliot is pointing to the fact that adult writers often have frameworks they can draw on in writing and that first of all we copy and then get to a stage when we can become independent of our sources. This is the approach signalled by the teachers who worked with Corbett's ideas. The teacher noted that earlier a weather report set without any talk resulted in it taking a week to complete and:

'I can see a real difference in the quality of work that we did using Pie Corbett and the work that we started without that support.'

Data was gathered from the school tracking system, Classroom Monitor, which supports the programme. I looked at the results for non-fiction writing in particular for my class and analysed the results in a number of ways.

Gender.

Gender	Expected progress	Exceeded by April 2016
Boys	100%	50%
Girls	100%	25%

ALN Pupils

75% of ALN pupils have exceeded expected progress; the remainder are making expected progress.

Year 6

FSM pupils	Writing Level	Writing Level
	Oct 2015	June 2016
Pupil 1	4B	5B
Pupil 2	3A	4B
Pupil 3	4A	5B
Pupil 4	4B	5C

We have set about planning out the text types across the Year groups in order to ensure continuity and progression in skills and including this into the scheme of work. I have asked staff what they felt the next steps should be regarding training and they would appreciate more training regarding the non-fiction text types in the Foundation phase and also training on boxing up the text. This will be further developed in the future.

Conclusions and recommendations

1. Carrying out this research has brought into sharp focus the **benefit of providing a structure** to provide support and scaffold children's writing. The quality of writing non-fiction texts has improved both in Literacy and all other subject areas.
2. I have discovered, that the improvement in **writing standards in boys** has improved immensely, they like having a solid foundation that they can use and apply over and over again.
3. Talk 4 Writing has provided children with the **tools, confidence and independence** to write in a greater range of genres.

4. With the introduction of Talk 4 Writing, we have started to establish a foundation on which children can **scaffold and build their thoughts** and ideas into words. It has made writing accessible to all!
5. Children have become more **confident with the process of creating texts** and are excited in anticipation of what they will achieve together and as individuals.
6. It has provided all pupils with a variety of structures.

Lastly, many of my pupils have expressed pleasure in creating shared texts. One child said that creating text maps helped him hold **pictures in his head** so he found it easier to think about using punctuation and other features. Talk 4 Writing takes away the worry of how to do it bringing the focus back to showing what they are thinking and the enjoyment of writing. FSM pupils in particular have benefitted a great deal, all making good progress this year.

My findings support the conclusion of the Education Endowment Foundation's report which states that:

'Talk for Writing contains some features identified in research studies To promote effective learning, including formative assessment, the Use of Teaching assistants, and the emphasis on the links between reading and writing.'

They are less enthusiastic, in that report, about other key features such as gestures for connectives, washing-lines and the rehearsing of texts. However, the fact that the researchers could not find objective evidence of those factors improving performance in the six schools scrutinised, [they sound dismissive of teacher testimony calling it 'subjective perceptions'] may suggest that their evidence base was too limited especially in time-frame. To improve skills there is no quick fix; the stages must be followed thoroughly and accurately. However, provided a solid

foundation is taught and embedded, the pupils in my class have been able to retain structure and use those structures without prompting. On several occasions I have heard pupils in the classroom using the introduction to a persuasive text and applying it across a range of topics without requiring any prompting from me at all! The full effect of this approach will take longer than this research cycle to be fully established.

Bibliography

Corbett, P. [2011] *Talk for writing across the curriculum*, Milton Keynes: Open University.

JudeBrigley.co.uk/blog

Eliot, T.S. [1922] *The Sacred Wood*

Accessed: at <http://www.bartleby.com/200/sw11.html> May 2016

Dockrell, J. Marshall, C. Wyre, D. [2015] *Talk for Writing*, London: Education Endowment Foundation,

McNiff, J. [2002] *Action Research for Professional development*

Accessed: at JeanMcniff.com January 2016