

**Supporting student growth in syntactical fluency as writers:
A paired learning approach**

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SALLY BARRETT



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Abstract

The widespread belief that the traditional teaching of grammar is ineffective in enhancing student writing has contributed to a reduction in the teaching of formal grammar in the New Zealand English curriculum. At the same time and perhaps as a consequence students have little understanding about how language functions and what is needed to communicate effectively in writing. There has been widespread debate about the role grammar might play in enhancing writing effectiveness. This thesis will present the results of an intervention-centred inquiry involving the introduction of syntax in the context of teaching writing. The purpose of the research was to examine whether the teaching of syntactical concepts and structures at point of need enhanced students' writing, and how pairs, writing their stories alongside each other, might be utilised to provide productive, formative feedback. Pre- and post-intervention writing was collected as well as a questionnaire and attitudinal survey data on grammatical knowledge and writing confidence. Students subsequently worked on writing a narrative utilising the grammatical features taught during class activities. Over an eight-week period, teacher interventions included 'incidental' grammar lessons, inductive lessons where students were guided to notice grammatical patterns, conferencing together over problems, and mini-lessons that involved applying a strategy in the writing pairs. The results indicate significant improvement in areas of fluency and syntactical sophistication.

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Chapter 1

The problem of teaching writing

1.1 Introduction

The thesis is predicated on the knowledge that writing is a difficult cognitive activity and that writing ability lags behind reading ability, particularly for secondary students (Graham & Perin, 2007a). It also recognises that failure to master the requirements of writing by secondary school level will have implications for a student's progress at university, in the workplace and beyond (Graham & Perin, 2007a). This has prompted some to declare that there exists a crisis in terms of writing achievement and recognition that this situation needs to be addressed.

The thesis canvasses the recent debates around the efficacy of teaching grammar, the so called grammar wars, whilst recognising that the vast amount of research on the subject has found that decontextualized grammar instruction is unhelpful in advancing writing competence and, in fact, may even be harmful (Elley, Barham, Lamb & Wylie., 1975; Hillocks, 1986). It explores the idea that grammar can be taught differently and effectively in the context of writing, with the object of providing students with the techniques that will help them take ownership of their work, ultimately becoming designers of their own texts (Myhill, 2009), and thus become meaning-makers with the means to respond to the demands of school writing challenges and beyond. Many researchers in the field have made the point that this is an under-researched area, one that has not generated a body of theory to date (Myhill, Jones, Lines & Watson 2012; Weaver, 2010). By examining the introduction of syntactical concepts within the context of writing, the research

explores the kind of grammar that is best suited to the endeavour of writing, a rhetorical grammar used as a tool to produce more effective writing.

1.2 Key research questions

An important goal of the research was to embed the introduction and use of grammatical concepts in the writing process, bringing together and making use of a range of pedagogical strategies that can be labelled as part of the writing process.

Specifically, the research sought to answer the following questions:

- Does the teaching of syntactical concepts and structures at point of need, enhance and improve students' written work?
- Is there a place for contextualized grammar instruction in relation to sentence structure?
- How can paired groupings be utilised to provide productive formative feedback on syntactical fluency?

1.3 Purpose and significance

The motivation for this research was a belief that students who found writing difficult could be helped by explicitly being taught syntax whilst they wrote, and that peer relationships would help to reinforce concepts learnt and give necessary feedback during the writing process. A premise was that while students absorb the structures of language (tacit knowledge), they require explicit teaching if they are to be successful as writers. As a classroom teacher I have often observed students struggle to express their ideas clearly, and I have found their poor understanding of sentence structure makes it difficult to explain how they might improve their writing. As a teacher I believe it is important that every student has access to the genres of power, and by that I mean that they be given every opportunity to be successful at school and particularly in the demanding business of writing.

I was aware both from my own experience in the classroom and through my reading of relevant scholarly literature that teaching grammar as a stand-alone

exercise without any reference to the writing process was a futile exercise. However, I had, like Sams (2003), become increasingly frustrated by the lack of impact from the writing techniques I saw in schools and in my own teaching practice. I had used a range of techniques designed to enhance the generation of ideas and planning along with techniques to assist in structuring paragraphs. I also experimented with placing students in writing groups at various different stages of the writing process. Along with these initiatives, I endeavoured to make sure that the students were exposed to a variety of interesting texts and to use these as models for writing tasks.

Each of these ventures had some success but, ultimately, did not make a great deal of impact on the quality of the writing and the clarity of what was being expressed. Often I could see that a student had produced original ideas but that the impact of these was affected negatively by the way their sentences were constructed. This was not merely a concern with surface-feature correctness and easily corrected punctuation. Instead, this appeared to be something much deeper, a lack of sensitivity for what constituted a clear and cogent sentence. This was not confined to the junior classroom but was a malady apparent across the board in both junior and senior classes.

I realised that remedying this problem would be difficult for two reasons. Firstly, conversations with students over sentence structure issues were rendered difficult because many of them had little or no background knowledge about syntax and, secondly, this situation could not be ameliorated by teaching traditional grammar. It was not until I began reading articles by Sams (2003), a classroom teacher who had experienced similar frustrations with her students, and later, Weaver (1996) and Myhill (2009), that I began to realise that there were ways of teaching students to use knowledge about syntax to improve their writing – while they were writing. I was also heartened when I read about code-switching (Wheeler, 2008) – how it was possible to deliberately and successfully teach syntax to improve student writing.

I recognised that students did not arrive in my classes with a meta-language or an equal facility with language and that this deficit had nothing to do with intellectual ability. I have come to realise that these circumstances are the result

of a number of factors. Prior (2006) explains that in order to understand how learning happens, and this includes failures to learn the official curriculum, the specific nature of classroom interaction and the powerful role schools play as a site of writing development, must be heeded. He posits that it is the connections between school and community in relation to literacy practice that researchers should explore in order to improve the advantages for students ‘whose life worlds are underrepresented in schooled practices’ (Prior, 2006 p. 62). In other words, writing is a social practice and therefore influenced by social forces, both at school and outside of the classroom in terms of social background, that may leave students inadequately prepared to meet the challenges of schooling and life beyond.

Socio-cultural studies have sought to understand how writing is used and learned in school, and also how school writing is located in the larger and deeper currents of sociocultural practice (Prior, 2006). Heath’s (1982) study of literacies in three communities in the United States recognised that literate practices are first met in the home and community and the particular form of these practices may conflict with school literacies (Prior, 2006). Teaching syntax in a socially situated way, as trialled in my own study, seeks to mitigate these lacks and utilize the power of such socially situated practices as peer conferencing and feedback.

While many instructional models assume that competence resides within the individual, the socio-cultural perspective shifts attention to the role of social context in accounting for the development of students’ competence (Englert & Mariage, 2003). This thesis draws on socio-cultural theories of writing, utilising the theories of Vygotsky (1962) and Bakhtin (1981) to explore classroom writing practice and the effect of talk-mediated collaboration. It employs Vygotsky’s (1978) theory that it is social interaction that enables people to develop advanced thoughts – usually through repeated interactions – and that at the heart of this is language. Vanderburg (2006) explains that in Vygotskian terms, language is the container holding and passing thoughts from one individual to another. In Vygotsky’s view written language grows from oral language, which in turn becomes a container of ideas, transferring ideas and experiences which become part of a writer’s inner speech (Vanderburg, 2006). Often a difference exists between what children can do by themselves and what they can do with help.

Vygotsky called this difference the zone of proximal development. This was an important feature of the peer interactions in this research. Dyson (1990) makes the point that peers can provide instruction every bit as effective as the teacher. When students are given the opportunity to discuss their work and develop their ideas together they are able to aid each other through their zone of proximal development in writing, especially with peers who are more advanced writers (Vanderburg, 2006).

My aim in this research was to investigate the effect of a collaborative classroom where I worked alongside my students to enhance their ability to express themselves through writing. My role as teacher shifted from providing students with solutions strategies, to guiding their thinking so that they could assume control over their own work and make decisions about which strategies to use (Wong, Harris, Graham & Butler, 2003). This is especially useful in classrooms where there are a range of abilities and where some students are unable to perform all the tasks by themselves. In this situation peer support provides a compensatory mechanism enabling strugglers to overcome obstacles they might not overcome alone (Jenkins & O'Connor, 2003).

In this respect I was keen to ensure that the atmosphere of the classroom be characterised by a sense of excitement and experimentation. Students work best when they enjoy what they are doing (Hiebert, 1994; Larson, Hecker & Norem, 1985). For this reason my goal was that the way writing and writing instruction was carried out during the intervention should be different in character from the kinds of experience the students may have encountered up to this point, that is, classrooms where writing is highly individualistic or assessment driven. Instead, I was keen to develop a workshop quality in the classroom, one where students would come to see themselves as writers writing in community with others.

Consistent with the idea of the writing community was the idea of the 'dialogic,' as proposed by Bakhtin (1981), that asserts that the voices of others become woven into what we say, write and think, what Wertsch and Smolka (1993) describe as 'the various ways in which two or more voices come into contact' (p. 73). Extended dialogue and feedback is a means of helping students improve the quality of their writing (Baker, Gersten & Graham, 2003). Kucan and Beck

(1997) argue convincingly for the role of dialogue as an essential element of both reading and writing instruction, because it represents ‘the shift from identifying teaching discrete strategies to focusing on students’ efforts to make ideas or build their own understanding of them through dialogue’ (p. 285, cited from Baker, Gersten & Graham, 2003, p.115) . Talk, Dyson (2004) explains, facilitates the writing process because it helps to generate reflection; she argues that students require ‘a sea of talk’ (p. 1) to become writers.

1.4 The approach

The intervention was part of a unit of work that incorporated a study of a variety of texts that later served as models of writing. An important aspect of introducing grammar that the students could utilise as they wrote was to create spaces where they could stop and experiment with language that they could later incorporate into their writing. This involved the use of what Englert, Mariage and Dunsmore (2006) call tools, that is, the mental, linguistic and physical devices used to enhance a writer’s performance – features that make the concepts more visible, accessible and attainable (Englert, Mariage & Dunsmore, 2006). In this case the tools often assumed a physical dimension, with the use of tape recorders, smartboards, mini-whiteboards, and activities involving the rearrangement of sentences that had been previously cut up into large strips of paper.

The idea was to promote experimentation with sentence variety and enjoyment whilst working closely with a peer. These activities began with sentence-combining exercises, developed further with such tasks as changing the order of a sentence, adding adjectives, adverbs and phrases, and later explored changes in tense through a process of re-writing sentences and paragraphs. Often the activities generated a degree of competition between writing pairs, vying with each other to come up with original and innovative sentences.

As the students wrote and experimented, they worked closely with a peer who was either a stronger or weaker writer. To facilitate the efficacy of this relationship the class co-constructed, with teacher guidance, a feedback sheet to use for written or oral comments. This kind of environment freed me as the teacher to switch

roles from expert to facilitator according to the demands of the lesson. At times the lessons were teacher-led with whole class involvement and at other times I was able to work with pairs, small groups or individual students. The creation of a workshop environment allowed for some degree of fluidity as the intervention progressed.

I viewed the nature of the intervention as suited to a mixed methods, action research, case study practitioner inquiry. Researching as a practitioner meant that I was inquiring into an area I had realised was a need in the class, a realisation gained through years of classroom experience in the teaching of writing, rather than a topic whose origin was from outside experts (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, 2009). This methodology was appropriate because it allowed me as teacher to be responsive to the changing needs of the class. It meant that on many occasions activities were changed or modified, so that more time could be allotted when concepts were difficult or when revision was needed. Because the ultimate aim was for the students to compose their own stories, time was required for them to write in class and to receive feedback from their peer and on many occasions from me, the teacher.

The attitudes and discourses about writing that the students brought to the class in many ways shaped how they approached writing tasks. Many of the students disliked writing, often because they perceived themselves as poor writers. Dutro, Kazemi and Balf (2006) make the point that it is very easy for teachers to make quick and often negative judgements about students' writing, with students constructed as struggling based on pre-conceived or prejudiced notions of what constitutes success. To avoid this situation and to ameliorate the effects of past failure or self-doubt on the part of the students, it was necessary to create a distinctly different atmosphere in the classroom – one where the students felt free to experiment, where enjoyment was paramount, and where they were free to make mistakes and ask for help, in the knowledge that someone else would take the time to help them and that their efforts were valued. The intention was to have another student take time to write worthwhile feedback or give thoughtful comment that would help students see the endeavour of writing in a new light and themselves as writers, perhaps for the first time.

1.5 Outline of thesis

The thesis will begin with a review of theories of teaching writing and research on the place of grammar instruction in the classroom, focusing on new research that makes a case for teaching grammar in the context of a writing programme. Along with this, it will review research on the use of cooperative classrooms and their potential to enhance the teaching of writing. It will proceed by outlining why the use of an action research, teacher practitioner case study methodology, that uses mixed methods generated data, was suited to this piece of research. This will be followed by chapters that outline the intervention, detail the findings, and discuss their implications for the teaching of grammar in the context of a writing programme that uses a cooperative classroom. The final chapter will make suggestions for future initiatives.

Chapter 2

A review of writing pedagogy

'A common explanation for why youngsters do not write well is that schools do not do a good job of teaching this complex skill' (Graham & Perin, 2007, p. 445).

2.1 Introduction

This chapter critically reviews scholarship which examines the teaching of grammar in the writing classroom. It canvasses the differing viewpoints on the place of an explicit focus on grammar in writing instruction and ventures some conclusions on this issue. It also explores the literature on co-operative learning theories and their contribution to the teaching of writing. In so doing, it lays a foundation for the study which follows. It outlines the case for the explicit teaching of grammar in the context of writing in the environment of a co-operative classroom that allows some student autonomy.

Writing is a profound activity, something that can have far-reaching consequences in a person's life. In his meta-analysis of adolescent writing, Graham and Perin (2007) observed that writing facilitates communication, it promotes a sense of heritage, it persuades, it combats loneliness, and it is beneficial psychologically and physiologically. Because writing is at the heart of our identities as human beings, it touches all aspects of our lives. Failure to master this practice may equate to failure later on. Adolescents who do not learn to write well are at a disadvantage, their chances of attending tertiary education are reduced, their prospects in employment are affected, and as adults they are less able to participate fully in civic life. Despite the importance of writing, too many

youngsters do not learn to write well enough to meet the demands of school or the workplace. Teaching students to write, and write well, therefore, is a serious but difficult undertaking.

Writing is difficult and, accordingly, the teaching of writing is complex and problematic. Myhill, Jones, Lines and Watson (2012) assert that writing is ‘perhaps the most complex activity learners undertake, drawing on cognitive, social and linguistic resources’ (p. 144). This may explain why, according to the America’s National Commission on Writing (2003), writing is the most neglected of the three Rs in the classroom. Some, like novelist Edna O’Brien, wonder if it can ever be taught because, as she claims, ‘Writing is secretive. You can’t teach it’ (Dass, 2012). The question is, then, can this essentially creative and, some might add, individual endeavour be developed in students, and if so, by what techniques?

Research into writing has examined how best to achieve this. Initial empirical research was fuelled by efforts to understand the nature of writing as a prerequisite to improving instruction. However, Beard, Myhill, Riley and Nystrand (2009) note that the field of writing research is neither a unified nor a coherent one. Instead, it is characterised by competing theoretical frameworks which adopt very different methodological, epistemological and ontological stances. The chapter begins by providing a brief outline of the primary writing theories that have informed classroom writing practice.

2.2 Writing theory

2.2.1 Process writing

An explicit focus on the teaching of writing emerged with the process writing movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Process writing approaches to classroom practice reflect ideas that had their genesis in the philosophies of John Dewey in the early Twentieth Century. His view was that education should transform society by promoting the growth of the individual through personal discovery. In this child-centred pedagogy, the teacher was no longer regarded as the expert and repository of knowledge. Rather, the teacher’s role was that of a facilitator

encouraging the student to find his or her personal voice and to draw on personal experience for writing topics. This move to process was a paradigm shift that had its beginnings in the Dartmoor Seminar of 1963 and the publication of Janet Emig's (1971) *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders* (Fiagley 1986; Nystrand 2006).

Before Dartmouth, discourse about writing in the United States was mainly instructional, focusing on prescriptive text features of model prose. This traditional conception of writing was sharply critiqued at the Anglo-American conference which condemned the formulaic nature of school writing and proposed an alternative structure, one which emphasised Dixon's (1967) theories of personal growth regarding language development. Dixon believed that reading and writing were cognitive and expressive processes that shaped and extended everyday experience by bringing it 'into new relationships with old elements' (p. 9). Another Dartmouth participant, Moffett (1968) asserted that this meant that 'the stuff to be conceived and verbalised is primarily the raw stuff of life, not language matters themselves' (p. 114).

