

From Talk to Text:

Effects of Student Dialogue on Developmental Writing in First Graders

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Carter, a seven-year-old boy sits in front of a blank page of his journal. His crayons are haphazardly scattered across his desk; some have even managed to escape, having rolled unnoticed onto the floor below him. His pencil is a chewed stump with the eraser pulled off. He has the look of total concentration, yet his page is blank.

“What can I do to help you get started?” I, (Rosalind, the first author) ask.

Carter shakes himself, almost as if coming out of a dream and asks, “How do you spell grandma?”

As his teacher, I spell the word, yet he still looks blankly into space. “What is it you are trying to say? What story are you trying to tell?”

“I want to write about my grandma, but I don’t...” Carter stops short. “I don’t know how.”

“Tell me what you want to say and I’ll help you.”

Once again, Carter looks at his page and says, “I need to tell my grandma I love her, but...” and at once it hits Rosalind. Grandma had been ill.

“Carter?”

“My grandma died last night... and I don’t know how to write I love you.”

Carter is trying to write to his grandmother. Frustrated, he knows he has something important to say, but the words will not come. Like many first graders, Carter has rich, involved stories in his head. Children in the early primary grades are capable of speaking in grammatically clear, creative sentences and can orally tell a multistep story, however, children often struggle when trying to write these stories down (Connelly, Barnett, Dockrel, & Tolmie, 2009).

Anyone who has worked with first graders has most likely observed rich oral language and children at this age typically are quite verbally expressive. We, as teacher researchers, have often observed a sense of disconnect between children's ability to tell stories orally and their ability to express this rich language in their writing. This study explores the connection between first graders' writing and their oral language.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Literacy processes are interconnected and holistic (Cambourne, 1988). The processes of talking, listening, reading and writing develop simultaneously, creating an interweaving support system. Increasing the effectiveness of one system increases and strengthens the effectiveness of others (Connelly et al., 2004; Kielwer, n.d.), yet these systems all work to create meaning as a method of interacting with our world (1988).

Oral language is the basis upon which other language systems are built (Roskos, Lenhart & Tabors, 2004). Learning about the function and meaning of language, as well as the meanings of words, is achieved through oral language, which transfers to reading and writing. The effect of oral language on writing is much deeper than many have suspected. It is believed that students who have a high competency in oral language have a tendency to become more proficient writers. The inverse is also true: students who struggle with oral language also have a tendency to struggle with writing (Cambourne, 1988).

Although oral and written systems are highly correlated, writing is a more complex task than speaking. Oral language is a naturally occurring process through growth and maturation, while writing is developed through direct instruction (Cambourne, 1988; Roskos et al., 2004). Writing requires an integration of cognitive and physical skills that must work together to create

meaningful text. Typically oral language develops before written language (Rhyner, 2009) and thus is more mature before formal writing instruction begins.

One of the greatest challenges is transitioning children from learning about print to learning how to use print (Stribling & Kraus, 2007), which involves guiding a child who is just learning about letter formation into the next step of understanding that writing can be used to communicate. The physical processes of writing, such as mechanics, penmanship, and spelling also have a tendency to complicate the writing process. Stribling and Kraus (2007) found that there is a direct relation between a student's mechanics and his or her content. As content increases, mechanics have a tendency to decrease. As emergent writers become more fluent with their writing, less energy is needed to complete the writing task as more of the physical aspects of writing become stored in muscle memory (Carroll, 2004). These processes then can become more automatic. The energy previously required for the physical aspects of writing can then be applied to higher level writing concepts, such as composition. While children may be able to communicate orally, writing may still pose difficulties and challenges thus, the scaffolding of writing through the use of oral language may reduce the risk of failure (Connelly et al., 2009). In this study, we examine how scaffolding writing with oral language affects the quantity and quality of first grade writing.

METHODS

This mixed methods action research project was designed to understand oral and written language development of the children in Rosalind's first grade classroom.

This study poses the following questions:

- Does incorporating oral language into the writing workshop time increase quantity of writing produced by first graders?

- Does incorporating oral language into the writing workshop time increase the quality of writing produced by first graders?
- What language supports do first graders need in order to take risks in their writing?

Participants

This study was conducted in a small town in a Western state, estimated population: 983. The community is mostly an agriculturally based economy, and the median household income is slightly higher than the state average. Fourteen children (11 boys, three girls) participated in this study, ranged in age from 6.1 years to 7.5 years old when the study commenced. The ethnic diversity of the school is very low, with the majority of race reporting white (over 90%). The remaining population reported Hispanic and Native American origins. Of those students recruited, many had attended the same preschool and kindergarten programs.

