

## EXPLORING THE ART OF POSSIBILITY - An action research study into the effectiveness of 'talk for writing' to raise attainment in primary school writers (PART 1)

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### Abstract

The purpose of this action research study is to examine the effectiveness of the approach of 'Talk for Writing' in enabling children throughout the primary education phase to become successful and creative writers. In particular, it aims to identify how successful 'Talk for Writing' concepts are when used with different ages of children; those in the Foundation Stage (Nursery and Reception) and those in upper Key Stage 1 /Lower Key Stage 2 (years 2 and 3) and if success with this approach is limited by contextual factors, namely English as an additional language, social deprivation or gender differences. The study examines evidence from research and pedagogical theory and places this evidence into the context of 'Talk for Writing'.

An explanation of the methodology used is given, followed by an analysis of quantitative and qualitative data gathered. The study concludes with recommendations for development of 'Talk for Writing' within primary schools. Colocar aqui o resumo em língua estrangeira, com a mesma formatação do resumo.

### Key concepts:

'Talk for Writing', imitation, innovation, invention

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## INTRODUCTION

### Personal Background

Although initially trained as a secondary school science teacher, the author of this article has worked within the primary sector for thirteen years, teaching across the primary school range and for the last eight years as an Early Years teacher in the UK. The rapid progression of children's language development from initial words and simple statements through to dramatic, imaginative story telling has always been a personal fascination. Many of the children taught by the author throughout her career in the primary sector have been able to verbalise the most incredible narratives, and yet when the time comes to record these stories in writing, often something gets 'lost in translation'. Furthermore, experience of teaching children from a variety of different social contexts; review of data and literature and dialogue with colleagues seem to indicate that low attainment in writing follows certain trends with respect to factors such as gender, English as an additional language and family income level.

This research will examine the success of 'Talk for Writing' throughout the primary sector and analyse potential differences in attainment due to external factors. It is hoped that the results of this study will

form the basis of the production of a new literacy policy within a large federation of schools and a research paper to be made available to other professionals on a Teaching School website. O corpo do texto deve ser escrito em Times (New Roman) tamanho 12, justificado e hifenizado automaticamente.

### Context

The action research study was undertaken by 22 teachers in 11 primary schools across two shire counties in England, with each school having one teacher from the Foundation Stage and one teacher from year 2, 3 or 4 participating. Data collection took the form of a questionnaire sent out to all participating teachers at the end of the study and samples of pupils' written work taken at intervals throughout the study. Return rate of the questionnaire was poor, with only 41% of participating teachers returning the questionnaire with data for analysis.

According to the data received, class sizes in each school varied from 22 to 30 pupils (see Table I) and the number of children chosen to examine for the study per class varied from 3 to 6. During the time of the research, all teachers also attended a series of 'Talk for Writing'

workshops led by the author and educational advisor Pie Corbett. Each workshop was planned to introduce the teachers to the different stages of ‘Talk for Writing’, allow them opportunity to practise and develop new skills learnt and to share ideas and evaluate practice. The

workshops were delivered at monthly intervals over the course of six months and culminated in a conference delivered to 74 delegates, where the teachers modelled concepts learnt and shared their experiences.

**TABLE I**  
**CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION FOR EACH OF THE CLASSES IN THE STUDY**

School	Year group taught?	Total number of children in class?	Number of children tracked in study?	Whole school percentage of pupil premium* children?	Whole school percentage of EAL** children?	Whole school percentage BME *** children?
School 1	3	30	3	20%	87%	92%
School 1	Reception	29	6	20%	87%	92%
School 2	2	22	4	68%	15%	16%
School 2	Reception/Y1	24	4	68%	15%	16%
School 3	3	30	6			
School 4	Reception	29	6	17%	16%	16%
School 5	Reception	30	3			
School 6	4	26	3	11%	7%	9%
School 7	3	30	6	24%	10%	10%

\*Pupil premium – any child who is in receipt of free school meals or has been at any time during the preceding 6 years

\*\* EAL – English as an additional language

\*\*\* BME – of Black or Minority Ethnic origin

To maintain equal opportunities for all, all children within each of the classes participated in all the ‘Talk for Writing’ activities and assessment opportunities over the course of an academic year. Baseline summative assessments were made at the beginning of the study and

samples of work collected throughout the year. Final summative assessments were made using the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile in the Reception classes and ‘Assessing Pupil Progress’ (APP) scores in classes from year 1 to 4. Progress for each child over the course of

the academic year was then ascertained. These data were then compared to the national statistics for attainment and progress. In addition to this, samples of the children's writing were taken at various points throughout the study and analysed to establish the quality of the story language used and assess the use of grammar, punctuation and spelling.