Given the concern to facilitate the process rather than provide direct instruction (Hillocks 1984), the process model was non-directional with little teacher intervention (Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2006). In reality, this meant teachers did not give specific assignments, help students learn criteria for judging writing, structure activities based on specific objectives, or provide exercises in manipulating syntax. Therefore, it is not surprising that the research Hillocks reviewed in 1984 showed negligible impact on student writing as a consequence of the process mode. However, over time the process model has evolved to accommodate the use of a variety of new instructional strategies (Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2006).

Today, criticism of process approaches draw attention to the way that they privilege literate students, those whose family language practices resemble that of 'correct' grammar, and do not cater for those whose language traditions or culture are different from the mainstream. For example, students whose first language is not English have been viewed as at a distinct disadvantage in relation to process approaches. Sperling and Freedman (2001) explain that this comparative

advantage/disadvantage reflects that what children learn is immensely influenced by acculturation and immersion in the reading and writing of mainstream texts. This, they claim, is something process approaches have failed to take into consideration, concentrating as they do on personal experience.

2.2.2 Writing as social practice and genre theory

As a result of research by cognitive theorists Flower and Hayes (1981) and, later, Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987), practitioners began to recognise that the writing process was recursive and not linear. Flowers and Hayes developed a cognitive model of writing processes that identified the components and organisation of long-term memory, planning, reviewing, and translating thought into text by drawing on the think-aloud protocols used by professional writers. These new understandings about how the mind operates during the composing process amounted to a ‘cognitive revolution’ according to Nystrand (2006).

A challenge to the cognitive model came from sociocultural theory which asserted that language is a social act with far reaching consequences in our lives. Nystrand (1982, p. 19) reasoned that ‘the special relations that define written language functioning, and promote its meaningful use, are wholly circumscribed by the systematic relations that obtain in the speech community of the writer.’

Espousing sociocultural theory has implications for how we understand the role of the school in the way students access language and make use of it for writing. Bakhtin’s (1986) theories firmly place the individual within a social context, one where the individual influences the social world just as the social world influences the individual. Embedded in all our consciousness are multiple languages - heteroglossia - reflecting different aspects of our lives – these are not always harmonious and are often in conflict. It is when these discourses come into dialogic relationship with one another that an individual begins to form an identity. This is what Bakhtin (1986) describes as ideological becoming – the evolution of one’s identity and ideas. Bakhtin’s concept of ideological becoming is a process of transformation that begins with engaging in authoritative discourse that becomes an internally persuasive discourse. This calls for the utilisation of

multiple voices. In Bahktinian terms, this is ‘critical interanimation’, a process of continually transmitting and interpreting the words of others. By choosing the utterances we want to appropriate, we choose the stance we want to take. Bakhtin (1986) demonstrated how the voices of others become woven into what we say, write and think (Koschmann, 1999).

The theories of Vygotsky (1962) offered an explanation for the role of social interaction in creating an environment for students to learn language. From this perspective, learning is bound up in purposeful action that is mediated by various tools, the most important of which is language. Langer and Applebee (1986) illustrate the importance of Vygotsky’s theories when they explain that the acquisition of higher level skills is the result of learning through social relationships. Therefore, as children become literate, they learn the processes inherent in socially meaningful literacy activities. In this way, ‘processes that are initially mediated socially become resources available to the individual user’ (Langer & Applebee, 1986 p. 172). It is what ‘children can do with the assistance of others that is more indicative of their mental development than what they can do alone’ (Vygotsky 1962, cited in Langer and Applebee, 1986). Vygotsky (1962) found that a child’s efforts to solve concrete intellectual problems with others had its origins in its social development. This perspective emphasises the way thinking occurs interpersonally, as people interact in social contexts, before it becomes intrapersonal, that is, in the mind of the individual (Daiute & Dalton 1993). Such thinking has implications for how we understand the role of the school in the way students access language and make use of it for writing.

One implication of these insights is the realisation that negotiating the demands of school life requires mastering the language of the most socially dominant genres (Donovan & Smolkin, 2006). This is an important contribution of genre theory. The development of genre pedagogy was the result of relationships between teachers and discourse linguists, both of whom were concerned that the school system had largely given up the explicit teaching of writing in favour of a progressive ideology of personal growth (Rose, 2009). As the process model gained currency, according to genre theorists, primary school writing became almost exclusively confined to two genres: observation/comment and recount. In the case of recounts, the writing became increasingly longer but the genre did not

develop. This did not affect children from middle class literate backgrounds so much, but those from oral cultural backgrounds, such as indigenous Australian children, did not flourish. A hands-off approach to writing instruction was thus found to result in only a handful of students independently developing the writing skills necessary for success at secondary school level (Rose, 2009). Proponents of a genre approach to teaching, therefore, argued that knowledge of written language, unlike spoken language, does not develop naturally and required explicit instruction (Cope & Kalantis 1993).

Genre theory, however, has been criticised as leading to forms of instruction that are little more than traditional transmission pedagogy, something that concentrates on the acquisition of rules and skills at the expense of creativity, and an approach that reduces the composing process to a concentration at sentence level, most notably syntax. Such reductivism it is claimed, takes students' focus away from the overall purpose of their writing (Braddock, Lloyd-Jones & Schoer, 1963). Despite such criticism, genre-based theory approaches to the teaching of writing regard the inequality of schooling as a fundamental problem to address, which means providing all learners opportunities in education, opportunities that are usually restricted to a few. This position, according to Rose, is neither, conservative, liberal, or radical, but rather aims to reduce the inequality in educational outcomes by giving students and teachers the tools they need to succeed (Rose, 2009).

What then, according to theories which see writing as a social practice, are the tools students need to succeed? How do such theories suggest writing be taught in the modern classroom to meet the requirements of today's students? Sociocultural and sociocognitive approaches recognise writing as an individual, expressive, social and cognitive activity. The cognitive dimension means it is essential to have an understanding of how the mind works during composing; this can assist teachers to design work that enables students to formulate writing goals and tackle tasks in a systematic way. Along with this, it is imperative to understand that writing is social, influenced by context and society. Faigley (1986) brings these divergent ideas together by explaining that each approach is in fact part of a whole process. He points out that the term "process" allows for the accommodation of

seemingly incompatible writing theories. He divides these differing approaches into three broad categories – the expressive, the cognitive and the social.

Importantly, Faigley (1986) draws what appears to be disparate theories into a whole, showing how each perspective reveals a different aspect of writing. This in turn helps in the construction of a more holistic approach, generating the idea that process pedagogy is a dynamic and changing practice. This is borne out by Pritchard and Honeycutt's (2006) review of process approaches that acknowledge that cognitive theories of composing are an aspect of process pedagogy rather than separate from it. This kind of synthesis is useful for the practitioner/researcher providing, as it does, a multifaceted lens through which to view students, the institutions of education, and the influence of society in relation to writing theory and practice. It therefore provides a meaningful way of drawing together a variety of theories to use in the living and dynamic space that is the classroom.

2.3 Research on the teaching of grammar in relation to writing

Interest in the value of teaching grammar began early last century. Elley, Banham, Lamb and Wylie (1979) indicate that as early as 1935, research conducted by Ash found that grammatical principles were best taught through writing. Ash used three high schools across three grade levels to compare a stylistic approach to teaching composition with an approach based around teaching traditional grammar. The stylistic approach consisted of a series of lessons which emphasised the elements of writing style – paragraph building, diction, unity, coherence and clarity. The two methods were taught with groups of matched ability. After a term, the stylistic group significantly out-performed the grammar group on 19 out of 23 writing criteria, and had reduced the number of errors by 60 per cent compared to seven per cent in the grammar group.

Braddock, Lloyd-Jones and Schoer (1963) found similar results in their review of research on the teaching of written composition. They wrote:

‘In view of the widespread agreement of research studies based on many types of students and teachers, the conclusion can be stated in strong and unqualified terms: the teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or

because it displaces some instruction and practice in actual composition, even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing. (Braddock et al., 1963, p. 38)

An influential study on the relationship of grammar instruction to student writing was Elley, Barham, Lamb and Wyllie's 1970-1972 study conducted in an Auckland secondary school in New Zealand. The research was over a three-year period involving three groups of students from the beginning of their first year of secondary school until the end of their third year. The three carefully matched groups were taught three different programmes. Two groups were taught using the Oregon Curriculum, one with a transformational grammar component, and the other with additional reading and creative writing. The third group studied a conventional course based on a textbook which included exercises in traditional grammar. The findings of the study revealed that there was no discernible difference between the language development – shown through language tests and essay writing skills – of the three groups. A writing test 12 months after the experiment ended confirmed the earlier findings (p.98). The evidence that traditional grammar instruction has little or no impact on students' writing has been borne out again by the Andrews, Torgerson, Beverton, Freeman, Locke, Low, Robinson and Zhu's (2006) systematic review of studies on the impact of the teaching of formal grammar on the writing performance of 5 to 16-year-olds. Here they reiterate what Elley et al. (1979) and others had previously found:

The results of the present in-depth review point to one clear conclusion: that there is no high quality evidence to counter the prevailing belief that the teaching of the principles underlying and informing word order or 'syntax' has virtually no influence on the writing quality or accuracy of 5 to 16-year-olds. This conclusion remains the case whether the grammar teaching is based on the 'traditional' approach of emphasising word order and parts of speech; or on the 'transformational' approach, which is based on generative-transformational grammar. (Andrews et al., 2006 p. 47)

Another significant result of the Elley et al. (1979) research was the change in students' attitudes. The two grammar groups saw sentence study as 'useless', 'repetitive', and 'unpleasant' (Elley et al., 1979, p. 98). These negative attitudes

were similar to those discovered by Hillocks (1971, cited by Smith Cheville & Hillocks, 2006) in his survey of 3000 high-school students. He reports that students found traditional school grammar the least interesting part of their English programme.

The teaching of grammar was not a feature in the early process movement. It was considered unnecessary and even a hindrance to the process of composing. The first edition of Elbow's now classic *Writing With Power* (1971) advised students to think about grammar as the last matter to attend to in the writing process. His advice to writers was to consult grammar rule-books in order to fix any errors. His strongest statement regarding grammar was that it hindered the composing process and was best left alone. The teaching of traditional grammar was viewed as unnecessary and possibly harmful to the composing process, to echo Braddock et al. (1963), because it took up time that could be more valuably used composing. Many process writing advocates felt it had little to offer the student writer. Elley et al. (1979) supported this view when they claimed that:

It is highly debatable whether many students, or professional writers for that matter, are aware of the choices they make when generating new sentences. Habits of word production and sentence generation are set up very early in our language histories...the basic structures exist in most children's repertoire during their primary school days and seem relatively impervious to influence. (p. 99)

In this light, a teacher's most important job in relation to writing was to bring out of the student what was already there (Elbow, 1971).

The validity of these findings, that teaching traditional school grammar as a stand-alone, isolated activity has no impact on the quality of students' writing, is generally undisputed. However, a criticism of both the Elley et al.'s (1979) research and later meta-analyses by Hillocks (1986) and later Andrews and colleagues (2006), was that their assumptions concerning the transfer of knowledge were wrong. In the studies analysed, grammar was taught as a separate entity and represented an implicit belief that there would be a transfer of knowledge from the discrete teaching of grammar to the writing process. It is not surprising, then, that the research showed that there was no transfer and that the

teaching of grammar subsequently had no impact on the writing produced. Myhill et al. (2012) explains it in this way: ‘In many of the studies ... isolated grammar lessons are taught and the writing used to determine impact is produced in a different context’ (p.141).

However, what is most valuable for students’ writing is when they learn to control the language of writing by manipulating language in a meaningful context (Hartwell,1985). This promotes an awareness of language as language, a meta-linguistic awareness that should be cultivated. Teaching grammar in this way – within the context of a writing programme has the potential to provide students with a repertoire of possibilities, empowering them by helping them see that they have choices over the way they express their ideas (Myhill et al., 2011). Kolln (1996) explains grammar knowledge should be viewed ‘as a tool that enables the writer to make effective choices’ (p.2). Grammar instruction can provide a way to help students explore the effectiveness of the choices they make as they write. In this way, ‘it heals the split between grammar and meaning, and connects form to meaning and to purpose’ (Hancock, 2009 in Myhill, 2010, p.172). Myhill (2009) describes this process as students becoming designers, that is using grammar as a fundamental design tool of a writer’s meaning-making resources for text design. The way we think and give shape to ideas is closely related with the forms, patterns, and rhythms of spoken and written language. In this way writing helps bring to consciousness ‘the deep grammars we absorb as inhabitants of a particular place and time’ (Micciche, 2004, p. 721).

Another reason propounded in the literature for teaching grammar in the context of writing instruction is that it enhances a student’s cognitive processes – their ability to think. Nunan (2005) explains that for her the most important reason for teaching grammar is that it hits at the heart of what teachers hope to accomplish, that is to provide students with tools which help them to think with greater breadth and depth, and act independently on those thoughts. She claims that complex sentence structure and complex thought are mutually dependent. This, she claims, relates to Vygotsky’s (1962) theories relating to the interrelationship between thought and language, where he asserts that experience precedes and leads to thought. Thought development, she asserts, is determined by language; therefore

writing and grammar instruction help to develop thinking. Micciche (2004) adds to this idea when she states:

The ability to develop sentences and form paragraphs that serve a particular purpose requires a conceptual ability to envision relationships between ideas. In this sense, writing involves cognitive skills at the level of idea development and at the sentence level. (p. 719)

2.3.1 What kind of grammar?

The review, above, indicates that there are a number of significant reasons for teaching grammar as part of the writing process. If that is the case, what kind of grammar should this be? Any useful discussion of grammar needs to establish a consensus over the kind of grammar that is most useful for students as they write. As Micciche (2004) notes, the place of grammar in writing instruction is complicated by a failure to establish what kind of grammar is suitable for writing instruction. There needs to be recognition that not all grammar is the traditional, Latin-based, eight-parts-of-speech variety, heavy on prescriptive rules and error-correction exercises – what is often called ‘school grammar’ (Kolln 1996, p. 26). The kind of grammar that is suitable, does not employ ‘low skills courses that stigmatize and alienate poor writers while reproducing their status as disenfranchised...the repetitive drills and worksheets; the deadly kind that teaches correctness divorced from content and situation’ (Micciche, 2004, p. 720). Nor is it, as Peter Elbow (1971) recommended, something that is relegated to the final stage of the writing process. Such a narrow view of grammar concentrates on addressing errors and reduces the potential for ‘creating rhythms and dynamics in text, and for subtly shaping nuances of mood and meaning’ (Myhill, 2010a, p.173). When Kolln refers to grammar used for writing, she uses the modifier rhetorical to designate a method of teaching that is different from the remedial error-avoidance or error correction purpose of so many grammar lessons. She stresses that it is language facility that is paramount, that is a conscious ability to select effective structures for a given rhetorical context (p.29), or, to put it more directly, ‘a rhetorical tool that all writers should understand and control’ (Kolln, 2003, cited in Micciche, 2004, p. 716).

Teaching a rhetorical, functional grammar equips students with knowledge and tools they may not have acquired. Genre theorists draw attention to the way some students are at a disadvantage when they arrive at school, because the language of schooling is often not the language they bring to school. As Schleppegrell (2004) explains:

School-based texts are difficult for many students precisely because they emerge from discourse contexts that require different ways of using language than students experience outside of school; researchers need a more complete understanding of the linguistic challenges of schooling. In the absence of an explicit focus on language, students from certain social class backgrounds continue to be privileged and others disadvantaged. (Schleppegrell, 2004, p. 3).

To mitigate these inequalities, Clark (2010) has proposed that language structure and syntax be explicitly taught. Other educators articulate a similar position, linking grammar instruction to the larger goals of emancipatory teaching (Micciche, 2004). Micciche speaks for many when she suggests that every writing teacher, at some time, has struggled with the problem of how to teach students to communicate effectively. Because of this, she states, grammar knowledge is essential if, as a profession, teachers are to achieve many of the goals articulated in composition studies. By this she is referring to an aspiration that every student has the opportunity to learn to write well in order to be successful citizens.

2.4 Grammar pedagogies

New grammar pedagogies state that students learn by actively using language, testing and experimenting with its effectiveness. Children learn language, suggest Hancock and Kolln (2010), the same way they learn other things – by experience. Moreover, becoming a writer involves being ‘socialised into ways of making meaning’ – the norms and values and acquiring the means with which to ‘comply with or resist those norms’ (Myhill, 2010a, p. 172). It involves, in other words,

learning how to convey meaning in a way that effectively communicates with others.

