

Book review

Fisher, R., Myhill, D., Jones, S., & Larkin, S. (2010). *Using Talk to support writing*. London: Sage | ISBN 978-1-84920-143-8

As the authors describe in the introduction, "Using Talk to Support Writing" offers a research-based look at writing in the first years of primary education. The book is primarily meant for school teachers, literacy coordinators, teacher trainers and pre-service teachers who want to support children when starting to communicate in writing, but it also supports teachers who want to get launched into classroom based research. Researchers of classroom based writing may find the book very helpful as well.

The authors, all actively involved in the "Talk to Text: Using Talk to Support Writing" research project of the Graduate School of Education at the University of Exeter, focus on the role of talk in different stages of the writing process: before, during and after writing.

The book comprises 8 chapters: (1) Learning to write, (2) Exploring classroom talk through action research, (3) Talk to generate ideas, (4) Writing aloud, (5) Talk into writing, (6) Talk for reflecting on writing, (7) Talking about writing, and (8) Managing talk for writing in the classroom.



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In the **first chapter** Myhill, co-editor of *The Sage Handbook of Writing Development* (2009), gives an illuminating overview of research on writing and writing development at a young age. She brings together insights from both the cognitive approach and sociocultural theory, making clear that the current research project is primarily embedded in the second paradigm: the classroom is a writing community in which there is space for sociocognitive apprenticeships, procedural facilitations and tools, and participation in communities of practice. The author also expands on the differences between talk and text, differences which mature speakers/writers take for granted, but which young writers still have to master. To conclude the chapter, Myhill sketches the state of the art as far as the importance of talk in supporting early writing is concerned. The research project that this publication is based on, is meant to add new data to this domain.

In the **second chapter** Jones expands on the outline of the project "Talk to Text". The main focus of the research is the interface between talking and writing: how talk operates at different points in the writing process. Three key strategic talk-related elements in the writing process are discerned: (1) talk to support idea generation, (2) oral rehearsal to support the formulation of written sentences, and (3) talk about thinking processes during writing. The research project involved six Year 1 or Year 2 'project' classes from five primary schools and two 'comparison' classes in other schools. In each project class six focus children ($N=36$) were selected for detailed observation (representing a balance of both gender and achievement). The teachers of the project classes were fully involved in how the research was set up and conducted. Jones also discusses each type of data: videoed lessons, classroom observations, examples of children's writing and interviews with children.

Fisher, the author of **chapter 3**, covers the subject of talk to generate ideas. Using talk to help children collect and extend ideas is the best known talk-related strategy, as could also be deduced from the teachers' reactions. Fisher discusses a number of idea generation activities, such as 'Role play', 'Drawing on experience', 'Using pictures', 'Using artefacts', and 'Telling others'.

In **Chapter 4** Myhill defines the issue of writing aloud or oral rehearsal as "the movement from ideas in the head to words on the page, the movement from talk to text" and situates it in Hayes and Flower's (1980) 'translating (= creating text) phase'. Myhill first goes into the theory underpinning the concept. She expands on three aspects that might be supported by the use of oral rehearsal: (1) developing expertise in the differing language structures of talk and writing, (2) reducing the cognitive load of writing by partitioning attention to different aspects of a task or by helping memory with the mere uttering aloud of what has to be remembered (cf. telephone number), and (3) supporting the process of creating text. Myhill's exploration of oral rehearsal in the classroom makes clear that it is fairly easily distinguishable because of its different pitch and intonation, and that it is used to compose aloud, to practice shaping text, to foster peer support during writing and co-composition.

Based on analyses of teacher and child talk before and during the writing in a limited number of classes, Jones elaborates on Talk Into Writing in **Chapter 5**. Three key features of metadiscourse are distinguished: (1) strategic talk, i.e. the talk of children when actively engaged in a strategy to support writing itself; (2) evaluative talk, i.e. the talk used to reflect on the talk or the text, and (3) constructive talk, i.e. the talk that focuses on the social and communicative possibilities of talk. The author reveals that most talk is strategic and that children's metatalk varies according to level of achievement. In the second part of the chapter Jones studies the multiple sources four children draw on while composing: each sentence of their compositions is traced back to its original source as far as content and form is concerned: the teacher, a peer, classroom talk, the writer him-/herself. Different children use different sources in different ways, which brings Jones to conclude that more opportunities should be created for shared text construction (talk to generate ideas, cf. Chapter 3, and talk to write aloud, cf. Chapter 4) and evaluative talk.

Chapter 6, written by Larkin, deals with Talk for Reflecting on Writing, the third of the strategic elements of talk for writing. This involves reflection on the process of writing (metacognition) as well as reflection on the product of writing. These activities are known to be difficult with young children, but they are also important for academic success across subject areas. Larkin shows how the project supports the teachers in this respect and she makes clear that the right (and repeated) teacher input and questioning throughout the activity (and not just at the end) together with peer collaboration create opportunities for the slow and gradual process of developing metacognition, even in these young children.

