



Case Study – Feeling the impact

Maurice Leahy, teacher at Carlton Hill Primary School in Brighton, studied one child’s writing over a year to see the impact that Talk for Writing made.

At the beginning of the 2015 academic year, Carlton Hill began the two year process of embedding Talk for Writing throughout the school. This journey involved training on three INSET days (one involving the entire school team); 6 days training for project leads (teachers in YR, Y4 and the assistant headteacher); and 6 staff meetings led by the project lead team.

At the beginning of the second year of the process (Sept 2016), many teachers were talking enthusiastically about the quality of the writing at the start of the term, and were impressed by the variety of writing skills that children had brought forward into the new school year.

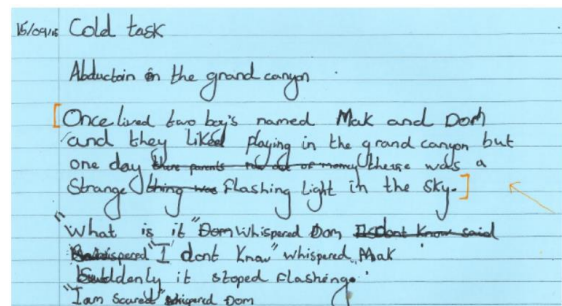
In a one form entry school, it is not straightforward to show the impacts of Talk for Writing purely through data because:

- at the beginning of 2014 a new and more challenging curriculum was introduced;
- at the beginning of 2014 a new assessment system was introduced to meet the needs of the new curriculum;
- in a one form entry school, cohorts can vary and often have very different needs and challenges.

Therefore, it seemed sensible to look carefully at an individual’s writing across a year, to see if the Talk for Writing approach was raising attainment. The writing used for this case study is by Marko, a Year 5 boy. He is an EAL child (of Bulgarian origin) who speaks fluent English.



Analysis of one child’s writing over a one year period



To begin with, let’s ignore the uneven presentation and focus on the content. At the start of the year, Marko had the confidence to undertake an extended piece of unaided writing, referred to as a cold task. Full versions of all compositions are available in the appendix. The opening paragraph demonstrates some ambitious initial ideas (‘Grand Canyon’) that are not developed with any detail. The opening sentence does not quite make grammatical sense (‘Once lived two boys ...’) and it relies on co-ordinating conjunctions (‘and’ and ‘but’) to link ideas together. Marko has also attempted speech. Although he understands that speech marks envelop the direct speech and that a new line is required for when a new character speaks, he is not yet using punctuation to separate direct speech from a reporting clause. Vocabulary choices show some ambition (‘flashing’ and ‘whispered’) but there is little variety as both of these words are repeated within the passage.



On the way up the big steep hill they suddenly got knocked out ~~after~~ saw a big 3D circle but what was it? As soon as they got to the top but of know they got knocked out by something after a while they found them selves stuck to a metal board ~~where~~ were they?

In the above passage from the same piece of work, it is clear that Marko has some awareness of cohesive devices ('On the way up...', 'As soon as'). However, in both excerpts the punctuation within sentences and the punctuation showing sentence boundaries is sometimes absent.

I enjoyed this story and I noticed that you are very good with your speech verb: 'whispered', 'boomed', 'shouted'.

Please rewrite this paragraph in sentences.
 On the way up the steep hill they saw a huge giant 3D circle but what was it? As soon as they got to the top out of know where they got knocked out by something! After a while they found themselves stuck to a metal board where were they?
 Accurate sentences - well done!

As part of every writing unit, children leave a blank page opposite their writing to revisit their work after feedback from the teacher. Children respond to orange 'ways forward' with their 'purple polishing pens'. Marko has been able to respond to the marking code and tighten up his grammar. This revisiting happens two or three times in every unit and allows children to pause and refine their skills, as opposed to carrying on and making the same mistakes.

18/11/15
 Hot task
 The Fire Fox
 This story is unsafe. I shall tell you, but perhaps you should not tell anyone else.
 In the west of a forbidden island there was a colossal volcano. Although the volcano was active there was diamonds still growing on it. No one ever dared to pick one of the diamonds until the young traveler came. Great setting!

Towards the end of the Autumn term, Marko's writing is more controlled. This hot task is an independent piece of writing, following a three-week unit on 'Warning Stories'. Sentences are clearly demarcated and there is evidence of deliberate variety – a punchy, short opening

sentence ('This story is unsafe.') and an extended fronted adverbial ('In the west of a forbidden island ...'). The setting is far more developed than the example from earlier in the year. There is still no punctuation within sentences.

From across the land a brave warrior called Beowulf had arrived. "I will kill the beast!" Roared Beowulf. "I promise!" The Danes gathered around the King and started a discussion. "Should we trust him?" asked a warrior. "Of course!" whispered the King. "You will come to our banquet hall tonight to slay the monster" Announced the King, pointing at Beowulf. Beowulf agreed and they went to the banquet hall.