It is, therefore, essential that students are presented with the apparatuses with which to make decisions about how they express their ideas effectively. Hancock and Kolln (2010) state that the teaching profession seldom recognises how deeply grammar is tied to meaning and rhetorical effect, because most of the debate ‘still seems to assume that grammar is inherently formal and primarily concerned with correctness’ (p. 21). Joan Didion calls the process of learning grammar in the context of meaning-making as infinite power; she writes, ‘All I know I know about grammar is its infinite power. To shift the structure of a sentence alters the meaning of that sentence, as definitely and inflexibly as the position of a camera alters the meaning of the object being photographed’ (Didion, 1984, cited in Micciche 2004). It is an appreciation of this ‘infinite power’ that students need to understand and frequently it is teachers who enable them acquire this understanding.

Micciche’s (2004) approach is to challenge students’ preconceptions about grammar as a rigid system for producing correctness. She uses Elizabeth Bruss’s (1982) ideas on the role of rhetorical grammar, which contends that, ‘One comes to know the nature of this machinery [language] through watching how it functions and using it for oneself’ (Bruss, 1982, cited in Micciche, 2004, p. 722). The important word here is ‘using’. She combines this idea of watching and using in the work she designs for her classes. This involves the analysis of selected texts that demonstrate the relationship between grammar, language practices and culture. A powerful example of this kind of teaching is illustrated in writing by bell hooks who explains how grammar was used as a form of resistance, as illustrated by the syntax of slave songs (bell hooks, cited in Micciche, 2004, p. 723). Micciche requires her students to use the works of writers like this to help inform the choices they make in their writing, that is, as resources that provide an understanding of a variety of grammatical techniques. This amounts to both watching and using.

Some theorists advocate selecting only a limited number of grammatical features to teach. This is the approach of Noguchi (1991), who proposed a paring down of

concepts so that students are taught the basics of grammar that connect most saliently to writing: the sentence, the non-sentence fragment, the modifier, the subject and the verb. He posits that grammar instruction has most to offer in the area of style and form. Weaver and Bush (2008), too, propose attention to a few selected constructions at point of need, determined by the requirements of the students. In essence this means that ‘instruction in grammar is minimal; application of grammar to writing is maximal’ (p. 26). In a similar way Nunan (2005) advocates determining what grammatical features should be taught based on needs as they arise in student writing. Her emphasis is on ensuring that techniques become embedded as part of the student’s repertoire.

Some researchers advocate introducing grammatical features based on their students’ developmental readiness. Vavra (1987) advocated breaking down instruction into sequenced grammatical constructions at different levels and taking time for students to understand the concepts. He proposed beginning with eight or nine-year-olds, studying prepositions and phrases and then slowly moving to clauses and subordinate conjunctions only as needed. He recommended using his students’ writing, and the material that they read, as a resource, and cited David Bartholomae (1980), who noted, ‘Studying their own writing puts students in a position to see themselves as language users, rather than as victims of a language that uses them’ (p. 258, cited in Vavra, 1987, p. 42).

Using the texts students are reading also helps introduce grammatical concepts. Berger (2006) maintains that students can be ‘seduced into trying writing techniques they find in the work of professional writers’ (p.5 8), and can begin to realise that grammar is inspiring and transformative, and is most effective when viewed as a way to enable them to use their voices more effectively, to convey their ideas and passions. In a similar fashion, Devet (2002) claims that one of the most useful techniques to help students understand the rhetorical possibilities of grammar is by imitation exercises where students mimic ‘an artful sentence’ (p. 14).

Not all practitioners agree that the teaching of grammar at the point of need works. Sams (2003) found that this did not work with her students because it implied teaching in response to errors as they arose, rather than helping students

understand how to build sentences as they write. Teaching at point of need was also found to be problematic, because her students did not have an understanding of language structures and so could not make use of the instruction in any meaningful way. She found that her students lacked a solid understanding of how to write clearly linked sentences and that they needed clear instruction about how to build sentences. In other words, they needed to go back to a simple sentence and build from there. Over a period of several months through a process of questioning and discovery, she helped her students build up a range of sentence-types, culminating in compound complex sentences. She maintained that the writing process is about forging relationships between and among ideas expressed in language structures (sentences) and that students must be able to analyse them to ascertain whether they have clearly conveyed their meaning. She claimed that it is the ability to analyse and understand how parts work together to convey meaning that is central to the writing process for students. By helping her students understand how the structures of language worked, she helped give them a better understanding of the options available to them for combining, embedding, and enhancing clarity in their writing.

According to some, grammar can be taught without recourse to an explicit metalanguage. Schleppegrell (2007) posits that even teachers who do not consider grammar to be a useful tool for teaching writing use it, but in a covert way. They may often engage in activities that involve manipulating sentence structure, for example, suggesting an alternative wording when phrasing is awkward. In this way, she asserts, teachers are intuitively teaching grammar, helping students to notice the language options open to them. Anderson (2006) deliberately adopted a technique similar to this when he realised that he could ‘stop using labels without stopping grammar’ (p. 29). He explained that his students, many of whom had had failed standardised tests, regarded studying grammar as simply another ‘way to be told that they are wrong – so they need an approach that addresses their weaknesses by giving them power to make meaning’ (p.29). He developed an approach where he took time out from the work they were doing to ‘zoom in’ on a concept they were finding difficult. This involved finding examples from the students’ work or material they were reading,

experimenting with it together and finally ‘zooming out’ and back to the work that had previously occupied them.

2.4.1 Current research on grammar embedded in writing

There is a growing support amongst educational researchers that there is a place for the structure of language to be taught as a tool for writing. However, as Micciche (2004) claims, there is an ‘absence of a sustained contemporary conversation about grammar instruction’ (p. 717).

Teaching grammar in the context of writing continues to be an under-researched area. Myhill (2005) asserts:

The truth is that teaching grammar and knowledge about language in positive, contextualised ways which makes clear links with writing is not yet an established way of teaching and it is, as yet, hugely under-researched. (p. 81)

As yet there is no comprehensive theory of teaching grammar in the context of writing. Myhill et al. (2012) contends that such a model would need to be far-reaching in conception, encompassing an ‘inter-disciplinary framework, which is cognisant of linguistic, cognitive and sociocultural perspectives, in order to reflect with validity the complexity of classrooms as teaching and learning contexts’ (p. 144). Myhill (2010a) further asserts that the debate about grammar is often to do with differing views about language development which, therefore, carry differing pedagogical implications. If grammar is not innately acquired, as Chomsky asserts, and ‘if the forms of language are inherently, organically linked to discourse context and to meaning and are not innate, but learnt and practised over time, as would seem to be the case, then the study of grammar is extremely beneficial for the teacher and student of writing’ (Hancock, 2009, cited in Myhill, 2010, p. 171).

There is a scarcity of research evidence supporting the teaching of any kind of grammar as benefiting writing (Andrews, 2005, cited in Myhill et al., 2012, p.144). In response to this situation, Myhill and colleagues (2012) recognised

that it was the time for ‘robust large-scale research which seeks to establish valid causal relationships, but which also seeks to go beyond simple cause-effect paradigms to understand the complexity of the issue’ (p. 144). Their research was conducted over a full school year with 855 Year 8 pupils (aged 13-14) in 32 mixed, socially and culturally diverse comprehensive schools in the South West and Midlands of the United Kingdom. Teachers were randomly allocated to the intervention. The study consisted of a comparison group that followed a general outline of what should be covered, but made their own decisions about how to introduce the grammatical concepts into the writing programme, whilst the intervention teachers followed detailed lesson plans and were provided with resources which embedded explicit attention to grammar, relevant to the writing that was being taught (Myhill et al., 2010). The research represented the first large-scale study in any country of the benefits or otherwise of teaching grammar within a purposeful context in writing.

The following strategies were employed in the intervention:

- Using grammatical meta-language, always explained through examples and patterns;
- Making links between the feature introduced and how it might enhance the writing being tackled;
- Using ‘imitation’, offering model patterns for pupils to play with and then use in their own writing;
- Including activities which encourage talking about language and effects;
- Using authentic examples from authentic texts;
- Using activities which support pupils in making choices and being designers of writing; and
- Encouraging language play, experimentation and games (Myhill, 2011, p. 13).

The results showed significant gains in the quality of student writing, especially with more able students. The intervention group improved by 20 percent, while the comparison group improved by 11 percent.

The research represents an endorsement of the teaching of grammar when it is contextualised within a writing programme. It suggests that teachers should embed grammar within the teaching of writing while making grammar available as a tool for writing. This makes explicit the connections between grammar features and effect in writing (Myhill, Jones, Lines & Watson, 2011). The research argues that ‘attention to grammar should be explicit, clearly explained and linked to meaning and effect’ (p. 2). This is of greater importance, they suggest, than attention to the identification of grammatical features.

Interview data from the study revealed that students were most confident discussing word choice but not sentence-level syntax. Metalinguistic awareness often centred on experimentation with sentence-types but did not often reveal an awareness of why these techniques were employed. Metalinguistic knowledge often appeared to reflect what teachers had said during lessons (Myhill et al., 2012)

The study also revealed some imprecision regarding the use of a metalanguage. Some teachers used ‘semantic definitions influenced by common practice over many years in both primary and secondary classrooms’ (Myhill et al., 2012, p. 160). This caused confusion when the definition did not explain the function of the word-class adequately. This affirms that thorough teacher subject knowledge is fundamental to the successful use of contextualized grammar instruction in writing (Myhill et al., 2012).

2.5 Enhancing writing through a cooperative classroom

So far this review has indicated that there is a place for the teaching of grammar within the context of writing, because it does provide students with tools to make meaning, give students choices, facilitate creativity and, at the same time, help to ameliorate the deficits they may bring to the writing classroom.

What follows is a review of research into the way the establishment of a cooperative classroom enhances writing instruction by facilitating greater student involvement and autonomy in the writing process through writing together or collaboratively. This necessarily explores the place of language and talk to

generate ideas, both among students and between teachers and students. It also examines the role teachers' play in creating this environment. This is based on a sociocultural view of writing and involves working cooperatively, sometimes in dyads, and emphasises the coaching role of teachers.

2.5.1 The role of talk in a cooperative classroom

Writing can be a solitary activity in the classroom, often lacking interaction and dialogue with others. However, theorists such as Bakhtin and Vygotsky consider dialogue with others as essential for learning. This is especially pertinent for classroom writing, where idea generation, stimulation, feedback and engagement are increased when students and teachers discuss writing together. There is strong evidence that peer tutoring and collaboration during writing benefits the writing process (Yarrow & Topping, 2001). Conversation and verbal feedback from a partner supports students to generate and modify their thoughts, and in turn produce language.

This emphasises, as Ball and Freedman (2004) assert, that 'all learning is at its core social' (p. 6). Bakhtin emphasised the importance of multivoicedness and divergence, an essential feature of a classroom where students are given the opportunity to hear the words of others and either agree or disagree with them. In this kind of environment, 'all ideas are open for testing through dialogic discourse: students' and teachers' voices are equally valued and disagreements are not seen as threats but as opportunities for learning' (Dysthe, 2011, p. 72). This promotes what Cooper and Selfe (1990) describe as the use of 'language to resist as well as to accommodate' (p.847), an important feature in the establishment of a dynamic social system generating the kind of equal relationships desirable between students who are working together alongside a teacher in a classroom. Bakhtin's own teaching was based on the testing of divergent ideas between students and their teachers (Dysthe, 2011). In this sense, the teacher becomes one voice among many and though still endowed with the status of expert, is able to cast off the mantle of authority in order to dignify the contributions of students, thereby giving their comments status (Dysthe, 2011).

Talk is vital in the writing process, as students come to an understanding of who they are and what they think. Students need to hear their own voice alongside those of others, if they are to establish their own internally persuasive discourse. In the classroom, this means that students are subject to a rich and varied range of utterances and are encouraged to participate in the discourse, that is, the speaker both absorbs and works with language putting it to use, then interrogating it through interpretation, analysis, reflection and revision. Individuals go through a process of selectively assimilating the words of others (Ball & Freedman, 2004). The role of others is critical here – the more choice students have to assimilate, the more opportunity they have to learn. Ball and Freedman (2004) explain that in a Bakhtinian sense ‘it is with whom and in what ways and in what contexts that determine what we stand to learn’ (p. 6).

Put simply, learning in this sense is social; it is about communicating with one another. Collaborative learning, either among students or between students and teachers, is therefore, able to powerfully assist students through zones of proximal development – that is, the gap between what the learner could accomplish alone and what he or she could accomplish through cooperation with others who are more skilled or experienced (Vygotsky 1978). Such learning environments create positive conditions for helping students work to their potential.

2.5.2 Working cooperatively

These conclusions are borne out in research that indicates that students learn best when they work cooperatively and when the teacher allows them some autonomy. Slavin (1980) suggests that cooperative learning benefits students in many ways, both in terms of improved achievement and enhanced relationships. This can result from classroom configurations which promote cooperation over competition, and which allow for positive reward and interdependence, where one student’s success helps another to be successful (Slavin, 1980).

At the heart of a cooperative environment is the generation of the type of conversation that produces questioning, commenting and paraphrasing (Bruffee, 1984). Speech unites the cognitive and the social, and allows students to reflect on

the processes which relate new knowledge to old (Barnes, 1974, cited in Gutierrez, 1995). Bakhtin suggests that most speech has an intended audience ('addressivity'), and it is this feature of speech, and especially dialogue, that is harnessed when students discuss their writing together. Flowers (1979, in DiPardo & Freedman, 1988), found that successful writers were interested in the response of an audience, and therefore peers discussing their work together helped to make an audience's needs concrete. Elbow (in Stanley, 1992) noted that student writers derived benefit from recognising an audience in their peer group. He observed the importance of the physical dimension of this relationship, explaining that students can see when a partner registers confusion or incomprehension. In this way, he posited, writing clearly becomes a task of communicating 'rather than merely an exercise to be completed for the teacher' (p. 217).

Researchers of cooperative learning emphasise another benefit of working together as increased engagement. Fung (2010) asserts that this is because students have ample opportunities to initiate ideas and contest them, allowing reflective and generative thinking which, in addition, draws out the competence of each individual to create 'complementary' contributions (p. 19). He explains that working closely in this way can result in the development of negotiation skills, which can promote mutual accountability and also enhance critical self-reflection and shared decision-making. It can also generate 'cognitive conflict', something that ultimately helps learners to be more creative and enhances writing by providing different perspectives, resulting in better language use. Fung (2010) maintains that the combined strengths of each member of a group 'provide a greater chance of enhancing the learner's zone of proximal development' (p. 23).

Establishing these kinds of classrooms has been described as representing a paradigm shift in the way we think about the teaching of writing (Haiton, 1982, cited in DiPardo & Freedman, 1988; Johnson & Johnson, 1999). It is one where student input is valued and deemed not only important, but essential. In discussing this change, Emig (1979, as cited in DiPardo & Freedman, 1988) emphasized the role of social exchange in the writing process, explaining that what was once viewed as a 'silent and solitary activity with no community or collaboration' is now seen as a process enhanced by other writers who provide vital response, including advice (p. 123). Students flourish when they regard

themselves as part of a community of writers. This is a condition that fosters encouragement and provides feedback – often immediately – so that students can easily grasp ‘that writing improves when they get help and have the chance to do it again’ (Street, 2005, p. 639). This kind of environment provides students with the kind of support that helps them take ownership of their work (Street, 2005). This is counter to the atmosphere of many writing classrooms where the teacher dominates and where students view the teacher as the ultimate arbiter of their writing; the person who should tell them what is wrong and what to do next – where grades are more important than learning to write (Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Richardson, 2000).

2.5.3 Working cooperatively in dyads

Working intensively with one other person, in particular, has been found to be valuable in enhancing learning in the writing classroom. Knoblauch and Brannon (1984, cited in DiPrado & Freedman, 1988) suggested that students receiving a response from groups of classmates benefited from widely ranging feedback on their writing, but that individual tutoring between two students encouraged more searching self-analysis of the writer's ideas and strategies. It also had the potential for one student to take on the role of the expert or even the teacher – although these roles can be interchangeable. Bruner (1978) described this in terms of an expert student scaffolding a less competent partner to realize his or her zone of proximal development. Cazden (1985, cited in DiPardo & Freedman, 1988) explained that, in Vygotskian terms, ‘the roles are more dynamic and flexible’ (p. 130) in the case of dyads. This meant that the ‘tutor or aiding peer serves the learner as a vicarious form of consciousness, until such a time as the learner is able to master his own action, through his own consciousness and control’ (Cazden, 1985, cited in DiPardo & Freedman, 1988, p. 130).

A student, therefore, has potential to perform at a higher developmental level with a partner who has extensive knowledge, because he or she has access to the expert's knowledge, skill and coaching. However, students of varying abilities may also be able to offer one another helpful pointers throughout the composing process (DiPardo & Freedman, 1988). Vygotsky's ideas suggest that learning to

write is much wider than simply absorbing bits of knowledge or fostering discreet skills (DiPardo & Freeman, 1988). Instead, it is about the social nature of communication and how individuals learn to make sense of their world. They do this by verbalising ideas with each other, an action which elicits cognitive processes that typically produce reflection, organisation, and the expansion of knowledge (Krol, Janssen, Veenman & Van der Linden, 2004). These researchers describe this as elaborated talk and contend that it aids both students.