### **Aims**

The aims of the action research study were:

1. To examine existing research and current theories aimed at empowering primary school children to become creative story tellers and writers.
2. To analyse the extent to which 'Talk for Writing' can contribute towards raising progress and attainment in writing across the primary sector.
3. To evaluate the impact of 'Talk for Writing' within different cohorts of children.
4. To make recommendations for how schools can develop 'Talk for Writing' to raise attainment in writing within the primary sector.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Introduction**

The process by which children turn their thoughts and ideas from the spoken word to the written form has been the focus of much research over many years and more recently, in an attempt to raise attainment levels in writing there have been many research studies and government documents published, which have tackled attainment issues from different foci. A recent OFSTED report highlighted underachievement in certain ethnic groups and underperformance of children from low income families and looked after children. Nationally 20% of children do not reach expected standards for reading and writing by the time they leave primary school. (Ofsted, 2011, P.4) This has a continued impact into secondary education, with the data showing the percentage of children eligible for free school meals gaining at least 5 GCSEs at A\* to C has been 28% below that of their peers for the past 5 years. The report identified a delay in language development of children beginning nursery as a barrier to learning, however this contradicts evidence cited by Browne (2009, p. 204) who referred to 2 studies of the 1980s in which it was concluded that often children who appear to have a language delay upon starting nursery, are in fact, 'too

ill at ease to display the full range of their verbal skills when they enter school.’ (Tizard and Hughes, 2002, cited in Browne, 2009, p.204). However it might be argued that the changing levels of social intercourse at home since the 1980s, with the evolution of the continuous children’s television broadcasts, ICT equipment and a larger proportion of parents facing different socio-economic pressures (whether this is in the form of both parents working full time, single parent families or where unemployment of one or both parents plays a role) has also played a part in children’s underachievement. Corbett links the lack of a bedtime story routine in many of today’s families with the lack of a child’s ability to retell narratives. If a child does not have experience of story sequence and language patterns they will not be able to produce stories of their own (Corbett, 2009, p. 16). Both the OFSTED report and Tizard and Hughes, do however, emphasise the importance of developing speaking skills as a tool to enable children to both read and write successfully. The OFSTED report also emphasises the importance of storytelling as an aspect of daily provision in the early years setting.

Despite much international research into the development of writing

and many initiatives throughout the United Kingdom, over the past few years, attainment in writing at the end of primary school still lags significantly behind that of reading (Cremin and Myhill, 2012, p.1). In a 2007 report into the factors affecting low educational achievement, Cassen and Kingdon (2007,p.xi) ascertained that ‘poor reading and writing scores at primary school are strongly and significantly associated with later low achievement’. They went on to conclude that, ‘a significant part of our findings has been the extent to which poor reading and writing skills at primary school are associated with later low attainment, .... poor reading and writing achievement in primary school is strongly associated with low achievement at Key Stage 4.’ Data from the 2013 Statutory Assessment Tests (SATs) for the end of Key Stage 1 and 2 show that the national percentage of children attaining a level 2b or above in Key Stage 1 or a level 4 or above in Key Stage 2 for writing is significantly lower than for reading, and that children with English as an additional language, children from black or minority ethnic backgrounds or pupils eligible for pupil premium attain less well than their counterparts. Furthermore the attainment of boys in writing as compared to girls has been lower for a number of years.