Data Collection and Analysis

Qualitative data collection methods included field notes, interviews with children and teacher experts, and classroom observations. Sample interview questions are summarized in Appendix A. All interviews were transcribed by one member of the research team. The data were analyzed through qualitative techniques (Glesne, 2011). The analysis was an exhaustive process in which student speech, interviews, and writing samples were coded for themes. The research team collaborated through the data analysis process as well as used diagramming to arrive at key themes in the research.

Quantitative data collection methods included analyzing a pre-treatment and post-treatment design in which we analyzed sentence length before and after the intervention of incorporating oral language into writing workshop. Data about the student writing were obtained during the students' writing workshop instruction's regular journal writing class. At the onset of

the study, the children were given journal prompts and were allowed to talk freely about the prompts without instruction. After two weeks the students were given instruction on how to have a ‘productive discussion.’ Concepts such as speaking clearly, eye contact, and how to listen were taught and practiced.

After a time period of two months, the student writing samples were collected (pre- and post-study) and analyzed for predetermined criteria. These numbers were collected by taking a physical count of journal writing samples. Each entry was assessed for average number of ideas in their writing journal writing, average number of words per sentence, and average number of sentences per writing. (Average here indicates mean.) Due to the small population, the researchers used only descriptive statistics in this study. The data collection took place over the course of the 2014-2015 academic school year.

FINDINGS

Oral language and its connections to writing were evident throughout this study. Children spoke with passion, honesty, and sometimes, just plain silliness. But throughout it all, they spoke to express themselves. This behavior was the key. This expressive behavior was one main factor that we monitored to see if students would increase their writing ability.

The results of this study indicate that by allowing students to implement oral language strategies during writing workshop, both quantity and quality of writing were improved. In addition, student content was improved due to increased risk taking during writing workshop.

While it was evident to the teacher researchers that the inclusion of oral language did have positive effects on student writing, the students had mixed feelings about its usefulness. Cody said that talking before writing, “helps you to get ideas and different stuff and then you get better ideas.” Lewis indicated that talking “helps me write and makes me think.” Some students

Key:

A.I. = Average ideas per writing

A.S.L. = Average sentence length (number of words used in sentences)

N.S. = Average number of sentences per writing

* Not every child is represented in the graph as some children joined the study after the onset of the first two weeks.

Although there was this slight increase in sentence length, we observed there to be a vast improvement in overall quality of student writing, as demonstrated in the next section.

Quality of Student Writing

Quality of student writing was highly correlated to the quality of oral language. Students who had more developed speaking skills typically had more advanced writing skills and the reverse was true as well. As demonstrated in Figure 1 (below), one student's (Cody's) lack of oral language skills affected his writing skills. In talking, Cody had a tendency to leave out articles (*a* and *the*) and verbs. Notice he does the same when writing.

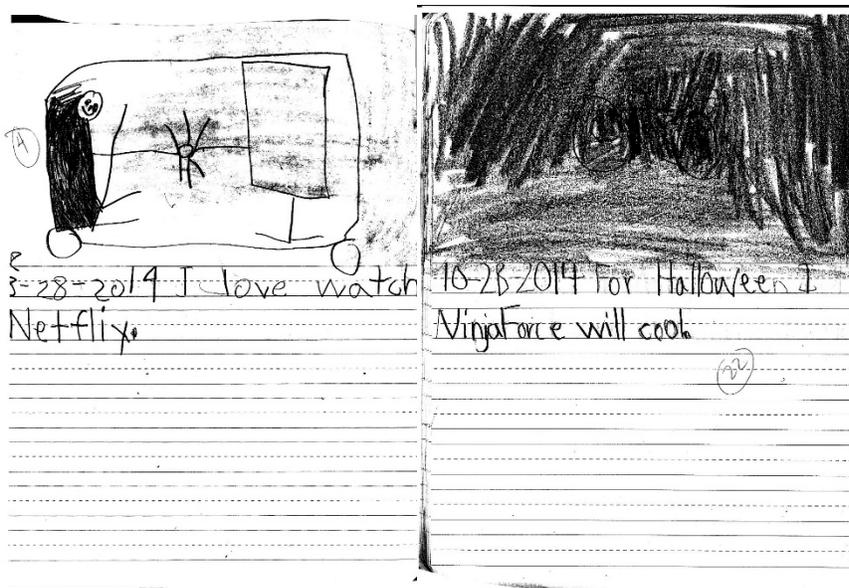


Figure 1: Cody's writing

Cody was able to communicate content, but as with his oral speech, he left out important transition words. Because Cody has not mastered them orally, it appears that there is no foundation in which to incorporate transition words into his writing.