Pairs are more likely to elaborate in answer to questions than simply provide a short and direct answer, a condition, Webb (1999) explains, that encourages the kind of cognitive restructuring needed in the writing process. In these kinds of exchanges the listener is helped to see from another's point of view and to clarify his or her own ideas whilst the explainer discovers gaps in his or her own knowledge and is able to 'develop new perspectives and construct new knowledge' (Krol, et al., 2004, p. 209).

An important consideration is that students are often able to communicate with each other more clearly than the teacher is able to do. They are frequently more aware of the needs of their partner and what they did not understand, and can provide easy-to-follow explanations, that are more finely attuned to the partner's zone of proximal development (Krol, et al., 2004). Kasta's (1987, cited in Stanley 1992) study of 9th-grade students bears this out. The study found that peers who evaluated each other's writing had a more positive attitude toward writing and an increased fluency than those students who received only teacher feedback (Stanley, 1992, p. 218). What was emphasised in the findings was that it is the quality of exchange that is important. Questions which are thought-provoking enough to promote high-level discussion trigger elaborate explanations which positively influence the performance of both students (King, 2002). High-level complex learning in dyads can, therefore, occur when the thinking and interaction is characterised by dialogue that includes exchanges of ideas, information, perspectives, attitudes and opinions (King 2002, p. 34).

2.5.4 The teacher as guide, facilitator and coach

High-level, cooperative writing is more likely to occur when the teacher is clear about the purpose of the writing class and can act as a guide, and when the teacher adopts the role of a facilitator and writing coach. Bruffee (1984) asserts that this involves facilitating the kind of cooperative exchanges among students that are 'emotionally involved, intellectually focused and personally interested' (p. 642).

Working together in such a personal way has the potential to be profound, but may also involve conflict between students at times. Along with this, not all help is beneficial. Stanley (1992) reports that in some cases students can deliver unhelpful and unfocused responses and at other times over-interpret what is being written, sometimes even supplying an alternative meaning for their partner – in effect rewriting the work for them.

Students need guidance in appropriate ways to respond to each other if the benefits of cooperative writing are to be realised. King (1999) explains that student interaction can be difficult, especially around issues of status and competence. It is not unusual for a student to be perceived as more or less competent, or higher or lower status, and it is up to the teacher to coach the students and provide enough structure around the nature of the exchanges to ameliorate this situation. Intensive coaching and reminders from the teacher have been found to result in an informal consensus and commitment regarding what are suitable responses to one another's work (King, 1999). If this kind of learning is to be effective, students need to be intensively instructed in communication skills and introduced to specific helping skills, such as how to be a good listener, give explanations clearly, provide specific feedback and how to praise to a partner (Webb & Farivar, 1999).

In cooperative class environments, the role of teacher has increasingly been characterised as that of a collaborator (Daiute & Dalton, 1993). This implies a change in the role of the student from passive recipient to one of active participant and co-constructor of knowledge. However, researchers emphasise that it is important for the teacher to maintain a surveillance role and monitor what is happening. This is reasonable, given 'the power of peer dynamics to either subvert or support the educational goals of a project' (Di Prado & Freedman,

1988, p. 127). O'Donnell (1999), too, makes the point that the manner in which a teacher structures student interactions often determines their success. This is because children may lack awareness of the appropriate strategies to use or have difficulty exercising control over implementing and monitoring them (Topping et al., 2000).

Importantly, a failure to remind students about appropriate modes of behaviour could result in the poor treatment of a student or students. Along with this, a teacher's interaction with an individual student or group of students influences how others treat them. This is particularly the case when students are struggling with a task. A negative comment from a teacher, or even a failure to censure negative comments by other students, could mean isolation or exclusion for some students (Webb & Farivar, 1999).

The research emphasises that it is important that the teacher model talk and questioning that is of a high cognitive level, requiring more than recall. This is modelled when the teacher puts the class in the role of helper and the teacher in the role of needing help. By asking deep and probing questions, the teacher models the kind of help students can give each other when they work together (Webb & Farivar, 1999). It is the job of the teacher to develop a structure with students to respond to each other's work that will provide the depth required for more than surface change. King (1999) makes the point that different kinds of interaction facilitate different kinds of learning. Factual material may simply require rehearsal, the requesting and providing of information, whereas complex learning such as analysing, integrating ideas and solving problems calls for the construction of new knowledge. This goes beyond the memorizing of information to thinking about how information relates to what is already known. King (1999) explains that according to Vygotsky, successful interactions require questioning at a high cognitive level, the kind that requires explanations, speculations and conclusions. These are strategies that the teacher can teach. King (1999) labels these 'thinking ideas' rather than 'easy ideas', because they help students generate ideas that lead to a new understanding.

Students need to be trained, otherwise they will be focused on simply looking for the simplest solution. O'Donnell (1999) posits that the teacher should experiment

with setting up scripted cooperation as a way of guarding against negative processes. In these arrangements, she explains, students assume alternate roles and each learn from the modelling the other provides. Much of the research assumes that good interaction is the result of motivated students, but O'Donnell asserts that if a student does not have the requisite cognitive skills, interaction can be ineffective. In this situation, it is the teacher's job to help students establish shared goals and carefully designed cognitive structures that aid the formation of high-order questions and elaborated explanations. It is also important that teachers allow enough time for students to develop their ideas and interact without being rushed. Teachers need to allocate plenty of time for students to work together solving problems and explaining work to each other. It is when teachers do too much talking that classes rush through work and some members are silenced (Webb & Farivar, 1999).

2.6 Summary

Is Edna O'Brien correct in asserting that, essentially, writing cannot be taught? This review of the literature indicates that her position is both right and wrong. It reveals that methods of teaching writing that are not sensitive to individual needs, that are not cognisant of how a person's mind works, and that do not cater for the social dimension of writing are bound to have little or no impact on students' abilities to express themselves in written text. For example, it is clear that grammar exercises that are separate from the writing process have no effect on a student's ability to write and may in fact be harmful. This review indicates that there is a place for teaching grammar within the context of writing. It shows that embedding grammar within a writing programme makes available for students a range of tools they can choose from to make their writing effective. This facilitates autonomy, enabling students to become designers of their own texts.

It is clear that writing is a process that is recursive and idiosyncratic. It is also clear that the ability to write is not dispensed equally; social and cultural circumstances play a role in the way individuals access texts and use them. However, it appears that setting up classrooms where students are free to work together, where they can explore a range of ideas, where they are given the tools

to experiment with language in order to make meaning will indeed facilitate writing and teach students that it is, indeed, a process.

Chapter 3

Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The primary aim of this study was to explore the idea that syntax could be meaningfully taught within the context of a classroom writing assignment utilizing writing pairs. The project was carried out as a case study examination of a teaching intervention that was practitioner-based, and based on action research methodology. The intervention is outlined in the following chapter, and makes use of theories of socially-situated language development. The case study employed a variety of qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. This chapter discusses the rationale for the method used and explains its appropriateness to the subject under investigation.

3.2 A case study to assess a teaching intervention in a writing classroom

The research project was informed by the principles of practitioner research and can be thought of as an action research case study of a year nine English class and their responses to interventions to enhance their syntactical fluency.

Case study is a method of inquiry that allows for the examination of phenomena in their real-world context and which typically draws on a variety of sources of evidence (Cresswell, 1984; Yin 2009). Case studies provide for rich ‘thick’ descriptions and detail, and allow for establishing cause and effect, the how and why of a case. Because case studies are examples of real people in real situations, they are more than sets of abstract theories (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011).

They are able to present situations in an authentic way and allow for observation and analysis in ways that are not always susceptible to numerical analysis. Case studies are, thus, powerful tools for description, explanation and illumination (Yin, 2009).

Case studies are especially appropriate for examining situations where there are many variables operating and where there is a need for more than one tool for data collection. They accommodate the acquisition of many sources of evidence, allowing for both quantitative and qualitative data (Cohen et al. 2011). Hitchcock and Hughes (1995) suggest that case studies are distinguished less by the methodologies they employ than by the subjects of their enquiry, and they are particularly useful when the researcher has little control over events. They suggest the following hallmarks of a case study:

- It is concerned with rich and vivid description of events;
- It provides a chronological narrative of events;
- It blends description of events with analysis of them;
- It focuses on individual actors or groups of actors and seeks to understand their perceptions of events;
- It highlights specific events that are relevant to the case;
- The researcher is integrally involved in the case;
- An attempt is made to portray the richness of the case in writing up the report.

Case studies provide for mixed methods data collection instruments, both qualitative and quantitative. Conclusions are stronger if they are based on a range of different types of data. Reams and Twale (2008) contend that mixed methods are necessary to uncover information and perspective, to increase corroboration of the data, and to render less biased and more accurate conclusions. Such an approach recognises the pluralistic nature of the world we live in – it is not exclusively quantitative or qualitative, but a mixed world (Cohen et al., 2011). It is one that requires the researcher to collect, analyse and interpret evidence in a single study or a series of studies that investigate the same underlying phenomenon (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2009). In this way, mixed methods

research can address both the ‘what’ and ‘why’ of research questions (Cohen et al., 2011).

3.2.1 Practitioner-based action research

The research was practitioner-based action research. Action research in education is often about teachers investigating and reflecting on their own practice with the goal of improving it in order to better the outcomes for their students; it suited the kind of inquiry needed for this research. The linking of the terms action and research highlights the essential feature of the approach: trying out ideas in practice as a means of improvement and a means of improving knowledge about the curriculum, teaching and learning (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). Action research is fundamentally collaborative and participatory. This concept was first developed by social psychologist Kurt Lewin in the 1940s and emphasized the idea that action research should revolve around group decisions and improvement (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988).

Action research tends to be concerned with issues of fairness and emancipation, a need to make things better. Implicit in this is the idea of challenge. Research of this nature has the potential to challenge power relationships – a necessary component of change and improvement (Grundy, 1987). McNiff (1988) makes the point that when we say we intend to improve something there is an assumption that we are improving for a purpose, towards personal and social benefit. To take ‘action’ is in response to a perceived need for change and improvement. In this case study, I could see that my students were unlikely to progress using the methods traditionally used to teach writing. It was doubtful too, that they would enjoy such methods or grow in their understanding of how to use language effectively.

Action research is participatory; it is undertaken alongside and with others. McNiff (1988) describes the difference between traditional research and the participatory nature of action research in these terms: ‘Traditional researchers enquire into others’ lives and speak about other people as data whereas action research is an enquiry by the self into the self, undertaken in the company of others acting as research participants’ (p. 15). This kind of research must, therefore, be reflective. Kemmis and McTaggart (1998) describe this in terms of a

need to be flexible – a willingness to change when the need arises, a readiness to take risks in the light of new evidence or a change of situation. This means honestly critiquing practice, recognizing what is good and building on strengths, as well as understanding what needs action to improve it. In this research, I was an active participant in a number of ways. I was a participant observer and often shared my writing with the students.

Both McNiff (1988) and Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) explain the action research process in terms of a spiral, which is made up of planning, acting, observing and reflecting. They explain that there is a ‘dynamic complementarity which links these four aspects into a cycle and ultimately into spirals of cycles’ (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988, p. 10). Reflection is the catalyst for each of these cycles – the essential ingredient that the process hinges on. Such processes are in many instances part of the repertoire many teachers employ. However, action research provides a theoretical framework to guide the practice (McNiff, 1988) ‘more carefully, more systematically, and more rigorously than one does in everyday life’ (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988, p. 10). It was the conscious use of reflection and the willingness to be flexible and change track in the face of a perceived need that lay at the heart of my research. It meant noticing what worked with the students and building on these events after some reflection; this made this project dynamic and relevant for everyone involved.

For the teacher researcher, action research is a living and dynamic process; it is not a set of abstract theories applied to practice. It is the trying and the testing of ideas and theories on the basis of reflection in the vibrant space of the classroom, in a sense creating theory from real practice. McNiff (1988) makes the point that practical experiential theorists should have the same status as abstract theorists, because they are the front line of social theorizing. Practical forms of theory are as legitimate as pure conceptual forms and are a powerful and appropriate form of theory for dealing with social issues, since they are ‘located in and generated out of practice, valuing tacit knowledge as much as cognitive knowledge’ (McNiff, 1988, p. 20). As an epistemology, action research offers a way a way of understanding and explaining phenomena, while offering a way forward. It is doing and improving rolled into one.

3.2.2 Practitioner as researcher

Often teacher research is enacted in response to influences from outside of the classroom. By this I mean influenced by research that is carried out by non-teacher ‘experts’ researching the nature of effective classroom practice. Teachers often frame their practice in accordance with the ‘results’ obtained by ‘expert’ researchers from outside the classroom. This can be problematic for many reasons, but one important result is that it means teachers tend to not investigate the problems they encounter in their own classrooms and are not encouraged to develop ways to combat them. In many instances, teachers have grown used to seeing themselves as receivers of knowledge and not generators of professional knowledge. This situation serves to undermine teacher confidence, leading to what has been described as a disenfranchisement, because ‘those who have daily access, extensive expertise, and a clear stake in improving classroom practice have no formal way to make their knowledge of classroom teaching and learning part of the literature on teaching’ (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 2).

This study drew on the ideas and methodology of the teacher as a researcher as expounded by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1990, 1993, 1999, 2009). They explain that the teacher as a researcher is unique in the field of educational research and can bring to research credible, real-world methodology and findings that are distinctly different and distinct from the university-based research usually found in educational research literature. These findings are valuable and capable of generating theory. However, much teaching practice theory continues to be based on the assumption that knowledge about teaching should be ‘outside in,’ produced at the university and then made use of in schools. Teachers are expected to be the ‘eventual recipients of knowledge generated by professional researchers’ (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 1993, p. 1).

Stenhouse (1975) argued that ‘teachers by dint of the fact that they were teachers were also researchers’ (Campbell, McNamara & Gilroy, 2004, p. 9). By this is meant the capacity teachers have to reflect on their practice and to make changes and adaptations based on perceived need. For many, this is a key feature of being a teacher. Campbell et al. (2004) explain that part of what it is to be a good

practitioner is to bring tacit knowledge to the surface in a process called reflection in action – thinking through one’s actions as one is producing them.

Systematically thinking through one’s actions as one is producing them in a professional situation is a feature of practitioner research. Explicit knowledge is garnered when teachers research their own practice because,

The knowledge teachers need to teach well is generated when teachers treat their own classrooms and schools as sites for intentional investigation at the same time that they treat the knowledge and theory produced by others as generative material for interrogation and interpretation.

(Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 250)

Describing the situation as it existed at the beginning of the 1990s, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) noted that little attention had been given to the teacher as a researcher in his or her own right, as one who was able to generate knowledge about teaching whilst reflecting on his/her own practice. They asserted that much research into teaching, teachers and their work often ignored the contribution teachers had to make ‘as theorizers, interpreters, and critics of their own practice’ (p. 1). They argued for a new kind of knowledge of practice, where ‘knowledge making is understood as a pedagogic act, constructed in the context of use, intimately connected to the knower, and, although relevant to immediate situations, also inevitably a process of theorizing’ (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 273). Likewise, Sanders and McCutcheon (1986) argued that a teacher’s professional knowledge is essentially theoretical knowledge, because it requires ‘intentional and skilful action in real-world situations... which rely on the ability to perceive relevant features of complex problematic, and changeable situations and to make appropriate choices’ (cited in Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p. 16).

Teacher research is sometimes regarded as lacking rigour, because it does not employ an empirical methodology. However, empirical data does not reveal *why* a student is struggling with a writing task, nor does it help devise ways to ameliorate this kind of situation. It is the real-life, day-to-day knowledge and relationships a teacher-researcher establishes with his or her class that begins to expose why a problem has occurred. Such knowledge tends to be qualitative and

cumulative, built up through discussion and conversation, observation and professional reflection.

Such teacher knowledge, the wisdom of practice, has often been missing from the research literature on teaching (Shulman 1987). Shulman was particularly interested in ‘pedagogical content knowledge,’ which he defined as: ‘that special amalgam of content and pedagogy that is uniquely the province of teachers, their own special form of professional understanding. It represents the blending of content and pedagogy into an understanding of how particular topics, problems, or issues are organized, represented, and adapted to the diverse interests and abilities of learners, and presented for instruction’ (p. 8, cited in Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 255). Such knowledge does not rely on a body of codified knowledge passed on from expert teachers or university research theories. In fact, this kind of knowledge may not be easily codified. Instead, it is more likely to be proven and tested by the discussion and collaboration of other teacher researchers researching similar problems in their classes (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, Campbell et al., 2004).