### **The development of writing from speaking**

The importance of story-telling and the concept of ‘oral rehearsal’ are well known and many experts in the field of early years education have examined the link between children’s speech during play and the emergence of story narrative. Gussin Paley exemplified this process with the ‘staged version of the storytelling process’, in which the child and the teacher work collaboratively to turn spontaneous play events into creative narratives (Dombrink-Green, 2011, p.90). Ohlhaber (2001, p.36) recognised the importance of encouraging children to ‘utilise their very strong structural language skills in oral retelling before we expect them to write stories in any form’ and identified that stories have a triplicity to them, a beginning, middle and end, which when varied or extended can create new stories.

Academic studies into the development of writing from speaking have ranged in nature from the examination of the effectiveness of oral rehearsal (Myhill & Jones, 2009) and the specific teaching of linguistic structure (Cremin and Myhill, 2012, p.5) through to the use of drama to inspire writing and enable children to examine characters, settings and events in a kinaesthetic manner (Dombrink-Green, 2001;

Heathcote & Herbert, 1985; Toye & Prendiville, 2000). All of these studies recognise and share the important role that speaking plays in enabling children to write effectively.

Cremin and Myhill (2012, p.12) contrasted the development of writing to that of speaking, stating that the latter is naturally acquired through exposure, while the former needs to be learned. They also made the distinction of the difference between talking and writing, quoting Kress’s ‘habit of ‘explicitness’’ (Cremin and Myhill, 2012, p.15); the concept by which children learn to provide details relevant to the reader’s understanding when writing, as opposed to transcribing dialogue.

Myhill and Jones (2009, p.266) used the work of Vygotsky to illustrate the usefulness of talking through ideas with others as a beneficial strategy to support an individual’s writing and this was further supported by Wright et al (2007, p.363) who linked Gussin Paley’s theories of developing preschool children’s storytelling into written narratives, with Vygotsky’s understanding of the importance of play in en-

abling young children to imagine and remember ideas from their previous experiences.

### **Mark making**

A frequent accompaniment to story narration in young children is mark making. Gardner examined the link between a child's drawings, as an emergent form of storytelling and 'the increasing separation of drawing from writing and other cultural notations', (Gardner, 1980, p.16). Gardner explored the way in which as children's ideas become more complex the use of pictorial imagery alone is no longer sufficient to allow the audience to understand the finer nuances of their thought processes and so the practices of 'mapping or notation' develop (Gardner, 1980, p.154). He stated that children of Nursery and Reception age begin to include different notations into their work, including numerals, letters, music notations, logos and map making annotations in 'graphic but nonartistic processes'. He further illustrated that some pre nursery children (2 years old) have classified certain activities as writing and understand that different marks correspond to different words; often by producing diverse strings of mark making to represent the different words and sentences they say.

Browne (cited in Marsh and Hallett, 2002, p. 87) discussed the development of writing in young children and emphasised the importance of viewing writing as a three stage process; that of composing, transcribing and reviewing. She stressed the importance of the audience - the reader, and the fact that writing 'begins with understanding what is to be written, to whom and in what way.'

### **'Talk for Writing'**

The premise behind 'Talk for Writing' is the underpinning belief that in order to be able to write effectively, children must first be able to remember and retell a range of well written stories. Corbett (2003, p.65-74) classified stories into different types; 'wishing tales', 'warnings', 'chasing stories', 'defeating the monster', 'problem solving/resolution tales', 'intruder stories', 'journey stories – quests and adventures', 'repetitive tales', 'losing, hiding and finding', 'lying and telling secrets', 'cumulative stories', 'home and school stories', 'fables and tales with a message', 'trickster tales', 'fantasy', 'humbug, stuff and nonsense stories', 'nursery rhyme tales', 'the nasty person', 'extended stories' and 'story of our lives' and advocated that children, from Nursery onwards, should be taught a minimum of six stories a year, with exposure to other narratives during story-time sessions and

shared reading. This would equate to children having a bank of at least forty eight stories by the time they leave primary school, from which to draw inspiration for their writing. This concept of broadening children's experience of stories is shared by Clark (1982, p.104), who affirmed the importance of access to an array of reading materials in both the home and school environment. Developing an enjoyment of narrative and reading is a philosophy underpinning 'Talk for Writing' and research and reviews into policy and practice undertaken in primary schools resulted in changes to the emphasis of reading for pleasure in the National Literacy Strategy of 2001 (DFES, 2001, p.3). The most recent adaptation to the National Curriculum, due for implementation in September 2014 and statutory in all English maintained schools, also includes reference to reading for pleasure and states children should 'establish an appreciation and love of reading' (DfE, 2014, p.13).

