SHARED THINKING:

METACOGNITIVE MODELLING IN THE LITERACY HOUR

ABSTRACT

This paper considers evidence from an ESRC funded study of twenty teachers, teaching the literacy hour. In 170 hours of observation only one instance of a teacher modelling her thinking about reading or writing was recorded: and this was unplanned. It is suggested here that, although there should be opportunities for metacognitive modelling within the literacy hour, teachers find it difficult to use these opportunities. Some ideas about the importance of metacognition are reviewed and an example of metacognitive modelling in shared writing is analysed. It is argued that concern for improved performance may cause more attention to be focused on *what* is to be achieved rather than *how*.

Introduction

'The implementation of a literacy hour in small rural schools' was an ESRC funded project, which followed 20 teachers through the first year of the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) (ESRC award R000222608, for further details see Fisher, Lewis and Davis, 2000). The research involved monthly observations of 10 KS1 teachers and 10 KS2 teachers over the first year of the NLS. The project has continued to follow a group of these teachers into the second and third year of their teaching of the literacy hour (see Fisher, 2002). One of the features of practice that the research team sought to observe in classrooms was metacognitive modelling. We hypothesised that the pedagogy of shared reading and writing would provide excellent opportunity for this. We were right that there were opportunities for this to take place but, in more than

170 hours of observation, only one possible instance was recorded. In this paper I intend to consider why metacognitive modelling is judged to be important, give some examples from practice and reflect on possible reasons why these should be so rare.

What is metacognition and why is it considered important?

Metacognition is the consciousness of your own cognitive processes - in other words an awareness of what's going on in your mind while you are doing something. Quicke and Winter (1994) argued that, if children are to become better learners, teachers need to make them aware of the psychological processes entailed in learning. Although such learning may be subconscious at first (Richmond, 1990), children can be helped to think and talk about how they are learning. Indeed, Hall and Myers (1998) claim there is a 'fairly robust evidence that an awareness of one's own understanding, is strongly linked to success.' (p8). Williams (2000) hypothesises that understanding the processes involved in learning will help pupils make conscious decisions about how to tackle tasks in the future. She concludes that, 'enabling them to acquire metacognitive understanding is both emancipatory and empowering' (p3).

Both reading and writing are complex processes in which a range of knowledge and skills are orchestrated to produce text or to make meaning from text. We have long been aware that children who fail to make progress in reading and writing find the putting together of the component parts more difficult than learning each separately. For example Clay (1979) found that the poorest readers tended to do exactly and only what they had been taught and appeared to have become instruction dependent with the result that, although they knew letter sound correspondences, they did not use them efficiently because they used them exclusively. Similarly, Garner (1987) showed that whereas good readers monitor their comprehension of a text, poor or less

experienced readers do not seem to recognise when the text does not make sense. In both these cases an awareness, firstly, of the need to select an appropriate decoding strategy before applying it and, in the second case, that readers should continuously check on their understanding of the text would help these readers.

Modelling metacognition

The literacy hour has brought about an increase in the amount of modelling of reading and writing by teachers. Shared reading and writing are becoming routine parts of literacy teaching time in which teachers can demonstrate how readers and writers go about reading and writing. However, evidence from my research and experience working with teachers seems to show that, whereas modelling the process is normal, modelling thinking is rare. Wray (1994) says that teachers should make their thinking public, that is that they should model their 'strategic thinking'. Hall and Myers (ibid) argue that thinking aloud while modelling is important. Just modelling task completion is insufficient as then ' the strategic activity will be largely unobservable' (p9). Similarly, Corden (2001), discussing his work with teachers on writing, talks of 'developing pupils' strategic repertoires so they can make conscious choices and take control over their own writing' (p40). Thus pupils learn the thinking needed in order to make decisions about their reading and writing in addition to knowledge of literacy and the physical activity required.