The students, by speaking aloud, utilized a richer vocabulary and use more sophisticated language—words they knew how to say, but did not necessarily know how to write. The more the students utilized high level vocabulary in their talk, the more willing they were to use these words in their writings. This process of discussion allowed students to build their mental lexicon. For example, Piper’s writing in the first part of this study was simplistic, using only one sentence. But as she spoke about her ideas more she became more willing to write more expressively and expand upon her ideas.

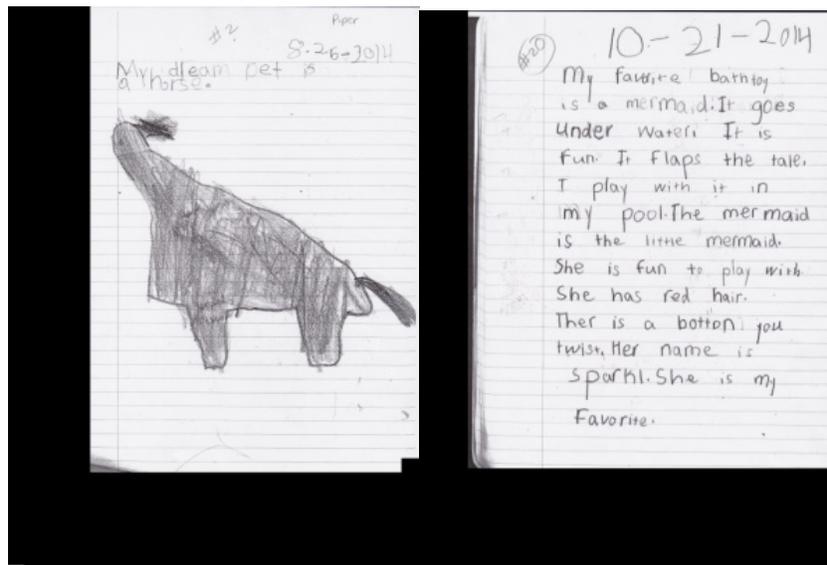


Figure 2. Piper’s writing at beginning of the study (left) and after two months (right).

By talking aloud, the students were practicing their stories aloud, which became a form of verbal prewrite. This verbal prewrite allowed the students to form their stories in their heads, and when they wrote the stories down, they used many of the same words they used from their

conversations. Words such as *monster truck*, *treasure*, *bearded dragon*, *alien*, and *boomerang* were observed in their writings (See Figure 3). The students did not get these words from instruction; these words came from the students as they talked about personal experiences.

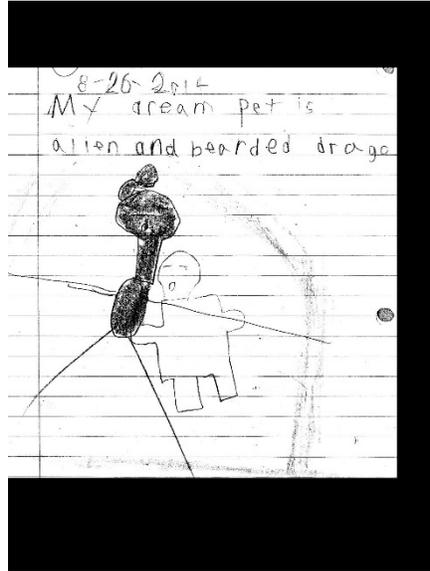


Figure 3. Dexter's use of bearded dragon

Scaffolding Talk with Writing to Encourage Risk Taking

The children of this study used oral language as a means of expressing their feelings and sharing their experiences, often without inhibition. When students were allowed to talk freely and felt safe to do so, they spoke on a variety of topics with great depth of understanding. When writing was scaffolded with talk, students seemed to feel more comfortable and capable to take risks.

Below are two examples of children's rich discussions about some complex issues. In this first example, notice how Rick and Dexter are highly expressive about their experiences at the dentist's office in which they had to show bravery.

Rick: *"I need to be brave when I am at the dentist. I was real brave once."*

Dexter: “*Did you get a shot?*” (Points fingers into his mouth, makes a loud ‘umm’ noise and sticks his fingers into his mouth.)

Rick: “*No, but they pulled at my teeth. Like this*” (Rick put his fingers into his mouth and makes an ‘uggh’ sound.)