The 'Talk for Writing' method is an approach in which the children accumulate writing skills and knowledge through the three phases of 'imitation', 'innovation' and 'invention'; each phase having a prescribed pattern. In the 'imitation' phase, children are exposed to a story and then learn to retell this story as a whole class, in small groups

and then in pairs, using actions to remind them of key language. This phase includes the extensive use of drama to allow the children to experience the characters' appearance and emotions. The use of drama to enhance children's understanding of a story has been recognised for many years and several authors have discussed its benefits. Marsh and Hallet (2002, p. 133) asserted that drama helps children to retell stories and familiarise them with 'book language'. Read (2008, p.6) affirmed the use of drama to scaffold children's understanding of a text, referencing the work of Bruner and Gardner in the development of multiple intelligences. Read concluded that 'through engaging different intelligences in storytelling and drama activities, individual children have opportunities to.....extend and deepen their learning'. Drama has also been a key focus of the National Curriculum for a number of years, Toye and Prendiville (2002, p 86 – 89) recalled the emphasis on drama in The Cox Committee report of 1989 and the subsequent inclusion of drama in the Speaking and Listening strand of the Primary Literacy Strategy in 2001. In the latest version of the National Curriculum (DfE, 2014) a paragraph is dedicated to the use of drama in the 'Spoken Language' section, stating that 'pupils should be able to adopt, create and sustain a range of roles'.

In the ‘Innovation’ phase of ‘Talk for Writing’, children innovate on the story they have learnt by altering certain features to create a new story, while the language patterns and sequence of the original story remain the same. The innovations are then recorded in some way, through the use of ‘story maps’, shared writing and individual planning and scribing. Again drama plays an important role in allowing the children to explore their adaptations and alter their versions of the story accordingly. This intermediate phase provides the children with the security of having a structure to follow, while enabling them to develop their creativity through adaptation of the characters, settings and events. This practice is common in children’s fiction and many books have been written offering a ‘twist’ to the traditional story, ‘Mr Wolf and the Enormous Turnip’ by Jan Fernley (2004); ‘The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs’ by Jon Scieszka (1989) and ‘The Three Little Pigs and the Big Bad Wolf’ by Eugene Trivizas (1993) are examples of which many primary school teachers will be aware. This practice of adapting existing narratives links to Corbett’s idea of story patterns, where the basic framework of the particular story type remains constant but the story embellishments are changed (2003, p.65-74). Wray and Lewis (1999, p.6) discussed the extent to which previous

knowledge impacts on children’s learning and stated that ‘for teachers to develop their children’s abilities to learn from texts, (they) must include an emphasis upon the need to elicit what the learner already knows about the topics of these texts.’ It is this in-depth previous knowledge of the story that the phase of ‘innovation’ builds upon, while enabling the children to develop creative writing skills by focussing on the changes they wish to make to the original story.

In the final phase, ‘Invention’, children create their own stories, using their experience of story features, patterns and language to invent their own characters, settings and events. Corbett (2003, p. 31) emphasised again the importance of children having had experience of a range of tales from which to draw inspiration. ‘The more children gain experience of stories and the possibilities they contain, the more able they will be to invent their own.’ Using the experiences they have of different authors’ story language and style, allows children to create their own individual style of writing. Cremin and Myhill (2012, p. 51 -52) described this as developing ‘echoes of narrative texts’ and pointed to the acknowledgement given by author Terry Deary to Roald Dahl for enabling horror and black comedy to be acceptable in children’s literature, thus inspiring him to write the ‘Horrid Histories’ series.

Within the context of ‘Talk for Writing’, the scaffolding of story language seen in the ‘innovation’ phase becomes the echo of narrative text in the invention phase, with children moving away from language such as ‘Once upon a time’, toward more sophisticated language used to engage and capture the reader, akin to the powerful words scribed by Ted Hughes in the opening chapter of ‘The Iron Man’ (1968 p.1):

The Iron Man came to the top of the cliff.  
How far had he walked? Nobody knows.  
Where had he come from? Nobody knows.  
Taller than a house, the Iron Man stood at  
the top of the cliff, on the very brink, in the darkness.

