Exploring language: Literacy conversations in the primary classroom

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It is arguable that after seven years of implementation of 'English in the New Zealand Curriculum' in primary schools, many issues surrounding the appropriate content and pedagogy for exploring language in written language have not been addressed.

Introduction

The process of *exploring language* in written language is possibly the aspect of *English in the New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 1994) least familiar to New Zealand primary school teachers. Indeed, the writers of the *Exploring Language Handbook* recognised that teachers may not have the knowledge to undertake teaching in this curriculum sub-strand given that "teaching about language has not been consistently available to all" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p.2). The priorities of some past reading curriculum policies meant that many teachers experienced minimal teaching about language features and conventions in their own schooling. Furthermore, their teacher education pre-service and professional development programmes have commonly paid scant attention to the pedagogical approaches that are appropriate for this area. It is arguable that after seven years of implementation of *English in the New Zealand Curriculum* in primary schools, many issues surrounding the appropriate content and pedagogy for *exploring language in written language* have not been addressed.

Exploring language: A return to grammar teaching?

The initial resistance to the inclusion of *exploring language* in the new English curriculum at the draft writing stages (on the grounds that it foreclosed a return to grammar teaching), was addressed through a clear commitment on behalf of the curriculum developers to ensure that the content was more expansive (Bendall 1994). As Young (2000, p.122) writes of *exploring language* in the final curriculum statement "[It] was seen as an active process of analysing the language of texts ... to enable better understanding of language and be better able to make effective linguistic choices in their own arenas." Just as *exploring language* was intended to include more than the reinstatement of grammar teaching, the benefits for students were also portended to be more wide-ranging. Leitch (1995, p.26) as a member of the *English in the New Zealand Curriculum* development team, stated that, "the main purpose for exploring and learning about language is in order to describe and discuss the language of others in order to better control and manipulate one's own language." These promised outcomes endorsed the Ministry of Education's belief that *exploring language* knowledge, "expressed in relevant terminology, enables students to talk about texts in an informed way" (Ministry of Education 1994, p.17).

In summary two points become apparent concerning the Ministry of Education's position on this matter and these both relate to issues of teaching content as opposed to pedagogy. The first point is that the Ministry of Education has to some extent undertaken to redress the exclusion of 'knowledge about language' from classroom programmes. The second point is that a return to a narrow curriculum focusing predominantly on the teaching of grammar would be undesirable (Ministry of Education, 1996, p.2). However, the Ministry of Education gives no direction about pedagogical approaches that might be utilised to teach this exploring language content beyond indicating that instruction ought to be located within relevant text-oriented contexts (Ministry of Education, 1996). In Young's analysis of the handbook for exploring language, she notes that "it is not a book focusing on pedagogy, or containing any ideas for classroom practice" (2000, p.130). For this reason teachers are left to decide which approaches they should take. According to Young, children do need to learn about text structures therefore any debate should simply address the manner in which this may be taught. For this reason, research that sheds light on the effectiveness of various pedagogical approaches is urgently needed if children are to truly benefit from an increased knowledge of the language.

Classroom research

Exploring Language: Conversations in the Primary Classroom was a collaborative research project undertaken between classroom teachers and university teachers working as co-researchers in the School of Education at the University of Otago. This project (described hereafter as Phase II) emerged from the findings of a previous *exploring language* research project (Phase I) that had been conducted in a year 0-1 class (Thornley, Read and Eason, 2001). In the Phase I research the authors (above) had investigated the classroom implications of challenges made to the pre-determined objectives structure of *English in the New Zealand Curriculum* (Elley, 1996; Bendall, 1994; Locke, 1996). This investigation had centred on *exploring language.* Specifically, it examined the children's usage and application of technical language associated with text conventions. This technical language had been taught to them through a combination of explicit and inexplicit pedagogies. The context for this teaching had been a study of fiction and non-fiction texts. As a result of this teaching the children were able to use meta-language to discuss the texts that they read and those that they wrote. The Phase I findings confirmed that if the levelled achievement objectives for *exploring language* were used to define the parameters of teaching content for five year old children, their achievement could be unrealistically restricted. While it was considered that these findings were highly significant for the promotion of children's literacy achievement, they also raised significant questions about the effectiveness of implicit and explicit pedagogies for *exploring language*. As Bull (1996) argues this is a significant factor within any curriculum innovation.