This simple conversation reveals many things. The students are discussing an experience that was scary for them. When the students did not know the words to express themselves, they compensated by acting out what they meant to say.

First graders are capable of discussing deep thoughts and feelings. Consider this writing by Emma. Even with her limited ability to express herself, she can discuss her unsettled background.

Emma: (unintelligible)... *the momma pig said it was the momma pig, then momma pointed at the little pig and they were actually the parent momma (unintelligible) was actually the pig’s mom, but momma didn’t ever come back, because the momma pig didn’t want them anymore.*

This child is using a story to express personal feelings that she is unable to communicate or voice because the feelings are too raw. The “mama pig didn’t want them anymore” gives evidence that she has had traumatic experiences in the past and she is able to voice this through her journal. This is a huge load for a young child to bear, but through oral language and storytelling, she is able to voice an experience she may not have otherwise had the language to express.

Although we observed this risk taking in children’s talk, we wondered how students could also take risks in their writing. By incorporating times in which students could talk with a

partner, we observed that students' topic choices were expanded. The social influence of peers seemed to have a positive effect on helping students to choose a topic.

Dylan and Dexter were partners on October 23, 2014. The topic they were discussing was, 'My favorite thing.' Dexter spoke about his motorcycle and wrote about it. Dylan wrote about Peyton Manning. Cody, from another group, spoke about his dog, but then he wrote about the 49ers (see Figure 4). Cody was seated nearby and was able to overhear Dylan and Dexter's conversation. Since Cody rarely writes about football, or sports in general, in his journal, it seems reasonable to assume that overhearing the conversation was helpful in choosing a topic.



Figure 4: Dexter, Dylan, and Cody's Writing

Student growth throughout the study was evident. Student writing became more detailed and creative. Consider these examples from Gabe (See Figure 5). Gabe would be considered an average student with a great deal of creativity. When he felt safe and was able to take risks, he channeled much of this cleverness into his writing.

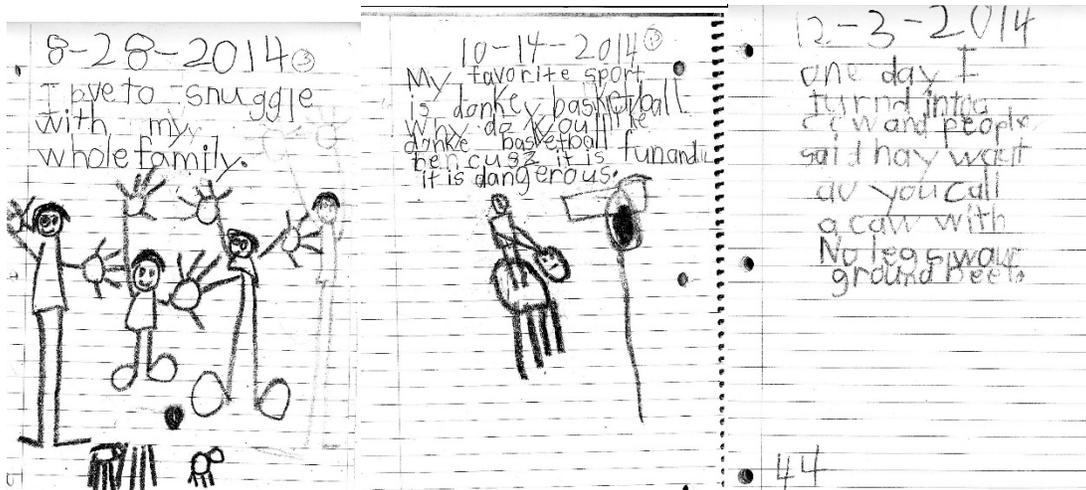


Figure 5: Gabe's Writing

One challenge we observed was the difficulty caused by spelling. Through the course of learning to write, the class agreed that it was acceptable to use a word even if they did not know how to spell it. The students were instructed to “take their best shot” and Rosalind provided assistance to fix spelling later. Some students did become so fixated on spelling that they would be unable or unwilling to write until they had the correct spelling. Occasionally, by the time the students were able to get the correct spelling, they would forget the content of their writing.

DISCUSSION

Oral language and writing skills are essential to the success of school students (National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges, 2003). While seemingly different, and historically treated as such, research is beginning to better understand the connection between these two skills (Connelly et al., 2009). It is believed that the effective use of oral language can lead to stronger readers and writers (Shanahan & Lonigan, 2012). In other words, “good talk leads to good writing” (National Council of Teachers of English, n.d.).