In addition to familiarity with texts, children also need to ‘recognise that stories are carefully organised forms’ (Browne, 2010, p. 113) and need to be able to break their ideas down to form the story structure. ‘Talk for Writing’ offers different strategies for this process, including the concept of ‘boxing up’, whereby the children ‘identify how the text is organised and box it up accordingly’ (Corbett and Strong, 2011, p. 12), and the use of illustrative ‘story mountains’ (a diagrammatic

illustration to show the sequence of the main events of the story) to enable children to visualize the structure of their story.

### **Transcription**

The importance of teaching children how to develop the correct use of spelling, punctuation and grammar, cannot be overlooked and while ‘Talk for Writing’ does not concentrate explicitly on this skill, opportunities are given throughout the process to ensure children gain the skills needed in order to write accurately. This is achieved through the use of writing games, ‘polishing’ work and peer to peer evaluation. Graham and Harris (2010, p.3) refer to the learning of transcription skills as the ‘mastery of a low level skill’, nevertheless it is vital to developing high level literacy skills. Cremin and Myhill (2012, p.15) describe the development of transcription skills and as a crucial step in a child’s understanding of the difference between a written narrative and a spoken story; ‘writing is not speech written down.’

### **Conclusion**

The concept of ‘Talk for Writing’ has emerged as a result of much research into the cognitive develop of children, the methods undertaken by successful authors to produce stories and national data and

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statistics on the achievement of children in writing over the course of many years. It has become a recognised method of teaching writing in primary schools throughout England and has been commended by many professionals for a number of years, being recognised and promoted by the National Strategies in 2008 (DCSF, 2008). A large amount of literature is available to validate the concepts behind this approach and much research has been done into the link between oral rehearsal and writing development. The premise of the ‘Talk for Writing’ approach can be summarised by Vygotsky who said, ‘what the child is able to do in collaboration today he will be able to do independently tomorrow’ (1987, p.211).

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

### **Paradigm**

An educational background as a scientist led to a natural draw towards a positivist approach to paradigms. The gathering and analysis of empirical data; measuring of progress by comparing baseline and final levels using a numerical ‘Average Points Score’ (APS) system of an experimental group (those taught writing through ‘Talk for Writing’) and a control group (children taught to write through ‘other’ approaches) could be compared and conclusions drawn as to whether

‘Talk for Writing’ proved to be a useful tool for improving the quality of writing for the children assessed. However on further consideration, it became clear that a positivist approach did not take account of many other variables that had to be considered. Firstly, the individuals that made up the study groups were incomparable; although of a similar age, all of the children within the class, and indeed the other schools taking part in the study, had very different backgrounds and prior experiences of literacy. Many of the authors researched and cited in Chapter 2 emphasise the importance of pre-literacy experiences in enabling children to become fluent and creative readers and writers and quantifying these experiences within the realms of this action research study was not possible.

Secondly, the environments in which the children would study were all different, as 22 different classrooms and 22 different teachers would be involved in the delivery of ‘Talk for Writing’. Again it would be impossible to standardise these conditions. This is referred to by Guba and Lincoln (1994, p.107) as ‘the interactive nature of the inquirer-inquired into dyad’, as in studies such as this, the notion of ‘teaching’ means that the inquirer (teacher) influences the phenomena (the attainment of the children).

Finally, there were practical teaching and ethical considerations to made; it would not be possible to discretely teach different methods of writing acquisition to different groups of children within the same class, nor would it be ethical to do so: dependent on the success of the teaching technique, one group of children would not have been exposed to the better teaching methods and therefore been denied the opportunity to make the same amount of progress as their peers. While the possibility existed that the use of ‘Talk for Writing’ would prove to be an ineffective teaching tool, and therefore the children in the class would not make the progress they could potentially have made if another teaching method had been employed, having conducted much research into the theories of how children learn and the links between speaking, reading and writing, it seemed probable that at worst ‘Talk for Writing’ would offer no benefits as opposed to having a detrimental effect on the children’s learning. Therefore the decision was made to include the ‘Talk for Writing’ process into the everyday teaching structure of all children in each of the classes in the study.