This is a cracking version of the story. Great variety of sentence openers too.
 Please write these speech sentences again. Can you get punctuation 100% correct and add 'stage directions' to each one?
 "I will kill the beast!" Promised Beowulf, waving his sword.
 "Should we trust him?" Questioned a noble man.
 "Of course," answered King. Hrothgar.

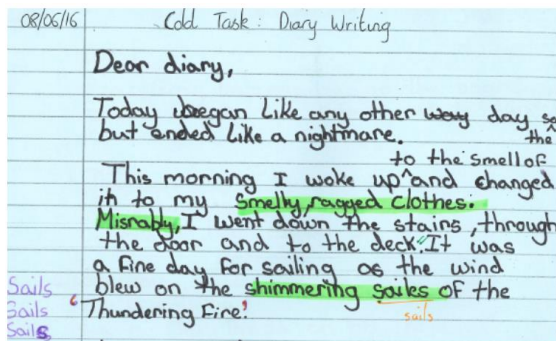
In this passage from a cold task in the spring term, it is evident that Marko is starting to use some punctuation within sentences ('From across the land, a brave warrior...'). The punctuation within speech marks is also beginning to appear although it is far from consistent. Adverbial chunks appear again ('...pointing at Beowulf') adding depth and detail to the text, and speech verbs ('roared', 'asked', 'whispered' and 'announced') are varied and carefully chosen, in contrast to the example from the start of the year.

After the wise man arrived, the chaos started. He had summoned skeleton warriors, who were very mighty, and dragons as scary as moss. In less than a minute, the village was elaborated from the fires and the flames, that were as frightening as nightmares. There were screams that filled everyone's heart in terror and newborn baby's cry, which were like a warning for all people. Of course they had no mercy. Beowulf like usual, stepped up to rise to the man's power.

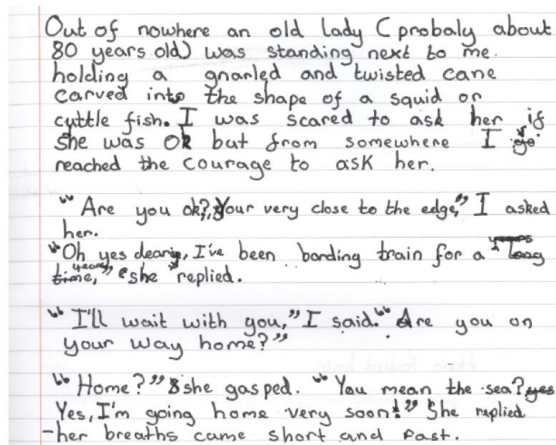
By the end of the unit, Marko is starting to writing with the audience in mind. He decided to write a prequel to Beowulf, explaining how Beowulf became a hero. He used the main character from the class text, but everything else is his own work. Here the writing is full of



excitement and tension. Vocabulary choices (chaos, fires, flames, terror, nightmares) are starting to build on each other to create an unsettling atmosphere. In terms of grammar, punctuation is often used to separate clauses, but more importantly it is something that demands to be read.



Towards the end of the year, Marko continues to write with a sense of audience – the opening sentence (of this unaided piece) builds tension and expectation. Punctuation within sentences is becoming more and more frequent. Writerly phrases ('today began like any other', 'a fine day for sailing') and well-chosen noun phrases ('smelly, ragged clothes', 'shimmering sails') are a consistent feature.



In this final excerpt, written late in the summer term, Marko is beginning to use parentheses (both brackets and dashes are used) to add further detail to his work. It is worth contrasting the passage of speech here to that at the beginning of this case study. M has finally got to grips with the rules of speech but, more importantly, the writing seems to capture the rhythm of a real conversation. The reader is

able to learn about the two characters as the dialogue progresses.

Marko's work at the start of the year was lively and he clearly had a vivid imagination. By the end of the year, his ideas are realised more fully, with more secure use of grammar (though there is still work to be done!) and an eye for detail, which elevates the writing. Marko's choice of vocabulary becomes more creative but also more precise and this is a result of Marko becoming immersed in different styles of writing across the year.

The battle over presentation may not have been won, but the content and organisation have certainly progressed.

What did Marko think about his own learning?

I showed Marko his books and asked him if anything had helped him over the year. Here are a few of his key points:

- "Innovating – when you innovate, you already have good story to start with, and you can add to it – when you've done this a bunch of times you can start magpieing from everywhere – the bits you like – and put them into your writing."
- "I like the sentence games – adding 'buts' and 'ands' and learning the conjunctions for complex sentences – building sentences up using chunks – it helps it all make sense!"
- "The part I enjoy the most is the drama – it's fun and you can be characters in the story, which helps you understand the story better."

I asked if learning passages of text helped in any way.

- "When I wrote the story of Grendel I used a whole chunk of Beowulf to get me started."

I asked him if he felt his work had improved.

- "I feel more confident with sentences... organising paragraphs and using words I haven't used before."