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between oral language and writing. If students can talk about their writing, they can begin to utilize what they say into what

they write. (Connelly et al., 2009). However, it must be noted that not just any talk will do. Talk needs to be scaffolded, structured, and directed to be of educational value.

In addition to talk being scaffolded, children need to be free to take risks in their writing. Cambourne's (1988) approximations concept addresses children's needs to take risks in safe environments. Rosalind structured her writing workshop in ways that encouraged students to take risks. By focusing more on content over conventions, students felt safe to implement rich vocabulary and try out writing ideas. In this study, student writing was not mechanically perfect. However, throughout the course of this study, errors decreased. Students were corrected on issues such as sentence structure, use of margins, and punctuation as they wrote and as it was seen necessary. The development of writing skills was viewed and treated as a process, not something that had to be perfect each time. This decreased stress offered multiple teaching opportunities and taught concepts in context.

The approximated environment provided a context for students to develop content. Not only did ideas become richer, but sentence length and average number of sentences increased writing after the implementation of scaffolded discussion. Discussion allowed students to formulate and process ideas in their heads. This process helped the students organize the words they wish to use and allowed for oral practice of the writing. The use of *oral vocabulary* became infused with *writing vocabulary* as students strove to include words that they talked about into their writing.

Discussion of ideas increases motivation for students. Many students were much more willing to write if they were able to talk about what they plan to write about. It took direct instruction ensure that student discussion stayed on topic and the transition from talking time to writing time took a great deal of patience, modeling and reinforcement. Writing time was not

always quiet time. Motivation also increased when writing became viewed as a social task rather than an isolated, individual assignment.

Educators have long known that kids like to talk. Talking is what allows children to share ideas, thoughts, feelings, and insights. Talk is the easiest way for kids to demonstrate what they know (McDonagh & McDonagh, 2008), and if teachers can latch on to this natural tendency of talking, then perhaps we can create a stronger base for teaching writing. Writing, this amazing skill, allowing us to express ourselves, from our mundane day to day life to life changing events, like a young boy writing to his grandmother to tell her he loves her, just like Cody.

FURTHER RECOMMENDATIONS

Talking as a writing support can be a very useful tool. Students come to school prepared to talk and they like to engage in talking. These skills are more developed than writing and when used successfully for writing development. However, talking to write is only effective if the talk is purposeful. Young children need to be taught how to talk in a manner that will support their writing, this will not come naturally. The process needs to be modeled and practiced. Below are some further suggestions how to make talk an effective scaffold for writing.

- Clear expectations need to be set; children need to understand that discussion has a purpose. Talk to write time is a time to gather thoughts and plan what we are going to write. Many times we found that children would wander off the topic and forget that this discussion was part of the writing task.
- Make sure your classroom environment supports student talk. Desks should be arranged facing each other or there should be a space in which students can sit and face one another. Students need to be able to see and hear one another. The setting should also have a sense of ‘this is work time, not play time.’ Be

prepared, classrooms will get noisy! Some students may not be able to function with the higher noise level. The noise also builds momentum and classroom control could easily get out of hand. Set your expectations and review them often.

- Teachers should model and practice what is expected. Throughout the process of this study we asked students to practice talking techniques. If we wanted to increase eye contact, we practiced eye contact independently of the writing lesson and then incorporated that aspect into the writing workshop time. This took a great deal of time to master.
- Children need to be encouraged to interact and talk to each other- at the appropriate times. Talking is a skill and it needs to be practiced. As children work on increasing oral language through exchanging ideas and thoughts, it will transfer into their writing.
- Most importantly, have patience. This is a process and takes time to master. Practice, guidance, and patience are the keys to helping children use their natural inclinations to talk to increase their writing skills.

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Appendix A

Interview questions

Questions asked of teachers, physical therapists, and occupational therapists

1. Do you notice if children who have a tendency to struggle communicating ideas orally struggle with writing their ideas down on paper?
2. Do students who have strong verbal skills have a tendency to more skilled writers?
3. Do you observe kids writing like they talk?
4. Do kids adapt to a formal writing language that they only use in writing. (For example do kids write with the same grammar structure that they speak with?)
5. Do you think kids write how they talk?
6. What do you think is the greatest impediment to student writing success/the greatest asset?
7. Have you seen any correlations between oral language skills and writing in your years as a speech therapist?

Questions asked of students:

1. What makes writing hard?
2. What makes writing easy?
3. Does talking about what you are going to write help you write?