The advantages of recognising and valuing this form of research in the life of a teacher has been summarised by Goswami & Stillman (1987, p. 8) in the following way:

1. Their teaching is transformed in important ways: they become theorists, articulating their intentions, testing their assumptions, and finding connections with practice.
2. Their perceptions of themselves as writers and teachers are transformed. They step up their use of resources, they form networks, and they become more active professionally.
3. They become rich resources, who can provide the profession with information it simply doesn’t have. They can observe closely, over long periods of time, with special insights and knowledge. Teachers know their classrooms and students in ways that outsiders can’t.

4. They become critical, responsive readers and users of current research, less apt to accept uncritically others' theories, less vulnerable to fads, and more authoritative in their assessment of curricula, methods, and materials.
5. They can study writing and learning and report their findings without spending large sums of money (although they must have support and recognition). Their studies, while probably not definitive, taken together should help us develop and assess writing curricula in ways that are outside the scope of specialists and external evaluators.
6. They collaborate with their students to answer questions important to both, drawing on community resources in new and unexpected ways. The nature of classroom discourse changes when inquiry begins. Working with teachers to answer real questions provides students with intrinsic motivation for talking, reading, and writing and has the potential for helping them achieve mature language skills

3.3 Data Collection

3.3.1 In-depth interviews

A primary source of data in this case study was in-depth interviews with students. Interviews were conducted with students in groups and as individuals, prior to and following the intervention. They were open-ended, but structured to maintain a close focus on their experience of writing (Spradley, 1979, cited in Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 55). The open-ended nature of the interviews encouraging what Cohen et al. (2011) describe as unstructured responses. They allowed student respondents to answer in whatever way they chose, and to 'discuss their interpretations of the world...and how they regard situations from their own point of view' (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 409). Open-ended group and individual interviews also allowed the capture of responses that were, on one level, spontaneous and, on another, complex and deep (Cohen et al., 2011). The interviews were videoed and recorded with a 'flip' camera, a small and reasonably unobtrusive device the size of a mobile phone. This enabled the teacher/researcher to be aware of the non-verbal element in the interviews.

There were several qualities unique to interviews as a data collection method that I wished to capitalise upon. The group makeup of the interviews helped to encourage the generation of consensus views, and rich responses that in some cases served to challenge the views of some members of the group or to stimulate further ideas (Lewis, 1992). This is particularly expedient when a group has been working together for some time or share a sense of common purpose (Cohen, et. al., 2011) and where members have learned to respect one another's points of view (Lewis, 1992). The individual interviews suited the disposition of the students involved. One student in particular did not mix well with other students and appreciated the chance to voice her views without the censure or possible embarrassment that group membership may have produced for her. Individual interviews allowed for the recording of material that a student might not wish to share with others – sensitive matters (Cohen et al. 2011) – or protect a more vulnerable student from the censure of her classmates.

Open-ended interviews also provided an opportunity for the interviewer to extend or clarify responses through probing questions to hear the experiences and views of the respondents. Brenner (2006) posits that the sign of a good interview is where the interviewer does the least amount of talking. I realised that it was important that the interviews were dominated by student talk. This meant working with a sequence of questions or cues that were flexible enough to accommodate and follow up unanticipated topics (Brenner, 2006). It was important that the questions allowed this type of freedom. For this reason, I started the interviews with big questions and progressed down to finer details as the interview proceeded. The semi-structured nature of the interviews also provided for the use of examples and clarifications before posing a question. This aided student recall of events and helped them to describe their own experiences (Brenner, 2006).

Interviews of this sort must also make an effort to bridge power differentials between the teacher interviewer and student interviewees (Brenner, 2006). As a teacher, I already had a rapport with the students, but I needed to establish that in a new way for the research. I worked hard to create a context where students felt safe to express their views, and adopted a light-hearted tone. I was also careful to reflect back their ideas by using the language they used rather than substituting a

more correct term. The use of eye-contact and encouraging nods and smiles helped them to realise that I was interested in their ideas and points of view.

3.3.2 Semi-structured questionnaire

Students were also asked to complete a semi-structured questionnaire prior to the intervention to obtain a record of their attitudes to writing. Students were asked to write responses to the following questions:

- What do you find difficult about writing?
- How do you feel when you are first given a writing task?
- How do you feel during the writing task?
- How do you feel by the end of the writing task?
- What do you enjoy about writing?

The idea was for the students to honestly explain their feelings at that point about writing. I made it clear that we were mainly focussing on school writing but they could include anything. I also completed the questionnaire, explaining to the students before they started that, on another occasion with another class, I had answered similar questions and that the class at that time had been shocked but heartened when I read my answers to them revealing that I, too, experienced anxiety at times when I wrote.

3.3.3 Writing scores

An analysis of student writing pre- and post-intervention was carried out in collaboration with an expert marker, my thesis supervisor, using a holistic writing rubric (Appendix 1). The creation of the rubric was a collaboration between the two markers and was prompted by a need to have a more sensitive and relevant grading system than those used in schools at the time, and that represented a more finely grained gradation of writing quality.

The rubric was developed collaboratively with my thesis supervisor. We drew on other marking rubrics from a number of educational institutions from a variety of

countries. The development process required decisions over what descriptors best charted the features we as markers wanted to investigate. Drawing on the Six-Traits model in Spence (2010), the rubric divided the marking into six dimensions: ideas and content; structure and organisation; voice; word choice and diction; sentence structure; and conventions. A numeric rating of one to four was used in each dimension. In developing the rubric, we were aware that divisions such as these are not objective and the inclusion of one aspect over another may be viewed as arbitrary. After some discussion, however, I decided to conflate the section of imagery and figurative language into that of word choice and diction, the rationale being that deliberate choice of words is very much part and parcel of creating images. In a similar way, I decided to allocate voice a category of its own on the grounds that an author's voice is a purposeful construction and as such is an essential element in the relationship between writer and reader.

Student writing was also assessed using measures that identified and then calculated the number of the different sentence types used. Hudson (2009) discusses the efficacy of using such objective measures to complement and validate (or question) subjective measures like marking rubrics. When using the term objective measure, Hudson is referring to measures that involve counting T-units, 'a main clause plus all subordinate clauses and non-clausal structures attached to or embedded in it' (Hunt, 1970, cited in Gaies, 1980, p. 54), along with other measurements that involve the counting of clauses and sentence types. Hudson defines subjective measures like the rubric used to mark my students' work as global, subjective assessments used by an experienced examiner. He contends that the use of subjective marking combined with objective measures gives a more complete view of the writing maturity and ability of students. Along with this, he claims it helps teachers see more clearly where students have gaps and, therefore, where teachers can target assistance more effectively.

Rimmer (2006) makes the point that testing grammatical complexity is difficult and that it is virtually impossible to have a complete measure given that typical measures reveal only the types of sentences present and not the effects of the sentences used. It is also difficult to be definitive about the comparative complexity of one sentence type over another. For example, is the use of simple sentences rather than compound sentences, a feature of less complexity or

maturity? Myhill (2007) makes the point that long sentences are not necessarily more complex – in fact the reverse is often the case. She found that young children or less skilful writers used longer and often more confused sentences in their writing. Bardovi-Harlig (1992) argues that measures like t-units falsely show complexity because the measure fails to take into consideration the intent of the sentence. For such reasons, I decided to count sentence types, sentence variety and overall composition length because this gave a clearer picture of sentence development than T-units per sentence.

3.3.4 Likert scales

The class answered two questionnaires using a likert scale pre and post the intervention. Each questionnaire used a scale from zero to five, with zero representing ‘Never’, the number three representing ‘Hardly Ever’, and number five representing ‘Often’. This was administered in order to determine the degree to which the students felt their knowledge of syntax had developed and their confidence as writers had changed over the duration of the project. Cohen et al. (2011) observe that likert scales are ‘useful devices for the researcher, as they build in a degree of sensitivity and differentiation of response whilst still generating numbers’ (p. 387). However, there are some factors that the researcher must take into consideration when using likert scales as a data source. An important consideration is the fact that numbers have different meanings for respondents; for example, what one respondent might consider a high score, another may consider as only a moderate one.

Scales that make use of verbal labels across the scale, like the one I used, have greater reliability than those that only label the end points of the scale (Schwartz, Knauper, Rippler, Noelle-Neumann & Clark, 1991). Another consideration in the construction of the scale was to avoid having all the positive scores on the left hand side, because respondents tend to use these categories more and consequently generate higher scores (Hartley Betts, 2010).

3.3.5 Reflective journal

While the intervention was being carried out, I also kept a reflective journal. Reflection is defined as ‘a mental process in which one thinks about things by going over them’ (Phelps 2005, p. 38). Such reflection is an important aspect of action research and is a significant component of professional education. Reflective writing can provide much understanding into the ‘the personal and often implicit processes which teachers experience in their work and development’ (Borg, 2001, p. 157). It is through writing, the cognitive process of documenting and reflecting on experiences, that teachers gain ‘an enhanced awareness of themselves as people and as professionals, an awareness which makes for more informed decision making’ (Borg, 2001, p. 158). Writing ensures that original experience is captured and not lost. It helps to reinforce understanding and also helps to serve as a mechanism for distancing the writer from the initial experience, helping to distinguish between the actual experience and its interpretation. It also helps to provide a sharpened focus integrating ideas by connecting significant experience in the classroom with other past experiences (Zuckermann & Rajuan, 2008).

This approach to data collection and this kind of data are the antithesis of traditional academic genres, because their nature is personal, sometimes tentative and indecisive, and exploratory (Zuckermann & Rajuan, 2008). Although reflective journaling was not at first conceived as a method of data collection (Borg, 2001), it is now a recognised method for data generation and interpretation (Ortlipp, 2008). Because of its relative newness in academic research contexts, there has been a shortage of guidance for the novice researcher regarding the purposes for keeping a reflective journal and how to use one’s reflections in the research process (Ortlipp, 2008). However, it is the departure from traditional methods that affords journaling its power and authenticity (Phelps, 2005). Not least amongst these are the opportunities it offers to capture insights described as ‘a-ha experiences’ (Phelps, 2005, p. 42), the significance of which may not be apparent until reflected upon by the researcher. It was experiences such as these that were important for me as I negotiated the new terrain of teaching syntax within the context of student writing.

As a novice researcher I, too, was initially tentative – unsure about what to record in a reflective journal and about how useful the information that would be for my analysis. Keeping the journal involved recording the progress of the class, noting my reactions to what was taking place, while helping me to clarify my understanding of the effectiveness of what I was attempting to do, in other words, assisting me to ‘feel my way’. Its recursiveness was appropriate to the action research framework, ‘documenting the interplay of students’ history with their current and emerging learning state’ (Phelps, 2005, p. 42). It was also a useful tool in capturing the mood and atmosphere of the class – the a-ha moments. The journal was useful to chart the changing needs of the class, the fact that some of the activities needed much more time than originally anticipated, and that many of the concepts could only be cemented into the students’ repertoire by repetition.

3.5 Analysis of data

Interviews have both strengths and weaknesses as a data collection method. Miles and Huberman (1994) make the point that what you ‘see’ in a transcription of interviews is inescapably selective and that transcripts often erase crucial non-verbal data (p. 56). However, they go on to explain that although words are more unwieldy than numbers, they render more meaning than numbers alone and should be hung onto throughout data analysis, because ‘focusing solely on numbers shifts attention from substance to arithmetic, throwing out the notion of “qualities” or essential characteristics’ (p. 56). It is these ‘qualities’ and ‘essential characteristics’ that the analysis of the students’ responses to the intervention attempted to uncover.

The analysis firstly involved transcribing the interviews and then using a general inductive approach (Thomas, 2006). The transcripts were read several times to identify themes and categories (these are outlined in Chapter 6) and then subjected to a system of coding and note-taking to establish links. Thomas (2006) makes the following salient points about this process:

- Data analysis is determined by both the research objectives (deductive) and multiple readings and interpretations of the raw data (inductive). Thus

the findings are derived from both the research objectives outlined by the researcher(s) and findings arising directly from the analysis of the raw data. (p. 239)

- The research findings result from multiple interpretations made from the raw data by the researchers who code the data. Inevitably, the findings are shaped by the assumptions and experiences of the researchers conducting the research and carrying out the data analyses. In order for the findings to be usable, the researcher (data analyst) must make decisions about what is more important and less important in the data. (p. 240)

3.5.1 Writing results

The pre- and post-intervention writing was assessed in two ways. The first used a marking rubric which generated an overall mark for all the pieces of writing both pre and post intervention (see Appendix 1). The pieces were marked by two markers and an average mark was taken for each piece of writing.

A second grade was generated through the use of writing measures. These were:

- Length;
- Sentence variety;
- Subordination and coordination;
- Run-on sentences, sentence fragments and ungrammatical sentences.

Comparisons were made between pre- and post-intervention data to determine whether the students' writing had made gains or otherwise after the completion of the intervention using both the holistic writing rubric results and the objective measures. The results were collated and tabulated for each student for both types of assessment. Percentages were calculated for pre- and post-intervention across a number of different features, firstly using the rubric with the holistic writing assessment, and then using the objective measures that examined sentence type, variation, and the length of the writing.

Results from the likert-scale questions were collated and tabulated to determine whether the students felt differently about writing and whether they considered

that they had gained knowledge of syntax by the completion of the intervention. The results were also analysed to discover which questions resulted in strongly positive or negative responses from the students.

3.5 Ethics

This project was conducted under the umbrella of a two-year research project entitled “Teachers as Writers”, led by Professor Terry Locke of the University of Waikato, Faculty of Education. In this project, individual teachers from around the Waikato region developed and ran their own interventions with classes, as they wrote and modelled writing alongside them. As well as this, the project involved teachers in a number of writing workshops, where they engaged in and practised the various strategies they would later use in their classes. My research was granted ethics approval from The University of Waikato under the auspices of the “Teachers as Writers” project.

I used the permission letters the Teachers as Writers project had already generated; a letter to the parents and to the students (see Appendix 2 and 3). The letter explained that the researcher would like to collect data or information from the student’s writing as they participated in the project. The data would include:

- Responses to questionnaires;
- Classroom observations;
- Occasional group interviews;
- Occasional one-on-one discussions during a lesson;
- Work samples with the student’s consent.

The letter made it clear that no student would be identified by name. In addition to the parental letter and consent form, there was a student consent form letter. Students consented to be involved in the research agreeing to be observed, taped, have quotes used (without revealing their identity) and have copies made of their classroom work. The most important feature was keeping their identities confidential. Along with this, permission was requested and granted from the principal and Board of Trustees.

Researching one's class presents some ethical dilemmas. The students were concerned to ensure that their work would not be identified. I was extremely cognisant of the importance of respecting their rights to privacy and the need to preserve their anonymity, while at the same time presenting the findings of the research in a clear and meaningful way.

Chapter 4

The intervention

4.1 Introduction

As concluded in chapter two, teaching grammar in a way that is isolated, discrete and separate from the writing process has little impact on writing development. The important aspect to note here is that instruction in grammar separate from writing has little to offer because it does not connect grammar and writing, or grammar and meaning. To date, the use of grammar in meaning-making is still not well understood and it is not well researched. But as noted, grammar that is embedded in the teaching of writing, and purposefully introduced at relevant points in students' learning, provides for them a repertoire of possibilities, the goal of which is to support writers in taking control and ownership of the texts they compose. These ideas informed the development of the teaching intervention that is outlined in this chapter. The intervention involved the introduction of grammar in context in a cooperative writing class. This chapter introduces the unit of work, the setting into which it was introduced, the establishment of a cooperative classroom, the specific texts that were used, and the teaching strategies employed. It also includes a number of student responses to the unit and the texts.

4.2 The unit of work

The intervention was taught in the context of a unit entitled 'Relationships', this being a part of an initiative by the English Department to teach thematically in the

junior school. This suited the nature of the intervention, because it made a useful link between language study and literature, therefore situating the teaching of syntax within a wider context, and it helped to provide the meaningful models required to aid the authentic development of writing in the class. The unit took place over a period of eight weeks, allowing for interruptions and the administration of some testing during the period of the intervention.

The following aims underpinned the intervention. These were to:

- Provide students with grammatical structures when appropriate during the progress of the unit and in the context of writing so that they built up a repertoire of possibilities as they wrote;
- Use grammatical terminology as appropriate; this meant emphasizing function and alongside examples. Having a label for the grammatical feature was aimed at helping the students identify the feature which was useful for providing feedback for the writing pairs;
- Facilitating a culture of experimentation with language, concentrating on the effect created by the deliberate use of grammatical features; and
- Using writing pairs to provide feedback and work together on examples of the language concepts introduced.

The introduction to the unit of work emphasized the goal of improving students' writing and helping them gain more control by learning new skills. This would involve learning a number of grammatical concepts that would help them develop new ways to make their writing more effective.