Guba and Lincoln (1994, p. 106) examined the flaws in using a positive paradigm when considering a study such as this. They explained

the issues surrounding ‘context stripping’ and ‘exclusion of meaning and purpose’ (Guba and Lincoln p.106) in that quantitative data can only be gained by stripping the study of all other considerations and that outcomes of the research can then only be applied to other events occurring in the exact same situation.

A post-positivist paradigm was then considered, as the research was primarily a study of the attainment and progress in writing of the children taking part. Analysis of results relied heavily on quantitative data and the comparisons to national data where ‘Talk for Writing’ may not have been the main method of teaching. However the application of the teaching methods, engagement of the children and prior literacy experiences of the children were also crucial factors that needed to be considered and examined closely.

When considering a post-positivist approach ten questions posed by Guba and Lincoln (1994, p. 111 – 116) were examined and conclusions were drawn as follows:

- The purpose of inquiry is one of explanation, with the aim of enabling prediction as to future methods of good practice within the context of teaching early writing skills.
- The nature of the knowledge is one of non-falsified hypotheses

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that can be viewed as probable facts; i.e the use of ‘Talk for Writing’ is a good method for raising attainment and progress in early writing.

- Knowledge is accumulated through accretion; the evidence from each of the participating classes would build the bank of evidence that proposes ‘Talk for Writing’ to be a valuable tool in the teaching of early writing.
- The criteria used to judge the appropriateness of the study would be conventional benchmarks of rigor, i.e. internal validation of data; professional opinions as to application of teaching methods.
- The role of values within the study is to some degree irrelevant as the study relies heavily upon quantitative data.
- Ethics would play a large role in the study, as equal consideration would need to be given to the education of all children in the class, not just those chosen for the study.
- The ‘voice’ of the author is primarily that of a ‘disinterested scientist’ insofar as, while a personal interest in the best teaching practices to enable the children in the author’s class to gain the best possible achievements is held, the principal focus in this

study is to use the results of the research to influence school policy and practice into the teaching of early writing.

- It is not believed that paradigms are necessarily in conflict with one another, indeed the importance of the opinions of both the teachers and children involved in the research allude to some evidence of critical thinking.
- It is hoped that the study may prove to be hegemonic within the author’s school and subsequently the other schools in the study, with regard to school policy and good practice in the teaching of early writing skills.

Robson (1993, p.59 – 61) discussed the theories of the post-positivistic paradigm in terms of its conception due to the inevitable consequences that arise when both the inquirer and subject are human and linked these to the methodology involved in action research projects. Robson’s notions gave further credence to the use of a post-positivist paradigm, particularly when consideration was given to his adapted ‘characteristics of ‘naturalistic enquiry’’ (Robson, 1993, p.61). The research conditions and subjects concur with many of these characteristics, most notably that the research was to be carried out in the nat-

ural setting of a classroom; that the enquirers and children (other humans) are the primary data-gathering instruments; purposive sampling of children's work would allow for focused comparisons of writing quality; and there would be a preference for negotiated meanings and interpretations during the reflection and evaluation segment of each training session. When also considering the aims of this study, a large proportion of the data to be analysed would be in the form of the quantitative data of attainment and progress, with a lesser emphasis on qualitative data of work samples and questionnaire answer analysis. If the emphasis on data collection were reversed with the qualitative data taking precedence, a leaning might be towards an interpretative paradigm; however as this is not the case a post-positivist approach underpinned the study. The view that this study does not fall into the remit of the interpretative paradigm is further reinforced by Munn-Giddins (in Arthur et al, 2012, p.72) who describes action research as only sharing 'some features of the interpretative paradigm'.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations were made in line with the guidelines published by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2004). The author was responsible for ensuring that no real or potential harm

would arise as a result of any of the research conducted by the author, Pie Corbett or any of the study's participants. All teachers participating in the research sought permission from all persons involved in the individual case studies and from the associated parents and the children whose work would form the basis of evidence. In addition permission was sought from the Head Teachers of all the participating schools and the Local Authority prior to commencement of the study.