> Sometimes the question that needs to be asked is not whether students of a particular age can learn something, but whether it can be taught in such a way that they can understand it. It becomes a question of pedagogy not learning (p.84).

A review of the literature pertaining to pedagogical considerations for 'learning about language' revealed that as recently as 1993, a dialogue had been taking place about the effectiveness and indeed possibility of explicit teaching in children's writing with particular respect to genre. This was significant for our research, as Freedman (1993) had claimed that acquisition of genre was tacit and unable to be speeded up or improved by explicit teaching. Indeed, it was further argued that explicit teaching was inherently unhelpful to novice writers and may actually jeopardize the natural process of learning the rules of discourse within genres. By contrast, Williams and Colomb (1993) claimed that effective teaching would include both explicit and inexplicit strategies. Lankshear (1998) while advocating for more explicit teaching also highlighted the significance of contextualised teaching in order to attain such benefits as contended by Leitch (1995) and the Ministry of Education (1994). Lankshear claimed that there is a need to identify and clarify the language and contextual features of genres and try to relate it to purposes and contexts as tangibly as possible so that learners will not only (ideally) "know how to do it" but also "know what it is that they know how to do" (Lankshear, 1998, p.122).

While this literature served to inform our classroom practice the lack of contemporary New Zealand research that might be used to inform the *exploring language* curriculum strand to enhance children's learning soon became apparent.

It was then decided to seek funding that would facilitate an expansion of Phase I to include the teacher and children from a year 6 class as well as the teachers and children from the two junior classes. A research grant from the University of Otago was awarded for this project extension into Phase II and so began *Exploring Language: Literacy Conversations in the Primary Classroom*. This grant provided release teacher salaries so that the three teachers in the research project could work in the university for one week each term throughout a year. This time was used by them to gather and analyse data through audio-taped interviews and writing samples, engage with the research literature, and reflect on their role as researchers at each point.

Exploring language in the year 0-1 classrooms: Karon and Viv

In Phase I, as part of the classroom reading, writing and library programmes we had focused the attention of the children in the year 0-1 classes on the language features, conventions and structures of fiction and non-fiction texts. Through each discussion we introduced appropriate *exploring language* terminology. This study of fiction and non-fiction conventions dictated exposure to technical language such as index, glossary, contents pages, facts, chapters, information, illustrations, photographs, diagrams, plot, characters, setting as these arose from the range of reading and library text. While we understood this to be explicit teaching within the context of the texts that the children read we wanted them to engage with these terminologies and the ideas that they developed independently, that is in contexts that were meaningful to them.

Following the work of Applebee (1996) we decided to utilise the approach of 'curriculum as conversation' for the *exploring language* learning. In such a curriculum design, children and teachers can initiate conversations from broad questions that when revisited in an ongoing way, constitute themes for study. For example, they may ask why authors make particular choices in their writing or how they make their work humorous or scary. Applebee, considers the strength of this approach is that it allows children to become active in their meaning making. This he describes as 'knowledge-in-action' as opposed to learning about topics and concepts chosen by the teacher or working with 'knowledge-out-of-context' (Thornley, Read and Eason, 2001). This process of 'curriculum as conversation' is not controlled by the teacher alone but by the children who become active participants and curriculum initiators, appreciating that their own knowledge and ideas are worthy of study.

The findings of Phase I indicated that simply as a result of teaching the terminology of fiction and non-fiction text conventions, the children's interest in writing had been sparked and thus having acquired the technical language they used it when discussing their reading. The following comments are evidence of some children's confidence in talking about text:

- I found a non-fiction book with chapters in the contents page.
- Can I please have help finding a non-fiction book about giraffes?
- It's fiction, the author drew the pictures. It didn't have a contents page.
- They sometimes have a contents page. It means you can go and see what the book is about and there is numbers to see what page it's on.

