



‘Winds in the North West, there’s Talk for Writing coming in, like something is brewing and about to begin...’

A Mary Poppins inspired unit of work in Year 4 at Greengate Junior School, Barrow-in-Furness.

Following Talk for Writing training, Headteacher Sue Jackson invited an enthusiastic staff to plan a unit of work based on a creative hook and quality texts. This case study features a unit of work in Year 4 based on Mary Poppins and exemplifies some key aspects of the Talk for Writing teaching sequence in action. The unit followed a visit to the theatre production of Mary Poppins.

‘Engagement is the precursor to all literacy learning,’ Brian Cambourne

On the first morning of the unit, the children entered the classroom to discover many umbrellas floating from the ceiling and artefacts from the story displayed. Class teacher, Elenor Chetwyndd-Knagg had designed this ‘hook’ to arouse children’s curiosity and engage them right from the start. (The umbrellas also led to some science work and fair tests based on air resistance!)



was displayed so that it could be referred to during the first week. At the end of the week the children dressed up in assembly to retell the model.

Reading as a reader

The school uses Power of Reading texts so finding other snippets and examples of similar stories, such as Nanny McPhee, from a strong literature spine gave children a broad frame of reference to support innovation. These were read to the children and explored in shared and guided reading. As homework, the children were asked to watch the original film – Elenor was keen to develop reader comprehension based on comparisons between the story on stage, screen and book. This was displayed as a Venn diagram with the children’s thoughts attached as to what might be the same and different about each version.



Imitation

Elenor chose the incident of the tea party on the ceiling with Uncle Albert to learn as a model text and wrote an abridged version from the story and adapted it so that it included aspects that the children needed to focus on following the cold task. The class story map



Short-burst writing

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Opportunities for writing during the first week allowed children to limber up as writers in preparation for innovation. After creating chalk drawings based on their own imaginary land the children jumped into their picture and described the setting before writing about it. These short pieces of writing were edited and improved following two feedback sessions.



Persuasive letters asking Mary Poppins were also written in role as the family. This developed a sense of the character's point of view and generated discussion about whether she would be persuaded to return or not.



Reading as a writer

Elenor also felt that the vocabulary was enhanced as the children explored words such as 'inquisitive', 'incandescent' and 'crumpets' within the context of the story and 'magpied' words and phrases. As a result, more ambitious vocabulary such as 'disconcertedly' was used in their writing.

EAL learners with IEPs where there is no reading at home, benefitted greatly from a focus on speech and vocabulary. The use of action 'mnemonics' in retelling the story and knowing the meaning enhanced the reading and the writing. Sentence structure was strengthened and verb tenses which were still an issue for these children were also areas that became a focus through the unit.

Grammar and spelling

Time spent teaching and developing adverbial starters and sentence openers generally meant less repetition in children's writing across the board. For weaker writers, they were on more 'solid ground' and able to extend sentences more confidently. Spellings and Grammar features were displayed and added to throughout the unit.





Knowing how to start

Where to start writing and what to write wasn't an issue for any of the children as everyone had something to say. Writing had become less daunting for everyone and stronger writers moved even further forward.

Less time was taken up with planning and time spent was more finely tuned and focused. Elenor felt that planning 'wasn't as ominous' and that there was an element of 'letting go and allowing it to be driven and directed by the children's needs.' Planning became a working document that had flexibility and was added to, altered and amended throughout the unit.

Elenor felt Talk for Writing had given her more freedom and that the approach had provided teachers with a refreshing new way of looking at the teaching sequence for writing. She said "I'm enjoying teaching more and she wondered 'why haven't we always done this? It's common sense.'"

The next unit was Non-Fiction Information writing based on The Star Dragon. On my next visit the Star Dragon had already made an appearance, taking a selfie, scratching messages on paper and leaving a trail of stars and rose petals in his wake. The children enthusiastically told me what had happened and orally retold the adapted text.

From such an original, creative and inspiring beginning there can only be exciting times ahead!