It seems to me to be important that metacognitive modelling is used to show the thoughts processes at work rather than (or at least in addition to) instruction in thinking skills. I feel uneasy about the current moves to 'teach thinking skills'. Whereas focus on the thinking processes involved and making these explicit seems helpful, there is a danger that our urge to make things simple results in an over

simplistic solution. We often find simple rubrics provided that enable children to remember how to work through complex processes. Whilst these can be useful aides memoire, if they take precedence over a conscious understanding of the process it seems to me they will be, at best, useless and, at worst, a impediment to thinking.

Metacognitive modelling in the literacy hour

As indicated above, despite looking for evidence of metacognitive modelling in the literacy hour in our research, it was observed only on one occasion when a teacher wondered aloud why an author had started a sentence with 'and'. This was not a planned use but occurred in response to a child's question.

> *One child has noticed that the author has begun a sentence with 'And,'*
> *and she remembers that the teacher has told them not to do that. Teacher*
> *validates her point and they read the passage again. Teacher explains it*
> *as the author emphasising something. They scan the text and find*
> *another sentence like this, also the sentence 'Very much'. Again the*
> *teacher talks about how this isn't really a sentence because it doesn't*
> *have a verb. ……. Metacognitive modelling here as teacher wonders*
> *what the author's up to and trying to make sense of it all.* (Field notes
> April 1999)

It may be significant that the only instance observed took place in an exchange that fell outside the planned part of the literacy teaching. It did seem that, at least in the schools in our sample, metacognitive modelling was not an intentional part of the literacy provision.

At the end of the project when the main analysis had been done, including analysis of children's writing and reading test results, we had some idea of those teachers who

seemed to have been successful in their teaching of the NLS. I have since returned to the data to look at those teachers whose teaching of writing, in particular, was successful to look again at ideas about metacognition. With the notion of 'strategic thinking' in mind I have reread the classroom observations. I still have not found any more examples of metacognitive modelling but it does seem that a small number of our teachers did focus on thinking about the writing process as well as focusing on the piece of writing to be produced: they focused on the *how* as well as the *what* and *why*.

One such teacher whose children made good progress in writing over the year was Mr Leonard who had a class of year four, five and six children. He regularly would take a child's piece of writing to work on with the class and would discuss the process of redrafting. The observer noted that he would impress his thinking or opinions on the class and press them to state their own opinions and how they arrived at them. On one occasion they were comparing two similar pieces of writing and he asked children to say which was better and why. He asked how they thought the writer made you want to read more. On another occasion he had written a letter to the class purporting to be a letter from a member of the public complaining about the class' bad behaviour on a school trip. He asked them whether they thought it was a good letter and how they could judge this.

Another teacher with a KS1 class (the one already cited above) also made some reference to the *how* of reading or writing. For example, when discussing whether they found something in a text amusing she asked children about the 'pictures they made in their heads.' When reading about a kind witch, she asked how they knew the

witch is not nasty, she asked which words told them that. When reviewing the use of spelling rules she asked children to 'bring the rules back out of their memory'.

These examples in themselves do not seem significant. However, the significance lies in the fact that they are unusual. It was far more likely that the teachers in our project would focus on the work to be produced than reflection on the process. It is not that the process was unimportant but that interaction about the writing focused on what was the correct spelling of a word, what was the most appropriate punctuation, what features are needed to make a good narrative/explanation/argument and so on. Children were asked to rehearse knowledge rather than reflect on how they arrived at the answer. For example, in Mrs Noakes' class during shared reading of a book about feelings, the observer wrote,

> *Teacher then says she will cover some words and children must spell them.*
> *This is a well-known routine and the children obviously like it. The teacher*
> *covers the word in the text and the children must guess what it is and then*
> *try to spell it……The emphasis seems to be on memory rather than sounding*
> *it out or sight strategies although these must come into it. It's just that the*
> *teacher doesn't reinforce [or] emphasise any strategies.* (Field notes June
> 1999)