The children also used these understandings to explain the function of hitherto unused conventions in their own writing (Thornley, Read and Eason 2001). We decided then that the success of the contextualised explicit teaching approach was centred on the children's acquisition of knowledge about the structures and conventions of texts and their mastery of a vocabulary to articulate this knowledge. For many of the children their independent application of these new concepts particularly in the area of non-fiction became self-sustaining as they experimented in their own writing with the usage of the text conventions for their audiences. This is explained by Wolf and Gearheart (1994, p.428) who claim that

> Good writers have important things they want to say and many of these things stem from their own experience and active imagination. Still we argue that they are better equipped to say these things if they are given multiple opportunities to read and talk extensively and analytically about text.

It was therefore decided to replicate this work with the new cohort of children in the junior classes for Phase II. In this phase of the project we wanted

- to see whether the children would apply such understandings and knowledge to a 'range of texts' (Ministry of Education 1994, p.36) beyond the non-fiction that became so popular in the first project,
- to ascertain the ways in which explicit teaching of fiction structures through the use of appropriate terminology would influence their writing, and
- to find out if the children considered that they were influenced in their writing by the texts that they read.

For this reason we began Phase II by allowing the children to make their own decisions concerning the text conventions, structures and content of their writing. We were then able to undertake an analysis of their writing preferences from their writing samples and substantiate our findings from the children's responses to interview questions about their choices. From an analysis of the data taken from the interview transcripts, together with the writing samples, it became evident that the children preferred to write personal non-fiction (recount) and to read fiction. We believed that this may have accounted for the fact that they did not appear to transfer knowledge of text conventions or ideas for content from the fiction literature that they read to their own writing. With the previous cohort of children we had some evidence that the contextualised explicit teaching approach had changed this practice with respect to non-fiction. That is we observed a substantial increase in the usage of non-fiction writing and the associated text conventions.

At this point the data that we've collected took the form of story samples from the children's own writing in the classroom or at their homes. These data showed that within a few weeks of the introduction of the story-telling approach, some children were experimenting with the beginning, middle and ending structure when formulating their own written narratives. Initially they found that any plot development, such as linking the story ending to the beginning, was challenging so we continued to use the classroom narrative books that they read to highlight such models. We also discussed this aspect of their writing with them as they read over their completed work to us. Increasingly we noticed that the children would attempt to incorporate this aspect of narrative structure into their work.

It was planned then to teach more about the structure of fiction, and to concentrate initially on the construction of narrative plots specifically using the terms beginning, middle and end. The explicit teaching was located within the context of an oral story-telling procedure where the children were involved in shared story-telling activities. Simply, the teacher began the story-telling, creating the opening elements of the plot and setting, the children continued it and the teacher then concluded it, thus creating an original story.

> There was a big brown fluffy bear and there was a scrumptious cake. The big bear said, "That looks scrumptious" as his mouth watered. He looked at the cake and he said "I'm going to eat that cake all up" and then the cake wriggled around in the bear's tummy. Then the bear spat it out.

While many of the narratives were written to contain a series of events and these were often quite clearly linked through the plot, the stories were characteristically too brief to detail the essentials of time or setting. The example below was unusual in its description of the road and the taste of the water. However there is an indication that while the author understood that such information might be relevant for the reader he could not discriminate between those aspects of the plot and setting that needed further development. The reader is left to wonder why the bunny needed to drink so much water and whether this is linked to the clapping of its hands while walking down the road.

> Once upon a time they saw a bunny walking down the footpath. It was clapping its hands. It made shadows on the road. The road was

black and the lines were white. The bunny walked to the river and it drank the water. The water was too salty that the bunny spat it out and said "I'm not going to drink this water again".

For those people who are familiar with early narrative writing the plot resolutions included here appear to be less predictable than those commonly written in young children's writing. 'It was just a dream' or 'then we had a party' seldom featured in story endings. However the use of dialogue conveying finality became quite common for this purpose. We had not discussed the ways in which dialogue is used for the development of character but the writing indicated that the children had some understandings of how it could be used to convey action within the plot.