In **Chapter 7** Fisher explores children's talk about writing (N= 36). Although the researcher meets a number of difficulties when interviewing children of a young age, Fisher underlines the importance of giving the pupils a voice by asking questions like "What should good writing look like?" or "What do you find easy/hard about writing?", citing the children's answers and looking for patterns, sometimes expressed quantitatively. As far as the question "How do you know who is a good writer?" is concerned, Fisher observes a noticeable difference between views before and after the project: the focus has shifted from reference to external elements (the teacher's judgement, pupil's behavior) towards the writer's behavior and the writing itself. Regarding the process of learning to write children mention the importance of their own efforts and the help of adults, surprisingly enough most often family members. It is also shown that high achievers and girls tend to rely less easily on themselves than low achievers and boys. The extensive and repeated interviews with the same children throughout the school year led to a classification into two types of young writers, the passive ones (they do not give any indication of self-regulation as far as writing is concerned) and the active ones (they have been actively involved in their own learning-to-write process).

The **final chapter**, by Fisher, is dedicated to "Managing Talk for Writing in the Classroom". Teachers' input together with the examination of video data were drawn

on to formulate ideas about how best to manage talk. Fisher systematically treats the questions that should be answered before the writing task is introduced: What kind of task do I want the children to perform? Which prompt will help the children to focus when looking for content/ideas? How do I organize the change from a talk context (idea generation) to a writing context? How can a whole-class talk be organized? When do I best provide for paired talk? When I group children, do I mix gender, levels of achievement or both? What kind of instructions do I give? What do I stress? How do I scaffold? Fisher gives some important warnings, one of which is particularly relevant: if teacher instructions are focused on neatness and accuracy ("There will be a prize for the neatest letter and the hardest worker"), one cannot expect the children to be concerned about higher order aspects of writing. These findings are very much in line with Verheyden (2010) and Verheyden et al. (2011).

This book is easy to read, easy to use and accomplishes its most important purpose, i.e. a classroom research-based exploration of the uses of talk to support writing. The result is not just a classroom teaching manual, nor a mere research report, but a combination of both. It offers a nice balance between the discussion of how to teach writing and how to inquire into the way that writing is taught, which makes it primarily interesting for literacy coordinators, teacher trainers and school teachers, especially when they have the ambition to do action research on writing, but also for researchers who want to start with classroom based research in primary education.

To the *teacher who wants to support the writing processes* of his/her pupils the book provides a respectable number of easily adaptable ideas for every day practice. Moreover, at the end of every chapter a "Summary of points for the class teacher" brings together the most important elements, most often in do's and don'ts, e.g.: "Make sure your introduction emphasizes what you want children to concentrate on." And finally, most of the chapters offer sample lesson plans (designed by primary school teacher A. Wood), and discussions about how the plan worked out in a real classroom.

This book also supports *the teacher who wants to inquire* about the way he/she teaches writing. The authors clearly stress the importance of involving teachers in classroom based research, arguing that this involvement empowers these professionals. Without this kind of involvement, teachers become mere animators of a curriculum designed by others through strategies developed by others and disseminated in a top-down model. Therefore, each chapter contains indications for teachers about the possibilities and limitations of doing inquiries themselves and/or in close cooperation with a research team. The chapters are also permeated with reflection triggering questions for teachers under the heading "What do you think?", e.g.: "Who does the most talking in your class - you or the children?". "Suggested reading" at the end of every chapter is also a great help for this inquiring teacher.

And indeed, the book can also be inspiring for the *researcher* who wants to study teaching (writing) to young children. Researchers, who usually find it hard to collect naturalistic classroom data when young children are involved, can learn a lot

from the set up of this intervention study: the close cooperation between researchers and teachers allowed "the expertise of academic researchers to inform and be informed by professional insight" (p.21), but also from the way this project deals with data collection and data analysis. The authors provide for all kinds of caveats and offer bright solutions for the daily problems classroom based research is confronted with. The mixed method research, a combination of quantitative and qualitative analyses can also be of interest to the researcher of (writing) development. Qualitative microgenetic analyses embedded in a framework of quantitative analyses, get more relevance and more explanatory power. However, to find out more about the effectiveness of the newly developed activities that use talk to support writing, researchers will have to look elsewhere. "Using Talk to Support Writing" does not provide for this information in a systematic way. Appendix 1 of this book though contains "The research Report - Talk to Text: Using Talk to Support Writing", which is a rather limited overview of data collection, ways to analyze data, and some descriptive data.

"Using Talk to Support Writing" is an interesting contribution to the applied writing literature in that it bridges the gap between applied writing research and classroom activities in primary education. The microgenetic analyses of the writing lessons, including the children's products, disentangle the ways in which talk supports writing and what exactly happens when children use talk before, during and after writing.

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