



Case Study: Talk for Writing and Kensuke's Kingdom

Janet Gough, Primary Matters editor and former Assistant Headteacher and English Subject Leader at Cockerham Parochial School in Lancashire, explains how to use Talk for Writing techniques to embed language skills within the context of the novel *Kensuke's Kingdom*.

Whatever National Curriculum comes along, teaching writing is teaching writing. Although the teaching of spelling, vocabulary, punctuation and grammar is now explicitly required in the new curriculum, it is not new. *Grammar for Writing* was published in 2001 and the principles behind that document still hold water. Research shows that teaching discrete exercises which are unrelated to anything else is not effective and results in children writing in a formulaic way, ticking boxes to show they have included specific features, regardless of purpose and audience. So how to embed these skills within an engaging and meaningful context?

Talk for Writing's threefold and cumulative approach equips children with basic skills and empowers them as readers and writers. Writing skills are improved and extended by imitation, innovation and invention. Immersing children in a specific text (or genre) and teaching what they need to learn within that text can have stunning and long-lasting results with those basic skills thoroughly learned, discussed and applied.

There are many excellent novels available which lend themselves to this method – this article explores a few of the possibilities offered by *Kensuke's Kingdom* by Michael Morpurgo. There are several ways to hook the children's interest from the outset – a Google earth image locating an Indonesian island, an island collage as big as the wall, a Japanese display and food tasting, a model of a yacht ... the potential to exploit this excellent story is limited only by the individual teacher's imagination! The cold writing task (where children show what they already know about

the type of writing the unit is focusing on) can

be introduced by placing the children in the shoes of someone about to embark on a round-the-world expedition by boat – should they go or should they stay? The skills needed for discussion writing are varied and how they tackle this cold task will allow teachers to identify the areas the children need to work on and whole class and individual targets can be set.

Michael was there when the phone call came a week later. Michael knew it was his father. His mother said very little, so Michael couldn't understand what was going on, not until Michael sat down afterwards and told Michael.
"Michael sounds different, Michael. Like Michael very old self, like he was when Michael first knew him. Michael's found a place. 'Just pack Michael's stuff and come,' says Michael. Fareham. Somewhere near Southampton. 'Right on the sea,' Michael says. 'There's something very different about Michael, I'm telling you.'
Michael's father did indeed seem a changed man. Michael was waiting for Michael when Michael got off the train, all bright-eyed again and full of laughter. Michael helped Michael with the cases.

Once the story has begun, extracts from the text may be adapted and used to pinpoint and illustrate the specific aspect of English to be taught, for example, pronouns can be concealed and suitable replacements discussed (see picture on left).

The possessive apostrophe



- The sailing lessons of Barnacle Bill.
Barnacle Bill's sailing lessons.
- The blue cap belonging to Mum.
Mum's blue cap.
- The football belonging to Eddie.
Eddie's football.
- The decision made by the father of Michael.
Michael's father's decision.

The possessive apostrophe can be explored using examples from the text which have been identified and suggested by the children.



Tense - what fits?

I tried **potatoing** in another cave but it **pineappled** dreadfully. Once I had **cabbaged** it was full of bats, I **mushroomed** at once. Wherever I **strawberried** the mosquitoes always **lettuced** me out soon enough. It got so bad that I **peared** the coming of every night. I **tomatoed** out aloud in my misery as I **carroted** and **cucumbered** at them. I **peppered** for the mornings, for the cool of the wind on my hilltop. Here I would **apple** my day **turnipping** out to sea and **beetrooting**.

Sections of the text may be adapted to ensure children understand what consistent tense looks and sounds like.

Start with...
an 'ed' 'ing' or an 'ly' word

Kensuke met the orang-utans.

Grammar warm-up games can be played using basic sentences from the text and improving them. This gives the teacher plenty of opportunities to identify children who are still grappling with understanding and guided groups can be structured to meet individual needs.

Vocabulary development is easy with a novel such as this and revisiting and using words throughout the unit of work results in children confidently using the ambitious language of the story in their own writing. This is something which seems to stay with them – often words crop up in subsequent writing later. Whilst it would not be possible or a good use of time to learn the whole story by heart, it is certainly practical to internalise short key sections, and then discuss and delve into them. A toolkit of possible ingredients for their own versions can then be co-constructed with the class. Planning and writing in partners always seems to be an effective way of starting their writing, and sharing ideas with their peers leads to plenty of 'magpieing'. Children often love this public recognition of themselves as effective writers and it can lead to some outstanding and innovative sentence structures.

Text maps and learning sections by heart, using actions, allows the children to be marinated in the text until they are thoroughly confident with the type of writing, and eager to have a go themselves. Many children confidently adapt stories and write their own versions, but often rise to the challenge of writing a completely new version.

I have taught this unit of work on a number of occasions to Years 5 and 6 and I am always overwhelmed by the success of using these techniques. They turn reluctant writers who lack basic skills into confident and competent children who enjoy writing. These are just a few ideas that this novel offers; there are many more. The story links well to cross curricular writing in history, geography and science and art work can be inspired by the work of Hokusai, mentioned many times throughout the book. The full unit of work can be downloaded from <http://www.teacher-of-primary.co.uk>.