> Once upon a time there lived two Billy Goats Gruff. They were too scared because there was a tiger under the bridge. Baby Billy Goat had an idea. We will trick the tiger by saying "I'm not juicy I haven't got skin on my bones."

Perhaps not surprisingly the content of many of the children's early experiments with the narrative structure included topics of personal significance similar to those that they would have used in the recounts that had previously been so popular. However, it was not uncommon for them to incorporate elements of both fiction and non-fiction in their own work such as in this retelling of a family situation through a fairy tale.

> A long time ago there lived a tiger who was very sad because his wife ran away. "I might send my wife a letter to make her come back." Even Grandma said "I don't know when she is coming back."

While the focus on the beginning, middle and end started to feature quite readily in the children's conversations about their writing the notion of characters was also something that the children were beginning to discuss. The influence of the many examples of fiction featuring animals as characters became obvious also and was affirmed in this tape transcript.

B: We think about what to write...and we think about the characters

T: So when you think about characters what sort of things do you have to think about?

B: What animal you want to pick.

As teachers of emergent writers we were very aware of the restrictions and barriers that occur for novice writers in their construction of written text as explained by Bereiter and Scardamelia:

> For children first learning to write, the mechanics of the process clearly take up most of their mental capacity, and they have little left over to devote to such concerns about content (1982, p.64).

In the subsequent interviews we attempted to overcome this by capturing oral constructions of narrative text. We asked the children if they had stories that they were going to write and the results demonstrated that some children were able to verbalise narratives which included a beginning, middle and ending even if they were not writing them. The interviews revealed that commonly they composed the structure and content in their heads prior to recording their ideas on paper. Many children said they knew their story prior to the actual task of writing. We inferred from this that when they had started committing their ideas to paper they had already made decisions about structure and content and this was evidenced from the number who could readily do this at the start.

T: When you start writing stories do you know what's going to happen in the middle and at the end?

S: Yeah

T: Have you got another idea in your head right now?

S: Yeah

T: Tell me about your next fiction story

S: um it's going to be about Harry who went to town.

T: Who's Harry?

S: Its my rabbit.

> Once upon a time when my sister let Harry out and she let him go on the grass to eat and then he thought I'll just go to the bus-stop and then he went on the bus.

T: Oh and what happened next?

S: um he sat down where no one was sitting and then he um gave the money to the payer and then he went to go and sit down...

These findings supported Turner's (1995, p.413) claim that when children are engaged in discussions about "how writers think and plan, [children] are more likely to adapt to such attitudes and values to guide their future literacy actions". The children did engage in dialogue about their writing and many attempted to use narrative structures but the use of the text conventions that were associated with non-fiction appeared to be both more obvious and more enthusiastically embraced by novice writers in the Phase I research. We attributed this to the idea that many non-fiction conventions that we taught are more tangible and transparent, for example the inclusion of an index or a glossary, and therefore easier to apply. The purpose of these conventions may also be more accessible to the experiences of the novice reader for whom narrative features are more implicit. However, the use of contextualised explicit teaching approaches to demonstrate the structure of texts had changed the writing behaviour of many of the children, who maintained their enthusiasm for writing while developing their understanding of narrative.

At the completion of this research, we believed that the usage of books to provide examples for children's writing remained important. We thought that they provided examples of structure and content that could inspire the children in their decision-making. Further they provided us the context for the explicit teaching that was needed in *exploring language*. However, from the interview

transcripts it was evident that the children did not conceptualise or explain the significance that other writing may hold for them. For example when asked about the origins of their ideas the children claimed that they came to them *when I thinked hard,* or from *in my brain* or by *figuring it out*. Such responses clearly indicate the relevance of on-going conversations with children about their learning as they too have clear ideas about effective pedagogies that must inform our teaching practice.