Working with teachers

In an attempt to find examples of metacognitive modelling in the literacy hour I set teachers, who were working on a Masters module on writing, the task of using metacognitive modelling as part of shared writing with their class. Even when the strategy was discussed and the task set, teachers found it difficult to distinguish

between modelling the process and modelling *the thinking that was going on while they were engaged in the process*. However, what follows is an example of where one teacher with a year five class has used metacognitive modelling successfully as a part of shared writing over the course of four days. The shared writing sessions followed a shared reading session of Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters by John Steptoe. Children were asked to write their own version of the story set in a contemporary, local setting. They had already made plans for their own stories when the teacher said she was going to demonstrate writing her own version. Initially, as a class they decided on two characters, Andrew and Robert. Thereafter the teacher told the children that it was her story and therefore she did not want any contributions. This was unusual for them and they found it very difficult. For a description of the sessions see figure one.

FIGURE ONE ABOUT HERE

This teacher described the sessions enthusiastically and felt that they had gone well. She had found it difficult to do and had planned thoroughly both for what she was going to write and for what thoughts she was going to make public for the class. She had found using teacher demonstration of the writing, in which she had control, had made speaking her thoughts aloud easier. Other teachers said they had found it difficult to model their thinking at the same time as trying to accommodate children's ideas. She acknowledged that she had no way of knowing what children had learned about the writing process from the activity but she had been delighted with the level of enthusiasm with which children had set about the task of writing their own versions. She was also pleased that, perhaps because they had made their own plans

first, most of their stories were not carbon copies of hers but had incorporated some of the features she had talked about when writing.

Discussion

It is hard to draw conclusions from so little evidence, but I can offer some points that may warrant further discussion. Firstly, although from the small amount of evidence offered here it could be argued that metacognitive modelling is not in wide spread use, it *is* possible. Secondly, it also seems that it is easier in some teaching contexts than others. The teachers working with me on in-service courses in writing found it hard to involve children in composition at the same time as voicing their thoughts. Indeed demonstrating the process as well as the thinking going alongside was a demanding activity that required careful planning. Another teacher commented that he found modelling what he was thinking easier when he was working on an existing text, modelling how the writer would go about editing or redrafting. He found being faced with a blank piece of paper daunting and felt there was not enough to say. Inevitably this gave rise to interesting discussion. It was not lost on the rest of the group that this was precisely the sort of occasion when a window on the writer's thinking was needed. If we, as experienced writers, do not have explicit knowledge of how to go about starting out on composition, how can we expect children to?

Thirdly, the teacher's and children's goals will impact on the kind of teaching and learning seen in the classroom. Hall and Myers (1998) report on a study by O'Sullivan and Joy (1994), which showed that children, when talking about reading problems, attributed these to lack of effort as opposed to ability. O'Sullivan and Joy conclude that teachers' emphasis on practice and working hard allows children to retain a naïve understanding of the reading process. Teachers' practice of focusing on *what* is to be

achieved rather than *how* it is achieved can only reinforce this. Hall and Myers also
report on the work of Dweck (1989) who proposes two kinds of achievement goals
(learning goals and performance goals) and the sort of learners who favour these types
of goals. Learners who set themselves learning goals try to increase their
competence. They choose challenging tasks, persist despite the challenge and work
out strategies for gaining proficiency. On the other hand, learners who set themselves
performance goals in which they strive to gain favourable judgements from others,
tend to avoid challenge, attribute difficulty to low ability and give up in the face of
problems. Dweck argues that prioritising performance goals will not help the learner
how to learn. Hall and Myers argue briefly that criterion referencing and 'can do'
statements accord status to the *what* rather than the *how* of learning. The climate in
education at the moment is all about performance, about trying to do better, to achieve
better results, to be judged to be a level higher than last year. Teachers under pressure
to show increased performance, both on their own part and on the part of their pupils,
are not well placed to focus on learning itself and to encourage children to seek
difficulty and ways of overcoming it.