4.2.1 The class

The class was a Year Nine (first year of secondary school) group of 22 students in a decile 7 Catholic girls' school. In New Zealand, a decile ranking is an indication of the socio-economic status of the students attending the school. It is ranked from one to ten, with one being the lowest and ten the highest ranking. This was an integrated school, which meant that it was a state-funded school with a 'special' religious character. In this case it meant that Catholic values permeated the school. While this may not seem to have a great deal of relevance to

curriculum levels and achievement, it did affect the environment of the school and the atmosphere of the classroom. There were strongly articulated ideas around attitudes of respect for the individual and the promotion of supportive relationships. In practical terms this translated into students being more willing to ‘give things a go’ and often have an unquestioned respect for the role of the teacher.

The school had streamed these students into a class classified as average or below on the basis of its entrance results and a subsequent reading test. The class was placed fifth out of eight Year Nine classes. A subsequent reading test – an asTTle (Assessment Tools for Teaching and Learning) test – bore out the entrance-test placement. AsTTle tests are aligned to the levels of the New Zealand Curriculum, with achievement within each level assessed as either B (basic achievement), P (proficient achievement), or A (advanced achievement). The New Zealand curriculum assumes that students at Year Nine should be at level four of the curriculum and moving to, or have moved to, level five by the end of their first year of secondary school. In the asTTle test this translates to 4A moving toward 5B. In several cases students in this class were achieving below the expected reading level. Of course, reading skill does not necessarily predict writing ability, but does serve to provide a broad picture of language capability. Sixteen of the students were at level four or below, suggesting that many of the students in the class found writing difficult.

4.3 Setting up a cooperative class and writing pairs

Given the demonstrated benefits of cooperative classrooms and the benefits of writing dyads, students were organized into writing pairs. The rationale was that students could have immediate feedback from a peer, and that they too would benefit by giving feedback. The class was used to the idea of cooperative writing; we had used writing groups earlier in the year with some success. The students appeared to enjoy sharing their work with others – hearing it read aloud, giving and receiving advice, being complimented. I deliberately paired students with unfamiliar partners, usually where one student was more able than the other. These proved to be helpful, although some problems with incompatibility needed

to be managed. The pairs were established so that the students could help each other and receive quick feedback. Only one pair clashed and had to be changed, and another student had to be moved into a grouping of three because she could not work well with any of the combinations.

The pairs worked with mini-white boards, giving them opportunities to experiment with sentence structures, changing by erasing or even writing down different versions, one underneath the other on the board. On many occasions they compared their efforts with other pairs resulting in further changes and modifications. They were encouraged to write their own versions and compare them with others. In addition, they also wrote up what they had come up with on the class board for others to copy and share. On occasions, we tentatively decided on a best sentence, with me taking note of the best of the various combinations and saving them on my computer to be displayed later for everyone to share as they wrote. The students exhibited a pride in this work. It is notable that within the context of this collaborative writing experience, one student who had initially expressed a dislike of writing said that she began to consider herself a good writer. Seeing her work displayed alongside the work of other students helped to give her confidence.

Interestingly, as the unit of work progressed, the pairings became more fluid. I noticed students leaning across to other students to ask their opinion on a section of their story, or moving to stand behind other groups to suggest improvements. Some students were stronger and more confident in giving feedback and others less so. Peer feedback was usually verbal in these instances. These informal pairings were not discouraged as it showed the students were keen to receive feedback and were willing to make use of it.

4.3.1 Cultivating a positive atmosphere

I carefully worked to create an atmosphere of enjoyment and fun in the way we approached the writing tasks. The first activity of the unit of work involved the class discussing what they considered were the aspects of a true friend. In response to this, they constructed a recipe for friendship. After reading a number

of on-line recipes, the students noted that the instructions all started with commands. I explained that these starting-off words were verbs and named imperatives. While the recipe was fun to do, the students also found it challenging. At first they found it difficult to select the appropriate words to express how to 'make' a friendship. However, once they worked this out they wrote some delightful recipes. Here is one student's example:

A Recipe for Friendship

Ingredients

1. A handful of humour
2. A massive amount of honesty
3. A lifetime of forgiveness
4. An eternity of jokes
5. An acre of respect
6. Years of sticking up for each other

Method

1. Take two good friends together in a relationship
2. Mix a handful of forgiveness with a lifetime
3. Knead massive amounts of honesty into the relationship
4. Stir in an eternity of taking jokes and an acre of respectfulness
5. Add years of sticking up for each other to the mixture and stir
6. Bake for a millennium
7. Voila to a great friendship

The activity did serve to draw attention to both word choice and sentence construction used for particular effect – a useful foundation for later work.

4.4 Texts used as a model for writing

Texts with the potential to allow the exploration of the theme of relationships and how they affect people were selected as models to guide student writing. We studied three short stories by New Zealand writers, a poem, and we read a variety

of carefully selected newspaper articles. Each text was selected for its potential to foster discussion around the topic of how different kinds of relationships affect people. They were used to introduce the concept of ‘theme’ and show how the selection of events and the development of ‘character’ allowed the writer to convey messages to the reader. The texts also allowed for the examination of point of view, structure, the use of dialogue, as well as sentence structure and word choice. I chose texts with potential to provoke a personal response from the students and which could, thus, lead on to a consideration of how that response was created. In other words, I selected texts that would facilitate reflection on the techniques used by the author to convey a message or theme to the reader.

Theme

The texts we read examined the theme of relationships from a variety of perspectives: friends, family, school and romance. The idea of theme and what this means had been introduced earlier in the year. It is a concept that is used frequently in assessments and other material the students will encounter as they progress through secondary school, and so is something they need to be familiar with. However, I was careful to explain that different people read texts in different ways and so a theme may not be the same for everyone. I wanted the students to decide for themselves what they thought were the themes in the texts we studied, so that they would have an idea of how to develop this in their own writing. We read the texts together, often with me reading to them and discussing the meaning as we went. The students also worked through a number of questions together and wrote personal responses outlining what the texts meant to them.

A theme that a number of the texts shared was bullying. We read the poem ‘My Parents Kept Me From Children Who Were Rough’, by Stephen Spender (1981). The class decided the poem was about being an outsider and wanting to fit in, and that students can be bullied because they are different. In response to the poem, one student wrote:

His parents didn’t want their child to learn any bad things or words from the other boys. I felt the boy was very enduring because, even though the boys hurt him, he was still willing to forgive them.

Here the student's response illustrates a perceptive understanding of the meaning of the poem.

After reading the short story, 'Dear Mr Cairney', by Graham Lay (1985), a story about a teacher who mistreats a student, another student responded:

Well I never thought about one big adult picking on someone younger and weaker than him, especially a student.

The responses gave the students an opportunity to think about what the texts had communicated to them and to express their ideas in writing. In doing so, they allowed the creation of a record of ideas that they could later utilize in their own writing if they chose.

In 'Solomon' by Heather Marshall (1994), a group of friends bully a stray cat. They are stopped by the outrage of another child. These responses from the students were insightful:

Boredom can make people do foolish things, just like in the story. The kids got bored and tired doing and playing with the same kids each day. They end up doing worthless things.

The story shows that sometimes younger ones can be a lot braver than older people. I think it is because they aren't as scared and don't know the outcomes of speaking out.

While quite different, both responses were astute and suggested that the students did obtain a deep understanding of the story.

Point of view

All the texts were told from a first person point of view. However, 'Dear Mr Cairney' and 'Solomon' were a little different. 'Dear Cairney' is narrated through a letter a student is writing to a teacher 20 years after the events that are related, and 'Solomon' is told by a character that appears initially to be peripheral to the story. In both stories, the narration is central to understanding the purpose of the story. As a class we discussed the importance of how a story is told and who tells

it, and considered whether a first person narrative was more suitable than a third person point of view for their writing.

Structure

We used the story ‘Solomon’ as a model to explore how narratives are structured. The class plotted the main events of the story on a graph noting how the story advanced to a climax and finished shortly after this. We spent considerable time together deciding on which events could be considered the main events. This was an extremely useful exercise, with the discussion yielding an understanding of how the plot of a story contributes to the theme. The students used the graphing technique we modeled when they planned their own stories.

Dialogue

As a way of acquainting the class with the kind of dialogue they would need in their own writing, the students read ‘Thirteen Flavours’ by Jane Westaway (1996). The story is a comic romance set in an ice cream parlour. In it, the main character imagines a number of hilarious conversations with customers that have annoyed her. In pairs, the students created their own versions of these conversations and then practised writing them in their books, using the conventions of direct speech I had provided for them.

4.5 The scaffolded story

These texts, therefore, provided ideas and models for the students’ first piece of writing within the intervention. Many of the students were not satisfied with their first efforts, however, and because I had told them that they could choose from at least two stories for assessment, the class decided to write a second story. They elected to write a romance that would incorporate some humour, similar to the style of ‘Thirteen Flavours’. Many of the students asked for help getting started. As a consequence we worked out some possible plot progressions collaboratively. The students were free to ‘pick and choose’ and were no way limited to using all or any of the starters. I had helped the class with paragraph starters on other occasions. Through these exercises, the class became accustomed to working

collaboratively, with me and with each other. It was not unusual for me to model different kinds of writing and ask students for their response, or work alongside them as they wrote their own version of a task.

4.6 The introduction of syntactical tools

What is a sentence?

Once their writing was under way I began, through a number of mini-lessons, to introduce students to particular grammatical features. My intention was to encourage student experimentation with these features in their stories. The first feature was designed to address one of the most pernicious problems evident in their first efforts at writing – the use of run-on sentences. This was something that was found in all forms of their writing, both narrative and expository. It became one of the class mantras that by the end of the year the inappropriate use of run-on sentences would be eradicated, much like the advertised programme to eradicate the noxious pest, the possum in New Zealand. We also discussed how run-on sentences compromised meaning, and looked at some examples together.

Our focus on the basic unit of the sentence began with querying what they thought a sentence was. What were the characteristics of a sentence? They replied by explaining it should have a beginning and end, starting with a capital letter and ending with a full stop, and that it could be long or short. I asked them how long or how short should it be? The class decided that a sentence could be a single word or very long. When asked if a sentence should be a whole paragraph long, some agreed and others were not sure. I wanted the students to consider the advantages and disadvantages of very short or very long sentences. I wrote up these short sentences: ‘It was cold.’ ‘The wind was blowing.’ ‘I didn’t want to go outside.’ ‘I stayed inside.’ They were quick to come up with the idea that a short sentence could have impact, but, when asked to consider the effect of these sentences, most of the students agreed they sounded jerky and even childish. I pointed out that they had made a good point here, because this kind of writing was often found in early readers where simple sentences were the norm. With regard

to long sentences, students stated they could lose their way and that their writing was hard to follow when they used long sentences.

As a way of exploring this further, the class read the opening paragraphs of Katherine Mansfield's (1922) short story, 'At The Bay'. The story opens with the sentence, 'Very early morning.' The class was asked to come to some conclusions about this sentence. The overwhelming consensus was that the sentence was short – perhaps too short – and that it seemed to have something missing. When asked, most of the pairs agreed that the sentence should say, 'It was very early morning,' or, alternatively, 'It is very early morning.' They were questioned as to why a writer like Katherine Mansfield would write the sentence in this unexpected way. Was this acceptable? Should it have been changed? Most agreed that it should stay the way it was because she wanted readers to be clear about the time of day right at the beginning of the story.

Teaching the use of tense

A further teaching point from Mansfield's (1922) 'At The Bay' was the idea that sentences have verbs, and that 'is' and 'was' are verbs. As we discussed this, the class realized that the verb shows the reader when events are taking place; it shows the tense. The writing pairs subsequently experimented with writing simple sentences and changing their tenses, for example:

It was cold. It is cold. I will be cold.

Mary runs down the street. Mary ran down the street. Mary is running down the street. Mary has run down the street.

This was an opportunity to explain that some verbs need other words added to them to make them complete, and also indicate the tense, for example, 'is running' and 'has run.' The class could see that 'running' by itself did not make sense and nor did 'run' without the addition of 'had' or 'has.' This provided a basis for introducing the notion of auxiliary verbs.

As a class we decided that a hypothesis for finding the verb would be to find the word that showed the action and when the action happened. This was labeled as tense for later reference. The students were quick to understand the function of

the auxiliary verb and added to their hypothesis that auxiliary verbs show tense. They took a note of these conclusions in their workbooks for future reference. As the intervention progressed the students practised a range of different sentence constructions during mini-lessons which included changing the tense. During these times they worked on mini white-boards. Often after working on a particular construction, the class was given the instruction: ‘Now change the tense to the present.’ This meant having ongoing discussions about what tense was and how it could be formed.

Manipulating sentences: Inversion

Another sentence I wanted the students to notice in Mansfield’s story was, ‘Drenched were the cold fuchsias.’ The class was asked how they would normally expect this sentence to look and why Mansfield might have changed this order. Some of their replies were surprising. Some students did not like the inversion, feeling it added nothing to the sentence, while others felt it was ‘creative’, concentrating on showing the reader how the fuchsias looked. The class tried some examples together. For example, we explored the sentence, ‘We were waiting in the hall.’ The class decided that, ‘Waiting in the hall,’ had a more dramatic start, albeit that it needed something added. When asked why this was the case, one student explained it made the reader think about what was happening and it had more suspense. Another felt it sounded different, not what was expected in terms of word order. Interestingly, one student later used this for the dramatic opening of her story. She wrote, ‘Like me they were waiting,’ and another had written in her workbook, ‘A good tip is to change the sentence up a bit.’

Sentence combining

The introduction of sentence combining activities during mini-lessons provided the foundation for the majority of sentence manipulation activities that followed. Sentence combining is a strategy that shows students different ways to combine simple sentences, using subordination and conjunctions, into more sophisticated sentences. The most recent, large-scale reviews of research into secondary student writing, carried out by Graham and Perin (2007b) and Andrews et al. (2006), show that this is an effective strategy for enhancing student writing.

While longer sentences do not necessarily mean better writing, Graham and Perin (2007a) assert that teaching the writing of more complex structures enhances writing. Others, Myhill (2010a) posits, assert that it is the discussion around the sentences and how to structure them that enhances the writing. This, she says, is an interesting twist in the grammar debate, because it raises questions about the link between grammar and writing, and about teaching strategies which help writers to develop a repertoire of linguistic structures which might support their writing development.

In my case, the activities were designed to help students realize there were many ways to express an idea and that it was acceptable to change sentences and word order. In this way the activities helped the grammatical features become embedded and purposeful at relevant points in the learning (Myhill et al., 2011). In fact, the students soon realized the advantages of experimentation, because it helped them see linguistic options; they were more able to make decisions about impact and meaning in terms of what they wanted to express.

The activities were fun. The class activities became something of a game with students competing to share their versions first, along with efforts to see if they could come up with a different version. They enjoyed the conundrum aspect of the activities. At first some students couldn't see how some of the sentences could be joined, but once a few students resolved it, most of the class became involved. They enjoyed making the sentences and looking at the various combinations possible. The activities began by using coordinating conjunctions and then moved on to the use of subordinating conjunctions and how they could be used to change the way the sentence read. Pairs were given a list of coordinating conjunctions to stick in their notebook for future reference. Important here was the recognition that sentences could be subtly changed by using a conjunction at the beginning of a sentence. This kind of understanding promoted an awareness of sentence structure that, as it turned out, went a long way towards eliminating run-on sentences. These activities transferred into the writing that was taking place and it was interesting to hear the exchanges that took place between pairs. Many advised their partners with recommendations such as:

You could combine these sentences; use “and” or, Take out words here and use a “because”.

The class had quickly learnt that combining sentences meant changing the sentences and possibly eliminating some of the words. It was also interesting that some students did begin to use terminology to explain what they were doing:

Use a conjunction, you know, a ‘because.’

After questioning the class it became apparent that some of the students were already familiar with grammar terminology, such as conjunctions, but were not quite sure how to use them. This situation was confirmed later in the interviews.

I gave the class the following list of conjunctions to use during our mini-lesson and later during their own writing:

After; even if; unless; where; although; though; because; until; wherever; as; since;; when; while; as if; but; while; before; that; if; as long as; whenever.

Many of the exercises took place at the start of lessons and were usually written on mini-whiteboards, shared between the pairs. Mini-whiteboards were useful because they could be quickly changed and other combinations could be added. Records of ‘best’ sentences were kept for reference by the teacher. They were put up on the data projector to remind students of different combinations and by the students on large pieces of paper and in the back of their notebooks. The sentence combining exercises used for practice were sometimes found on the internet and others were created by the me. Examples were:

- The day is hot.
- The day is humid and windy.

This became one student’s different versions: ‘The humid and windy day was hot.’ *and* ‘The day is hot, humid and windy.’

Another example:

- It was cold.
- Mary decided to stay inside.

- Mary wanted to drink hot chocolate.
- Mary was keen to see all the episodes of *Home and Away* she had taped.

This became: ‘Because Mary was cold she decided to stay inside and watch all the episodes of *Home and Away* while drinking hot chocolate.’