### **Methodology**

The basis for the research strategy was one of mixed methods research. Empirical enquiry evidence in the form of action research was used to produce a range of quantitative and qualitative data, resulting from observation, interview, summative assessment and work scrutiny sampling. In order to train the teachers and evaluate the practicalities of using 'Talk for Writing' as a teaching method, the views and opinions of the teachers delivering the lessons had to be taken into account. Zuber-Skerritt (2001, p.7) discussed this process when she stated 'the action learner/researcher is interested in perspectives, rather than truth per se, and in giving an honest account of how the participants in the project view themselves and their experiences'. In this study the viewpoints of the teachers involved were collected during

each cycle of the action research and evaluated through peer discussions. On completion of the study, final thoughts on disseminating training to other teachers were discussed and reflective suggestions were offered through peer dialogue. Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire at the end of the study period and respond to a set of homogenous questions. Research was carried out in an emancipatory format, with all participants working collaboratively to evaluate each cycle of teaching and reflect on the best way to move onto the next stage of teaching.

Munn-Giddings (2012, p.71) describes action research as ‘a form of research that can be undertaken by practitioners such as teachers.... and is often led by .... those facing the situation or trying to develop their practice.’ Action research does not rely solely on the analysis of quantitative and qualitative data but involves ‘action’ insofar as the implementation of findings during the research process allows the research to further develop. The research in this study followed Zuber-Skerritt’s notion of ‘spirals’ or ‘cycles’. Zuber-Skerritt (2001, p.2) describes the term ‘action’ as referring ‘to something that happened in the past which has affected our present insight, learning and knowledge bases and enables and compels us to plan our future action

accordingly.’ She defines action research as ‘a cyclical process of planning, taking action, observing, reflecting and, as a result, revising the plan for a new cycle of action research.’ (Zuber-Skerritt, 2002, p.144). In the case of this study, five cycles of planning, acting, observing and evaluating over the research period were conducted with the outcomes from observation and evaluation of each cycle influencing the planning and acting of the next. The process of action research as described by Zuber-Skerritt is illustrated in Figure 1.



### Implementation of the research

Training was delivered to the participating teachers during a series of five workshops led by Pie Corbett and supported by the author of this study. Each workshop session consisted of an overview of the teaching techniques at the centre of 'Talk for Writing', namely, 'imitation',

'innovation' and 'invention'; an examination of the theories behind how children learn to write; modelling of practical games and ideas to engage the children and an opportunity to observe and practice new skills learnt within classes of the author's school. Each teacher was also given a bank of stories, carefully selected to provide examples of narratives with each of the seven patterns described in the 'Talk for Writing' model (Corbett, 2003, p. 65) and taught a series of action to use with their class as a kinaesthetic aid to remembering key story language features. Opportunities were also given for teachers to share their knowledge and experiences with their peers and to evaluate and reflect on their practice. This evaluation and reflection period became the initial and final sessions of workshops 2 to 5 as it formed the scaffold upon which the rest of the workshop developed. Thus, by discussing the thoughts and experiences of the teachers in the study, new theories and teaching methods were revealed, affirming Punch's notion that 'collaborative participation becomes central' to the study (Punch, 2011, p.137). Kemmis and McTaggart (2000, p.595) described this collaborative form of action research as 'participatory action research' and commended such research for its ability to create a 'community of learners'.

Each workshop concluded with a group discussion to determine how each teacher would deliver the ‘Talk for Writing’ sessions within their classes and all participants were asked to collate samples of the focus children’s work at two month intervals. These samples were presented at the end of the study in the form of a portfolio along with summative data of the child’s baseline and final attainment scores.

In order to obtain baseline information of the children studied, teachers were asked to select between three and six children from their class to analyse. They were requested to conference the children by asking them firstly to ‘tell a story’ and secondly to describe what they needed to remember when writing a story. Baseline writing attainment scores for the children were also noted.

To complete the action research study, a conference was delivered to 74 teachers from across three counties, where the participating teachers worked in pairs to demonstrate various aspects of the study and discuss their thoughts and findings.