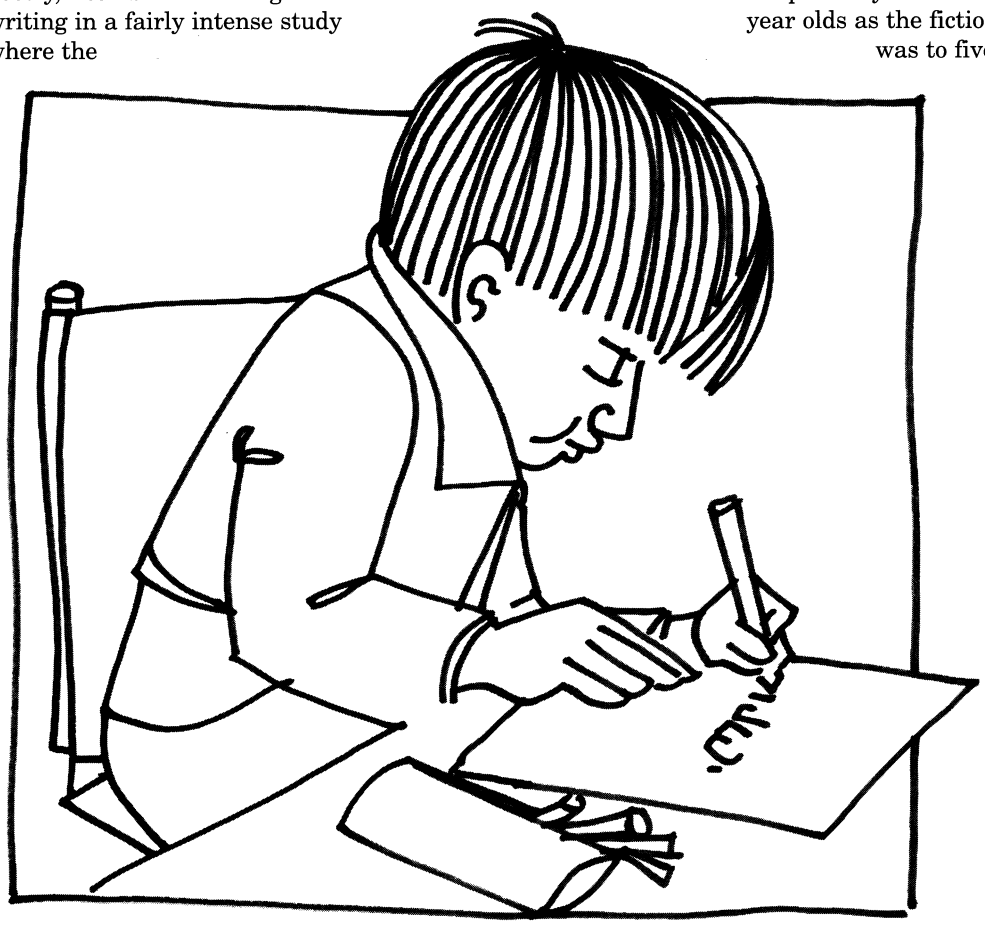
The year 6 project: Rae

In the year six class, I wanted to use as wide a variety of teaching methods as possible. My aim was not to point to the relative success of any one method over another, but rather to see whether good results could be obtained in *exploring language* by a mix of techniques, that is the 'explicit and inexplicit' strategies of Williams & Colomb (1993). Particularly, I wanted to investigate whether explicit teaching of language conventions and features might have a valuable role after such a long absence from pedagogy as described earlier in this paper.

In teaching two units of work on poetry, I combined reading and writing in a fairly intense study where the children read and/or wrote poems every day. The first exposure was to longer, narrative poetry. We used as main examples, *The Worst Band in the Universe* by Graeme Base; a new edition of *The Highwayman* by Alfred Noyes, illustrated by Charles Keeping; and another Australian publication, *The Spangled Drongo* by Steven Herrick. While the first two are written in traditional ballad form with strong, regular metre and rhyme, the third (just to blur the boundaries of genre a little) is a short novel written in free verse and with a realistic modern setting. We didn't attempt to write this kind of poetry at all. Rather we did many other activities in response to the text such as character webs, painting, illustrating part of the poems, and acting some of the incidents from the poems, as well as a little prose writing such as rewriting *The Highwayman* as a prose story and illustrating it.