The classroom interactive whiteboard, or Smartboard, was invaluable here. Either the teacher or one of the students was able to manipulate sentences quickly and easily to illustrate different versions. These were able to be saved for later use. At times these lessons assumed an almost carnival atmosphere with students calling out alternative versions or taking turns to write up their own versions on the Smartboard.

Adding detail

The students thoroughly enjoyed competing with each other to make different and interesting sentences. Along with sentence-combining, the students practised adding detail – adjectives, adverbs and phrases to their sentences. They worked mainly in pairs but sometimes in larger groups, using mini-whiteboards and cut-up sentences to try out different combinations. The use of the cut-up sentences added an interesting dimension to the exercises. The students also appeared to enjoy the physical nature of the activity. They were free to stand up or move to another desk to view the combinations of other students and then move back to their work to change their sentences. On one occasion four, cut-up sentences were distributed, meaning that several pairs were given the same sentence. They did not know this until the examples were written up. In this instance, each pair wrote up their version, unless they were unwilling, or it was much the same as a sentence that had already been written up. The resulting combinations showed a great deal of thought and creativity.

Feedback

As a class, we collaboratively generated a feedback sheet which some students used, while others preferred to utilize the immediate feedback of a verbal exchange. While they wrote, they shared what they had written with their partners. This gave their partners the opportunity, to point out sections of the story they felt didn’t work and explain why – often suggesting changes they felt

would enhance the sentence (usually), but sometimes several sentences, too. We had spent some time earlier in the year developing protocols around feedback that included developing the correct register, adding appropriate detail, as well as a prohibition on personal put-downs. The comments had to be constructive. These included explaining, first-off, what they liked about the work specifically explaining which sentence, phrase or individual word they felt had impact, and why they felt this.

The feedback sheet, below, was co-constructed, typed up and distributed to students for use as a basis for comments, written or spoken. It was based on feedback from students and a class discussion around the type of comments that would help students to make changes to their writing and be most beneficial.

Feedback Guide

Write on the story and/or make comments on sentence structure, punctuation and structure. Use the following examples as starters.

Sentence structure

- I can't understand this sentence
- There seem to be words left out here (You could suggest a word)
- This is a run-on sentence
- This sentence could be joined (and, but, or, because etc)
- You could begin with a conjunction here
- You could invert the sentence
- Try adding adjectives before this noun
- You could use an adverb after this verb like ...
- Try adding a phrase to give more information
- The tense has changed
- This is the wrong preposition
- Try a shorter/longer sentence for more effect

Punctuation

- Try using direct speech here
- You need a comma here
- The direct speech needs commas
- This needs a question mark
- Use a capital here
- Why does this have a capital?

Structure

- This should be a separate paragraph
- Ideas
- This is not ended well
- This seems unfinished
- Why did she/he do this?
- Explain (briefly) why this happened
- Add more description here

Some of the concepts in the feedback sheet had been covered during the exercises and previous class work. The idea of a preposition was not really understood clearly and needed further explanation, as did the use of commas, which had been discussed and tried out during exercises involving the adding of phrases. Often this involved the teacher talking to individuals or pairs about the use of these features. Apostrophes had been left off the list. This feature of punctuation was something the class struggled with and resulted in more than one unplanned mini-lesson.

Initially the students reverted to making simplistic and unhelpful comments in the vein of ‘cool’ or ‘this is good’ or ‘this doesn’t make sense.’ I had to remind the class and specific individuals to add more helpful detail to their comments, that is, to say what was appealing or why they couldn’t follow a sentence or sentences. Many students began adding comments like, ‘This is good but you need to describe this part more,’ or ‘Bring this out more.’ As I observed in my reflective journal, the feedback sheet did help to stimulate better comments.

4.7 The use of teaching tools to aid understanding

A number of teaching tools were used to assist in making ideas easily accessible. In this intervention, the use of tools that had a physical and sometimes visual dimension helped the students grasp ideas better.

Microphones

Before the class started the sentence-combining exercises, students were encouraged to go back to their writing and read to each other, listening closely to hear how the sentence sounded. The idea was for them to discern where sentences began and ended. They ended up using microphones with a recording function, so they could individually record their writing as it was spoken, and then individually listen to what it sounded like. This helped them determine the sense of a sentence, as well as where it should begin and end.

Mini-whiteboards and cut up sentences

The class enjoyed the physical nature of the mini-whiteboards and the cut-up sentences. The advantage here was that were able to quickly change their work. They enjoyed erasing a sentence and trying out a new example or even quickly passing it to another writing pair before showing me. In a similar way they enjoyed using the cut-up sentences. These were parts of sentences or at times single words that could be moved around in different combinations to construct a sentence. An amusing aspect of this was the atmosphere of cheerful competition this activity engendered.

4.8 Summary

The intervention took place over a period of just over eight weeks. This gave the class and me time to spend on concepts that were relatively difficult and to do so in a way that encouraged the students to own their work and enjoy the process. Teaching grammatical features as the students wrote provided the class with techniques they could use to change their writing. The emphasis was on showing them a range of possibilities so that they could take charge of their work and make decisions based on what they felt was effective. The whole-class activities, where the students worked in pairs, changing and combining sentences together, using either cut up sentences or mini-whiteboards, motivated them to experiment. Prior to this, many of the students were reluctant to change a sentence once it had been written down. These activities demanded they change sentences and experiment with them, giving confidence to make changes in their own writing and the motivation to experiment with different combinations. The act of working closely with one other student also appeared to be beneficial. It meant that each partner received feedback to the mutual benefit of both students. The giving and receiving of advice helped to clarify ideas for both students. The actual impact on their writing is reviewed in the following chapter.

Chapter 5

The impact of the focus on syntactical fluency on student writing

5.1 Introduction

What follows is an outline of the impact of the teaching intervention described in Chapter 4 on student writing. It begins by outlining the impact on the primary piece of writing that was completed, a narrative account on the theme of relationships, and discussing aspects of the process of ‘scaffolding’ students into this piece of work. The chapter goes on to detail the pre- and post-intervention measures of writing development, paying close attention to changes in sentence use and evidence of developing competency. The study also explored changes in student attitudes to writing, and sought to discover a relationship of these to the strategies used to create a cooperative classroom.

5.2 Pre-intervention attitudinal survey

A semi-structured questionnaire with open-ended questions was administered before the intervention to gain a view of the students’ attitudes about writing. Their answers revealed mixed feelings.

In response to the question, ‘what do you find difficult about writing?’, the majority of students commented that they found formulating ideas extremely difficult and wrote that this caused them a great deal of anxiety. However, alongside this, responses from the final question showed that most of the students

had something positive to communicate about writing, once they had started the process. These seemingly contradictory reactions indicated that the class was ready – fertile land if you like – to participate in the intervention. A close reading of student responses revealed the following themes.

Anxiety

Initially, most of the class expressed anxiety and even fear about some aspect of their writing. These included fears about: whether their writing was good enough, how to start a piece of writing, the generation of ideas and whether their ideas would be conveyed clearly enough to be understood. The following responses reflect these worries:

I'm worried if I've done enough, or done it good enough.
Sometimes I look at others and theirs is usually better so I feel stink.
I feel nervous people won't like it.
I'm not confident I did a good job.

For some students their anxiety resulted in a profound dislike for the writing process. In answer to the question: How do you feel when you are first given a writing task? These students wrote:

I feel not very happy about it because I don't really like writing that much.
I don't like writing that much because I'm not that good at it; so I don't really like it when we have to write.

In response to the question: What do you find difficult about writing, another student revealed her dislike when she said, 'I find it hard to find good ideas and I do not enjoy it.'

Ideas

By far the most dominant reason cited for writing apprehension had to do with generating ideas, often at the start of a piece of writing. Some linked this to a problem with planning as these comments reveal: 'When I need to start the story I find it difficult as I need to make up a storyline. I need to think of the beginning middle and the end.' This comment reflects a lack of confidence with planning which was echoed by other students. The following student relayed similar feelings when she said, 'I find it difficult to think of subjects to write about and I find it hard to plan.' Another student admitted to needing support with the

development of a plot and revealed, ‘I always find that the topic is hard to think of if I don’t get given the storyline.’

Relief

Several students reported that their main emotion by the end of a writing task was relief – relief that it was over as this student wrote, ‘I feel happy that I have finally finished.’ A significant number of students used the actual word ‘relief’ or ‘relieved’ to describe their feelings at the completion of writing. Sadly, this student combined feelings of relief with those of frustration when she said, ‘I feel relieved that I have finished, but I also always think I could have written it better.’

Technical competency

There was widespread concern among students over their ability to use the conventions of syntax and punctuation correctly. One student explained that she found difficulty with editing: ‘Editing my work, putting commas and punctuation in the right place.’ And another said, ‘I feel I could have added a lot more words, nouns, adjectives or even verbs to a paragraph.’ Some even used the verb ‘frustrated’ to explain their feelings of inadequacy over a perceived lack of skill in these areas.

Creativity

Many of the negative responses were juxtaposed by expressions of pleasure to do with the possibility of undertaking a creative endeavour. The student who had earlier expressed frustration at her lack of skill, explained that despite this, ‘I like putting creativity into it.’ And another asserted, ‘I like that I can put all my imaginative thoughts on paper.’ The students’ responses here were heartening, demonstrating as they do an interest in cultivating their imaginative facilities.

The questionnaire was a useful initial tool because it revealed how the students felt about the activity of writing and in particular their own experiences of the writing process. This gave an important window into their views – one that helped me as I developed the activities and strategies that I hoped would benefit their growth as writers during the intervention.

5.3 Student writing: The scaffolded story

The piece of writing that was completed after the intervention was a narrative. As discussed in Chapter Four, the class developed the bones of this narrative in a collaborative way, with the teacher refining some of the paragraph starters. The students were free to ‘pick and choose’ and were no way limited to using all or any of the starters. The use of the scaffold was very much in response to requests from students for help to get started, and was therefore in keeping with Vygotsky’s (1962) idea of the zone of proximal development. In other words it was an attempt to assist students to stretch beyond their level of ability, by providing support to reach the next stage. The scaffold did appear to achieve this. Scaffolding the story was in response to an expressed need by students for help getting started and in generating ideas, and as a consequence it is not surprising that students commented that they felt more positive about writing when they were interviewed.

Together, the class sketched out a broad framework for the story, but students were left to decide how the narrative should progress within the structure and how to end the story. Providing a broad framework did lead to a further positive outcome, as it freed the students to think more closely about the type and effect of the sentences they wanted to use. In a sense it relieved them of some of the anxiety many of them felt about the process of creating their own narrative from ‘scratch.’ Most appreciated the prompt it gave them, especially when it came to starting the story, as these students report.

S1: It gave me the start of the story.

S2: I liked it because I can’t start a story but I can finish it.

S3: It helped me get started.

Along with assistance to get started, many of the students found writing the story enjoyable, even fun, as this student commented in the interview:

Good, because sometimes I can’t think of starting and I liked the storyline, so it was fun to play around with.

Assessing the impact of having fun in the writing classroom is difficult. Like taking pride in one’s work, enjoyment and fun are qualities that cannot be easily

quantified, but their presence is an important component in providing students with the necessary motivation to write and to persist with the endeavour.

While scaffolding students into this writing task had positive outcomes, I am mindful it may have also had some limiting consequences. Some students may have found it too restrictive, despite the freedom to use or discard the structure that was provided, and this may have impacted on the quality of their narrative. However, only one student reported dissatisfaction with the prompts the story provided, when she remarked that, ‘The things that could happen were too basic.’ In this case the framework that we sketched together may have limited her perception of what was possible. She did, however, make progress across the board in terms of the areas on which the writing was assessed.

The fact that the second piece of writing was scaffolded potentially influenced the comparability of the pre- and post-writing. The scaffolded piece of writing had a sameness and predictability. Assessing the structure of the narrative was, therefore, less than straightforward given the assistance provided by the broad structural outline. However, some, albeit few, students did change the structure slightly and did not opt to use the starters as they stood.

5.4 Assessing writing development

5.4.1 Pre- and post-intervention measures

Samples of student work were collected prior to the intervention and after the intervention, and these were collaboratively marked to obtain a view of writing development. The results indicated that students had developed their writing prowess, albeit there are a number of caveats, as will be discussed later in this section.

The attitudes of the students in the class towards writing prior to the intervention were characterised by feelings of inadequacy or even an aversion to writing. Therefore, an improvement is worth noting for what it may represent. The results based on the creative marking rubric are indicated in the Table below. Each student’s writing was assessed according to a mark out of 20 and showed an

overall percentage rise of 11%. The average for the pre-intervention marking was 276.5 of a possible 528 marks or 52%. This is in contrast to a score of 333 out of 528 or 63% for the post-intervention total marking scores. The pre- and post-intervention comparison showed the students writing had made an improvement in the dimensions assessed by the rubric: ideas and content; structure and organisation; voice; word choice and diction; sentence structure; and conventions. These results demonstrate an improvement that reveals some students increased their facility with sentence structure, knowledge of the effect of using different types of sentences, and the development of a simple narrative.

Table 5.1 Marking of pre- and post-intervention writing

Student	Pre-int. Marker 1	Pre-int. Marker 2	Post-int. Marker 1	Post-int. Marker 2	Pre-int. average	Post-int. average	Pre-int. sentence use Marker 1	Pre-int. sentence use Marker 2	Post-int. sentence use Marker 1	Post-int. sentence use Marker 2
1	9	9	14	14	9	14	1	1	2	2
2	12	12	14	14	12	14	2	2	3	3
3	11	12	16	16	11.5	16	2	2	3	3
4	10	10	12	11	10	11.5	2	2	2	2
5	13	14	13	15	13.5	14	2	2	3	3
6	18	16	19	19	17	19	3	2	4	4
7	9	7	15	14	8	14.5	2	1	3	3
8	17	15	18	18	16	18	2	2	3	3
9	14	13	18	19	13.5	18.5	3	2	3	3
10	13	12	12	15	12.5	13.5	3	2	2	2
11	14	15	14	16	14.5	15	3	3	3	3
12	15	13	18	19	14	18.5	2	2	3	3
13	17	15	14	16	16	15	2	2	2	3
14	16	14	12	14	15	13	3	3	2	2
15	11	11	14	14	11	14	2	2	2	3
16	12	12	14	16	12	16	2	2	3	3
17	12	11	15	16	11.5	16	1	2	3	3
18	16	14	18	19	15	19	2	2	3	3
19	19	17	13	15	18	15	3	3	2	3
20	9	8	11	10	8.5	10.5	1	1	2	2
21	12	13	16	17	12.5	16.5	2	2	3	3
22	11	9	14	15	10	14.5	2	2	3	3
Total marks awarded	281	272	324	342	276.5	333	45	44	59	62
Mark as a %	53%	51.5%	61.3%	64.7%	52%	63%				

Note: students have assigned a number to protect their anonymity.

Table 5.1 also details the ratings awarded for sentence use, particularly sentence structure, by each marker both pre-intervention and post-intervention. The scores showed an improvement in student sentence construction ability, that is, the ability to deliberately construct sentences for effect. In most cases changes were from a score of 2 to 3 and in some cases from 2 to 4 in a scale where 4 was the highest and 1 the lowest. The overall average mark from the two markers for the pre-intervention total of sentence structure marks was 43 from a possible total of 88 or 49 % of the total. The post-intervention average total was 60.5, again out a possible 88 or 68.7%. Although this change is not large, it does indicate a pronounced change in sentence effectiveness and therefore, I would argue, a conscious decision to try to use a range of sentence structures that was not evident in the initial writing. This demonstrates a positive change for a majority of the students in the class.

It should be said that the creation of the rubric and the marking highlights the limitations of rubrics themselves. It is extremely difficult to reward flashes of brilliance or subtleties of humour that are not consistent throughout the piece of writing but were evident to me, the teacher, who had been closely involved in the development of both the student's thinking, and the resultant writing, and had noted the effort expended to develop the narrative. The consequent pieces of writing may be inconsistent, but may well illustrate the labour required to utilise the techniques learned in class exercises.

5.4.2 Change in sentence usage

The results of the holistic marking were obtained using the jointly constructed rubric and provided an indication of changes in the quality of writing the class produced. In addition to this, I made the decision to count the variety of sentences the students used in both the pre- and post-intervention writing to determine whether they had gained a greater degree of finesse and maturity in their sentence use. This meant classifying each sentence used under sentence type and then counting them. This measure gave an indication of the development of writing complexity. It is difficult to have a measure that completely shows writing complexity, simply because measures of this sort do not measure the impact of a given sentence. However, it does serve to show a change in sentence variety and, therefore, a possible willingness to experiment with different types of sentences for effect. I decided to

count sentence variety rather than the more traditional method of counting t-units, because I was investigating whether the grammatical features the students had learnt throughout the intervention would affect the sentences they used in their writing.