### **Collection of Data**

Data for this study was collected through a mixed methods approach in a concurrent manner, with both quantitative and qualitative data

sampled at various intervals throughout the study. This approach was adopted to answer fully the research aims as singular analysis of the quantitative data, while producing comparable data to ascertain the achievement in writing of the children, would not explicitly illustrate any improvements in the quality of story-telling language patterns in the children’s work. Further, it would not allow for the participating teachers to voice their professional opinions as to the effectiveness of ‘Talk for Writing’ as a teaching method. Biesta (in Arthur et al, 2012, p. 147) proposed that ‘‘qualitative’ and ‘quantitative’ approaches both have their strengths and weaknesses, so that a combination of the two might be a more fruitful option.’ By using both data forms in this study it was anticipated that a triangulation of results would enable the aims of the study to be met in more depth.

### **Quantitative Data**

The quantitative data took the form of baseline assessments to establish the writing attainment of the children before the start of the study and repeated assessments to establish attainment after ten months exposure to the ‘Talk for Writing’ methodology. Data were collected in the following table for each class (Table II).

**TABLE II**

**SAMPLE TABLE OF INDIVIDUAL DATA FOR EACH OF THE CHILDREN IN THE STUDY**

Child	Year group	No. children in class	EAL**?	BME***?	Pupil Premium*?	Attainment Sept 2012 (level/APS/age band)	Attainment July 2013 (level/APS/age band)
Child 1							
Child 2							
Child 3							
Child 4							
Child 5							
Child 6							

\*Pupil premium – any child who is in receipt of free school meals or has been at any time during the preceding 6 years

\*\* EAL – English as an additional language

\*\*\* BME – of Black or Minority Ethnic origin

**Qualitative Data**

The qualitative data used in this study took the following forms and was analysed according to the parameters below:

**Story Retelling** – This took the form of video based evidence of the children retelling a story known to them at three points during the study, prior to the start, after five months and after ten months. All children were asked the same questions at each recording and transcripts made of their answers. The questions asked of the children were designed to be open ended to allow the children to express their

awareness of stories and features of writing.

The questions asked were:

1. Can you tell me a story?
2. What things do you think are important to think about when you write a story?

The children's responses were compared both on an individual basis during the study and within similar age cohorts.

**Work Samples** - Photographs were taken of the writing produced by the children at two month intervals during the study, with the initial sample being taken prior to the start of the study. The writing produced by the children was independent of teacher or teaching assistant

intervention and was based around the topic being taught in the class at the time. All work was assessed according to the criteria set out in the APP level descriptors or the Early Years Outcomes. Visual comparisons were also made of the writing to establish if there was improvement in the handwriting and presentation of the writing concerned.

**Survey Responses** – At the end of the study, all teachers were sent a questionnaire to respond to in order to establish their thoughts as to the use of ‘Talk for Writing’ as a tool to improve the quality of writing produced by the children in their class. Each teacher was asked to score four statements on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 was low and 10 high. The statements used were as follows:

1. Ease of use of ‘Talk for Writing’ as a teaching method
2. Level of engagement of the children when using ‘Talk for Writing’
3. Overall effectiveness of ‘Talk for Writing’ as a teaching method
4. Ease of delivery of ‘Talk for Writing’ as whole school training

Teachers were also asked if they were using ‘Talk for Writing’ with

their class this academic year and asked to add any additional comments they might have. Teachers were also asked to provide contextual information (see Table I) about their class and school and to provide the quantitative data used for the quantitative data analysis.

Results of study available in Part 2 – next edition

**Curricular note**

Sarah Jerman was an early years teacher in Germany and the South West of England. Her leadership roles included Vice Principal of a large primary school and a moderator for the local authority. Sarah is now the Director of three Teaching Schools, two in the South West of England and one in SW London, positions she has held since 2015.

Bill Jerman was a primary Headteacher in West London for 28 years. He was a National Leader of Education and his school was the lead school in a Teaching School Alliance. He was seconded to work for the National College for Teaching and Leadership (NCTL) with a focus on leadership, system leaders, school improvement and teacher recruitment. He was also worked on international programmes for NCTL. Since 2015, he has been working as an Education and Leadership Consultant in South West England providing support and challenge for schools in school improvement, leadership, closing attainment gaps and school governance.