The emphasis on performance over learning makes quick fix solutions attractive. Yet
there is a danger that concentrating on helping children to perform well in the short
term, may not provide the foundations for a lifetime of thinking and achievement.

Conclusion

Shared reading and writing in the literacy hour are powerful ways of engaging
children in the process of reading and writing. The framework of objectives that
guides teachers' planning for their teaching has given them a much wider repertoire of
knowledge and skills to teach. However, it seems possible that the opportunities

offered by the NLS to enlarge children's understanding of literacy and how it is used could be lost by overemphasis on performance. If shared writing and reading are used to show young readers and writers what good reading and writing looks like without exploring how the reader and writer gains control over the process through careful reflection, we may be left with the same gap between aspiration and achievement that has long been evident in some children.

Acknowledgement

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Figure One: Shared writing

Class: Year five
Text: Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters

Not that long ago, in a school in Poole, a lovely seaside town with beautiful golden beaches, was a kind, helpful teacher with 30 delightful children. The class worked in harmony and everyone was happy. Two children in the class, Andrew and Robert, were best friends and had been for a very long time. Robert was very clever and far more intelligent than the other children. He scored very high in his tests. Everyone wanted to be Robert.

Robert was talking to Andrew and happened to say, 'I hope I get high marks in our Maths test tomorrow, I just need to memorise the last 5 questions on the answer sheet.'
'WHAT DO YOU MEAN?' questioned Andrew.
'Well you don't think I actually got high scores on those tests without cheating, do you?' remarked Robert.
'W..., well,' stuttered Andrew.
'I know it's dishonest but I really want people to like me and my parents are so proud of my achievements, how could I possibly let them down?' exclaimed Robert.

IT WAS TEST DAY!! Robert was smiling to himself as the teacher placed the test in front of him. Andrew looked at Robert and realised that he didn't really know him very well - he never imagined that he would be so dishonest.
'You may start,' said the teacher.
After 30 minutes the test was finished. Robert handed in his sheet to the teacher with a huge grin on his face. Andrew felt disappointed with Robert.
Later that day Robert and Andrew were watering the plants the class - this was their job. Suddenly, they heard, 'Robert, could I speak to you for a moment,' said the teacher sternly!
Andrew watched as Robert walked towards the teacher, whose eyes appeared to be bulging and her face was turning red. 'Robert you scored nothing on your test, which I though was rather strange considering your past performance, but, as I looked at your answers carefully I realised that they were next week's answers!

And so it was, not long ago, Andrew managed to do very well in his test and was very proud because he had worked so hard without cheating. The teacher was particularly pleased with him and she mentioned it in assembly to the whole school. Robert felt very ashamed and realised he had been deceitful by cheating. Robert and Andrew remained good friends, although Andrew seemed to be Mr Popular in the class.

Objective: to write a story from our culture and imitate the story of Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters

1st session
The introduction - analysing story openings.

I wanted to set the scene and describe where my story was going to take place, using a range of vocabulary. I though about introducing the characters but didn't want to give away too much information at this stage.

2nd session
The complication
I started to think out loud about the dialogue that was going to happen between Andrew and Robert. I wanted to include thoughts and feelings to get my reader thinking about Robert and Andrew. I want my reader to like Andrew and think he is honest and start to be weary of Robert. I though about the types of vocabulary I might use for each character.

3rd session
The climax
I needed to start bringing the threads together, something needs to happen so that Robert (good guy) is found out. I re-read each sentence out loud to check it made sense, at this point the children wanted to participate, but I told them this is my story, wait until you write yours.

They didn't expect my ending, although they liked it and said they felt it needed the dun…dundun…. from the end of Eastenders.

4th session
The resolution
I wanted to link the ending to the rest of my story. I wondered aloud how I could do this. I wanted to make it comparable to Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters. I looked back at my beginning to try and use the opening phrase. I tried to show role reversal in my story between the two characters: I made Andrew 'Mr Popular' in the end.

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