Through exposure to narrative verse, close reading of parts of it, 'playing' with it in the above ways, and discussion of the language features of this type of writing, the children developed a familiarity with narrative poetry. Perhaps most importantly, they had seen for themselves that enjoyable poetry didn't necessarily have to rhyme. From previous efforts to get children writing good quality poetry, it was clear that children of this age perceived that the most important language feature of poetry is rhyme. Is it the only feature they are aware of? Certainly, it is a barrier to effective writing at this age. I have encountered very few ten year olds able to handle the use of rhyme without sacrificing basic meaning, finding their own voice, speaking from the heart, much less looking for the right word or felicitous phrase to best express their meaning.

Later in the year we returned to poetry reading and writing, this time studying shorter lyric poems, dependent for their effect on the language and ideas used rather than any narrative component. The language features I wanted children to learn about and use, were: repetition; using the senses as a vehicle for description; similes; metaphor; alliteration. I wanted to attempt to replicate as closely as possible the work of the year one teachers, and felt that these stylistic devices would probably be as unfamiliar to most ten year olds as the fiction/non-fiction concept was to five year olds.



The teaching approach varied from feature to feature. The less accessible to osmotic or tacit acquisition of understanding the feature appeared to be, the more explicit teaching was utilised. Hence the use of repetition was hardly referred to as such, since its use in poems the children read was obvious and powerful enough to allow children to use it simply as a result of modelling. Some children repeated a phrase which gave their poem the framework or structure it was built on:

Frost

Have you ever tasted the frost?

The frost that sits on the grass outside your house?

Have you ever felt the frost?

The frost that sits on the palm of your hand?

Have you ever seen the frost?

The frost that melts on the treetops?

Have you ever heard the frost?

The frost that crunches underneath your shoes?

In this poem, the main teaching point was using the senses as a lead-in to description. The poet has obviously picked up on this with ease, but has also used the language feature of repetition which the modelled poem used; the 'Have you ever?' beginning to each line. In another example of the use of repetition, a whole line is repeated, and also one word, 'sometimes', used in a syntactically unusual way which gives interest and a rhythmic 'feel' to the poem.

A Person I Know

I know a person very well

She does my hair in the morning sometimes

I know a person very well

She helps me with my homework sometimes

I know a person very well

And she is my sister.

Repetition as a device was not referred to before the children wrote their own poems; the word was used in sharing their writing when for the first time I specifically mentioned repetition as a language feature they had used. More explicit was the explanation of the terms 'simile' and 'metaphor'. Although it was not felt to be of particular importance that the children learn these terms, it certainly made discussion easier to be able to name the figure of speech with a common understanding of what was meant by it, and in fact the children fairly quickly picked up this 'technical vocabulary'. The children were very enthusiastic about using these language features in their own writing. The success with which they were used varied; while children seemed to find it easy to remember that a simile usually had the word 'like' or 'as ..... as' and a metaphor didn't, they didn't all fully understand that both involve the comparison of unlike things for effect. Some wrote lines such as "Water is like flowing liquid" and others used comparisons that were uncomfortable if thought through:

The pepper that burns your mouth

Like a heater that you turn on in the morning

Many however came up with comparisons that were satisfying and creative.

Have you seen the hut with its

Smoking chimney as if it was

Trying to say "Hello, do come in"?

The thunder is a roaring giant

Big and fierce.

Then the lightning hits a tree

With a huge force

The thunder stomps around the burnt

Tree while it sighs &

Collapses.

Thunder-as-giant is a commonplace image, but that this writer has sustained the metaphor from the first to the fifth line I think shows the power the image had for the poet herself, at least. We must remember that what is banal to the adult reader may have the force of originality to the child writer/reader.

Rain is the tears of the sky above

As it is poked and prodded by planes

Is the alliteration in this example deliberate? The metaphor undoubtedly is. I often wished it were possible to learn more about the children's deliberate choices of language. In the poem 'Lion' the first two lines are

I am a lion

Full of pride

Is the pun deliberate? The poet in question didn't know what I meant by 'pun' which stymied any further discussion. To hold effective literacy conversations, children do seem to need to be equipped with at least a rudimentary technical vocabulary.

Subjectively, then, I found the children's poetry from this work better overall than poetry written in earlier years with little or no explicit teaching of language features. More sophisticated language features had been used and it seemed that the children found their writing 'voice' more easily once they were familiar and comfortable using the strategies for poetry writing they had been equipped with. Though there is evidence to show that lengthy and frequent classroom discussion may hinder the output of children's writing; that in 'writing classrooms' where much attention is given to sharing and discussion of writing, less actual writing may take place than in environments where the talk is not such a focus, yet I felt that in this instance the amount of pre-and post writing talk time had been valuable in clarifying children's understandings of both the terms we were using, and how the language features could be used to strengthen the power of their writing.

Following the work on poetry, we interviewed the children themselves to find out what their feelings were about the type of teaching and learning we had been engaged in. Children indicated their own

pleasure in their work, and in summary found it both easier and more satisfying to have learnt about the language features and practised using them.

The following are examples of what the children said about poetry writing

T: What can you tell me about writing poems?

C: Well we've learnt more than other years, and it's more easier to write poems.

M: Yeah, before, the teacher might just say write a poem about .... a ... whatever, and you wouldn't really know how.

W: Yeah, it helps when you know more, you make more poems and it sounds more satisfying.

I wanted to find out just how the children thought they had 'learnt more' and whether they felt that exposure alone to language features enabled learning, or whether some form of direct instruction was needed. At this point it became apparent that the children's ability to articulate their thinking was inadequate to this level of discourse – the lack of technical vocabulary? – but what they said was still quite illuminating.

T: So did it help your poetry writing, having me read poems to you first?

C: Well I got an idea from something you said, and then I thought I could do something like that, and then thought about it and I got another idea totally different .....

D: Um, well it gave you ideas what to write about.

L: Yep and words you could use.

S: Um another thing I like reading poems because when you go to write a poem by yourself you get more ideas.

So far the children seemed to be talking about ideas for the content of their poems (*thinking critically* rather than *exploring language*, perhaps), so we went on to investigate how they had felt about the explicit teaching that had occurred.

T: What about the things that we learnt in the poems like similes and metaphors and so on, were those things helpful to your poetry writing?

W: You can describe things .... metaphors ...

H: And when you go to get some similes it helps you, like you can't, you know what one is.

K: Well it actually helped me think what I'm actually going to write about.

G: It gave me a bit more ideas, what to write.

L: Well it's much easier from other years, cause we didn't really know much ..... about like metaphors, and ...

J: I didn't even know what a metaphor was ..... I didn't even know that there was one.

T: And now that you do, has it made writing poetry more fun for you?

Chorus: Yes, definitely etc.

T: Do you think your poetry is better than it used to be?

Chorus: Yes, definitely etc.

Conclusion: Implications for teachers

We consider that this study affirms the *exploring language* strand in *English in the New Zealand Curriculum* as a fundamental component of literacy teaching. The year 0-1 and year 6 children acquired new skills and understandings in written language. In particular they learned terminology that allowed them to articulate these understandings with reference to their own reading and writing. It is evident that through their exploration of language they would increasingly be able to make informed and conscious choices of language (Ministry of Education, 1994, p.17).

The teaching approaches that were employed at years 0-1 and year 6 comprised a three-step cycle. At first we ensured significant exposure to the language features and text conventions through the texts that we read and discussed with the children. This teaching was followed by a combination of implicit and explicit teaching of such features and the terminology used to describe them within the genre under focus. Possibly the most important part of this process was giving the children the opportunity to practice making decisions and to discuss these ideas in the context of conversations about their own writing.

The children's conversations about language based on their own reading and writing could only take place because of their newly acquired knowledge. From our experiences we know that where children have been taught about text conventions without the technical vocabulary they have not always been able to articulate their understandings. We believe that the goal for us as classroom teachers must be to ensure that children throughout the primary school increasingly experience the benefits of literacy learning that allows them to access knowledge about text structures and language features.

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