Therefore, like any measure that is used without recourse to other factors, this measure did have limitations. It was a blunt instrument, as it were, used to detect whether the students employed a greater variety of sentences as they made progress and experimented with new knowledge and in many cases greater daring in their writing.

The measures

Each of the following measures can be used to note a change in sentence awareness and development. The following lists the categories of sentences that were counted and an explanation of why they were important in terms of the students' writing development.

- ***Length:*** An increase in overall writing length is a change worth noting. This may indicate an ability to expand ideas using descriptive detail, characterisation and dialogue. The number of sentences written were counted for both post- and pre-intervention writing.
- ***Sentence variety:*** The variety of sentences used may indicate a greater awareness of writing for effect. Each different type of sentence used was counted.
- ***Subordination and coordination:*** Szmrecsanyi (2004) makes the point that it is generally regarded that the use of subordination indicates a greater degree of complexity in writing. For me, this involved calculating the number of complex and compound complex sentences.
- ***Run-on sentences, sentence fragments and ungrammatical sentences:*** The absence or presence of sentence fragments is an indication of progress or otherwise. Each of these types of sentences were counted.

The following table provides a breakdown of the sentences used in both the pre- and post-intervention writing.

Table 5.2 Measures of sentence types

Student	Pre-intervention								Post-intervention							
	Simple	Compound	Complex	Com/com	Run-on	Frag	Ungramm	Length	Simple	Compound	Complex	Com/com	Run-on	Frag	Ungramm	Length
1	3	1	1	0	5	0	0	10	9	11	2	0	3	0	1	26
2	9	5	0	0	4	6(3)	2	26	16	12	2	3	0	1	0	34
3	20	10	3	0	3	1	3	40	21	15	9	3	0	3	9	60
4	2	2	1	0	4	0	0	9	5	4	6	4	5	0	2	26
5	14	10	3	0	13	0	2	42	18	11	10	1	4	3	0	47
6	22	16	3	3	17	0	1	62	44	31	14	3	2	0	0	94
7	2	3	2	0	3	1	2	13	13	24	11	5	15	1	0	69
8	31	12	3	3	0	1 (1)	0	50	15	18	10	4	0	2	0	49
9	21	12	10	0	2	3	1(2)	49	30	12	11	3	1	1	1	59
10	34	9	4	0	7	0	0	54	12	2	10	3	1	0	1	29
11	4	6	2	1	2	0	0	15	5	14	2	1	4	0	0	26
12	9	7	3	2	3	0	1	25	27	32	5	7	7	3 d	1	82
13	3	4	3	2	0	2	3	17	12	4	6	0	6	1	1	30
14	24	6	6	0	4	0	0	40	11	9	4	0	7	0	0	31
15	0	4	1	1	9	3	4	22	4	6	4	4	7	0	3	28
16	19	7	2	1	2	5	1	37	24	11	4	6	3	0	2	50
17	4	2	4	2	10	2	5	29	6	10	5	2	3	0	2	28
18	2	5	5	2	8	0	0	22	9	8	2	5	7	0	0	31
19	26	8	4	2	9	2	3	54	24	14	7	6	5	2	1	59
20	5	0	2	1	9	0	0	17	6	10	0	2	3	0	0	21
21	5	11	3	1	0	4	1	25	8	8	12	2	1	0	0	31
22	6	5	2	0	2	0	0	15	10	17	4	2	4	2	0	39
Total	265	135	67	21 3.1%	116	30	28	673	329	283	140	84	93	19	23	949
Percent	39%	20%	9.9%	3%	17%	4%	4%		34%	29%	14.7%	8.8%	9.7%	2%	2.4%	

The table shows that the students' writing did make gains in each of the categories counted. Listed below is a breakdown of each of these categories:

Length

The table indicates that the students wrote more after the intervention. The overall number of sentences increased from 673 in the pre-intervention writing to 949 in the post-intervention. The intervention saw an average increase in the number of sentences from 30 to 43 sentences. Nine students wrote from one to nine more sentences than they did in the pre-intervention writing and 11 wrote from 10 to 57 more words. Two students wrote 56 and 57 more words respectively going from 13 to 69 sentences and 25 to 82 sentences. While length is not an indication of quality, in these cases the results are a sign of a willingness to engage in the writing process and develop the narrative. Along with this, it may be a pointer to greater student involvement in and enjoyment of their own creations.

Sentence variety

The results showed that students used a greater variety of sentence types. They increased the number of complex and compound complex sentences over simple and compound sentences. The sentences in the pre-intervention writing were dominated by the use of simple and compound sentences with fewer complex and compound complex sentences. While the post-intervention writing also showed that simple and compound sentences were still the predominant sentence type, there were greater numbers of complex and compound-complex sentences used, resulting in more sentence variety.

In many instances the simple and compound sentences used were more interesting, deliberately chosen for their effect. In the pre-intervention writing many of the simple sentences gave the impression of being used because they got the job done – they were what came to mind and conveyed the information as it was first conceived without thought of how this could be expressed more effectively. For example, this sentence from one student's work illustrates the lack of deliberate choice:

The adrenalin ran through my body. I have a huge smile on my face. I feel so proud. I slowly try to go over the wake trying not to fall off.

Contrast this with the use of simple sentences used for effect and to show tension as exhibited in the following example from the post-intervention writing:

I see the cake tipping. It's sliding towards me. I feel like there is nothing to do but wait. I don't move. I can't move. I just stare.

Here, the student has chosen a number of simple sentences deliberately to create a sense of tension and disbelief, effectively relaying how the narrator felt. In the next example, a student who had struggled to complete her story in the pre-intervention writing with what appeared to be little deliberate choice, wrote this combination of a compound sentence and simple sentence that illustrates the deliberate choice of a particular sentence structure to portray the narrator's feelings:

Will this be presentable for Sam? To reassure myself, I started taste testing everything and felt like a professional adding different herbs and spices to the pots and pans. Soon I was confident that all would be well.

Many students used a number of phrases to add extra detail, as this compound complex sentence illustrates:

I looked anxiously at people's food, their face, their expressions, any sign to indicate that the food was bad, but there was none.

Although this sentence would have been more accurate with the addition of a semicolon, the build-up of phrases and the subordinate clause helps to make this effective.

The class practised using effective adjectives in collaborative class exercises, as already discussed in Chapter Four. While most students appeared to use adjectives deliberately in both pieces of writing, the second piece of writing showed evidence of more skilful use, as demonstrated by the following example:

Like a lightning bolt I dashed up the stairs to get ready. Ten minutes later I had transformed into a black velvet dress, with a diamond necklace and high heels.

Here the student uses a simile that acts as an adverbial phrase and adjectives to describe her transformation.

Although some students used sentence fragments that were clearly mistakes, others used them deliberately to add tension or dramatic effect to their writing, as the following examples illustrate.

Tonight was the party – well dinner really for Mum and Dad’s 25th wedding anniversary and I was the cook. So much to do!

What would Sam think if he sees me? He wouldn’t like me. Would he like Sue more? Sue or her sundress.

This sentence is undermined by the lack of a comma after the final Sue, but the meaning is evident and even quite subtle. Would Sam really like Sue or Sue in her attractive sundress? While not expertly executed the sentence fragment is an attempt to convey the idea deftly. Sentences such as these were used deliberately by many students. Their use was not always consistent or accurate but their frequency signified that students were intentionally thinking about the effect of their writing, rather than simply using what came to mind. While the use of a variety of sentences does not denote quality it does represent a conscious change in writing practice by a number of students.

Compound and complex sentences

The post intervention writing exhibited a greater use of subordinate structures, those found in complex and complex compound sentences. This displayed a preparedness to try to use sentences that developed detail rather than using an ‘and’ or ‘but’ to simply add on information as the narrative progressed.

The pre-intervention results revealed 67 instances of complex sentences (9% of the total sentences written) and 21 instances of complex compound sentences (3% of the total sentences written) of the total sentences used, resulting in an overall total of 88 sentences that employing the sophisticated structures of subordinate clauses. The post-intervention writing revealed 140 instances of complex

sentences (14.7% of instances of sentences written), and 84 instances of compound complex sentences (8% of sentences written). Combined, these sentences showed 224 instances of complex structures: 23.6% of sentences generated and an overall increase of 10.6% from the pre-intervention writing.

The class participated in a number of exercises, where they tried out various combinations that concentrated on the impact of different ways to begin sentences (one of which was inversion as discussed in Chapter 4, although none of the students tried this this technique in the final piece of writing). Many students opted to begin their sentences with subordinate conjunctions, thereby potentially opting for a more interesting start and a departure from the more traditional opening, beginning with the subject, as these sentences illustrate:

When she found out Sam was coming, I could see a look of comprehension come over her face. She knew why I was doing this.

In the next example the placement of the subordinate clause and the prepositional phrase helps to signal the narrator's feeling of haste, just as it produces a sense of mystery in the next example:

As I enter my room, I notice a small note sitting on my bed. Without a thought I grab the note and read the message inside.

Run-on sentences

Many of the sentences the students wrote before the intervention were run-on sentences. As indicated in Chapter Four, discussion around this problem was explicit and it was agreed that the 'eradication' of run-on sentences was paramount.

The pre-intervention writing contained 116 instances of run-on sentences, 17% of sentences written. Some of the narratives contained more run-on sentences than any other kind of sentence written. In many cases, students displayed little knowledge of where a sentence should begin and end. This was typified by the over-use of commas that loosely linked ideas and in many cases compromised the meaning. In addition, many of the run-on sentences were an attempt to use direct

speech. However, in several cases, there was little differentiation between different speakers.

The post-intervention writing revealed that 93 run-on sentences were used. This was 9.7% of the total number of sentences written, resulting in an overall decrease in percentage terms of 7.5%. In a similar way to the initial writing, post-intervention run-on sentences were often the result of the poor use of direct speech, where punctuation was not used to differentiate between speakers. Commas were also used instead of full stops in a similar way as they were in the pre-intervention writing. However, in cases where there were few run-on sentences, the insertion of a semi-colon instead of a comma would have reduced the run-on sentence count dramatically. There were frequent examples of errors like this, that were counter-balanced by the skilful use of simple sentences and complex sentences used for effect, demonstrating a growing understanding of the effect of different sentence types. Students who used a number of run-on sentences in the post-intervention writing often tended to use extremely long sentences. This appeared to be an attempt to deliberately use more complex sentences, but without the thorough understanding required to achieve this successfully.

Sentence fragments and ungrammatical sentences

Sentence fragments were defined as those sentences that did not have a finite verb or a subject. The incidence of these sentences in the pre-intervention writing was 30, or 4.4% of the total. The post-intervention writing showed a decrease in this number to 19 sentence fragments or 2%, a reduction of 2.4%. The use of sentence fragments was not large in either piece of writing, but a reduction suggests a growing understanding of what constitutes a sentence. Interestingly, in some cases, the sentence fragments were not examples of unskilful usage, but were coded as such in the research. Such cases are indicated by the use of brackets on the table. Here, they were used deliberately either as direct speech responses, exclamations or to draw attention to a sound or intense feeling, as this example shows: 'Better get started then.' The following example was also used as an added thought after a compound sentence: 'My brother's drop dead gorgeous friend.'

Ungrammatical sentences were classified as those sentences that were muddled, either because they had too many words or conversely omitted words. They were neither run-on sentences, nor minor sentence fragments, although often contained elements of both these sentence varieties. Instead, their construction was such that their meaning was compromised and in some cases unclear, as the following examples illustrate from the pre-intervention writing:

My aunty who was packing food for us made a face to New Zealand.

In this sentence words have been left out, although the meaning can be understood in the context of the preceding sentences. In a similar way, the meaning is discernible in the following sentence, but is unfinished or needs the participle ‘putting’ changed to the finite verb ‘put.’

I delicately put on my white sparkly tutu and putting on my shoe.

The next sentence from the post-intervention writing is muddled and the meaning is not initially clear:

When we had both done our homework well did/helped me with my Physics homework (I’m useless).

While this student did make progress, her post-intervention writing still contained similar problems to her pre-intervention writing – jumbled sentences and run-on sentences.

There were 28 such examples (4%) in the pre-intervention writing as opposed to 23 or 2% in the post-intervention pieces, a reduction of 2%. Taken together, these results show that the use of inaccurate or unskilful sentence structures was less in the post-intervention writing. The use of ungrammatical sentences, those where the meaning was compromised by poor structure, were 25.7% of the total number of sentences in the pre-intervention writing, and this was reduced to 14% in the post-intervention writing. This reduction suggests the students had gained an awareness of how to structure their sentences better so that their meaning was more clearly conveyed.

Tense

Instances of tense errors were spread quite evenly across both pieces of writing. Both narratives showed some instances where students changed from one tense to another as the story progressed, but these were not widespread. The number of students using tense incorrectly in the pre-intervention was 10 as opposed to eight in the post-intervention, but this misuse was not consistent throughout the narrative. Many of the same students who misused tense in the pre-intervention writing were those who did so in the post-intervention writing, suggesting that they still struggled with the concept. However, this was often an error with a single verb, as this example illustrates:

Sam arrived with Rosie while I was still in the kitchen. I try to push the hair away from my face, so he can see me clearly. I needn't have worried Sue had already taken him through to the lounge.

Often there were only one or two lapses of tense consistency during the stories and these were often the result of the narrator's interior monologue, in other words pausing to comment on some aspect of the story that affected them personally causing them to lapse into the present tense.

Punctuation

The post-intervention writing showed the students had gained an understanding of how to rid their writing of run-on sentences. Fewer students used commas instead of full stops, as was the case in the pre intervention writing. However, students seldom used commas correctly to separate clauses or when using direct speech. Although most students used dialogue to enhance their narratives, they often omitted to use different lines for each speaker, sometimes resulting in confusion for the reader over which character was speaking. This detracted from the effectiveness of the dialogue.

The combination of both qualitative marking and quantitative measures revealed some gains as a result of the intervention. It is clear, overall, that the students did try to use a greater range of sentences for effect and did improve in terms of their syntactical fluency, though the gains were modest.

5.5 Likert survey responses

Twenty students completed both the pre- and post-intervention likert scale survey. This provided information on the degree to which they felt their knowledge of syntax had developed and their confidence as writers had changed over the duration of the project. These results indicated an increased feeling of self-efficacy on the part of the students in respect of the areas discussed below.

The survey used a scale from zero to five. Table 5.3 illustrates the students' changing understanding of grammar and punctuation. The individual scores for each student were added together for each of the ten items, with a possible score of 100.

Table 5.3 Knowledge of grammar and punctuation

	Pre	Post
1. I know when to use a capital letter	87	94
2. I know when to use a full stop	79	92
3. I know when to use a comma	69	79
4. I can identify a noun, verb and adjective in a sentence	48	61
5. I can explain the function of a noun, verb and an adjective in a sentence	46	63
6. I know how to use a conjunction	35	78
7. I can identify a coordinating and subordinate conjunction	6	41
8. I can identify a clause	6	23
9. I can identify run-on sentences and correct them	35	68
10. I can identify different tenses	70	81

The results show a greater awareness of features that were deliberately taught during the intervention, particularly knowledge about and the function of the grammatical features we practised during class activities. Student responses indicate they were better able to both identify and explain the function of nouns, verbs and adjectives, and their function in a sentence. Along with this, they were

much more likely to understand where to use a conjunction and the difference between a coordinating and subordinating conjunction.

A pre-and post-intervention likert survey also assessed student beliefs about writing. The results in Table 5.4 do indicate a positive change.

Table 5.4 Writing beliefs

	Pre-	Post-
1. I am a confident writer	68	72
2. I enjoy writing	63	73
3. I enjoy writing stories	62	68
4. I enjoy writing non fiction	55	62
5. I write poetry	34	42
6. I often write at home	44	47
7. I enjoy writing in class	50	55
8. I always plan before I write	45	46
9. I easily find ideas to write about	56	55
10. I can find and correct my errors	57	69

The writing beliefs statements on writing nonfiction, poetry, and writing at home were the items that scored the most zero entries in both pre- and post-survey responses. The statement, ‘I am a confident writer,’ did not change significantly from pre- to post-intervention and was scored reasonably highly on both. The statement, ‘I enjoy writing,’ did show a positive change especially in the case of some of the students who were initially reluctant writers. Students who had written negatively about writing in the pre-intervention questionnaire did not give a low score to statements one or two on the writing beliefs either pre or post the intervention. This is possibly an indication initially of how they regarded their ability as writers at school. Conversations I had with students during the intervention indicated that those who found classroom writing most disheartening

were also the students who expressed a desire to be good writers and were by the completion of the intervention the most pleased with their efforts.

5.6 Focus groups and individual interviews

Interviews were also conducted with both groups of students and with individual students. They were open-ended, but structured to ensure a close focus on experience was maintained (Spradley, 1979, in Miles & Huberman, 1994). The aim of the interviews was to determine the effectiveness of the intervention from the perspective of the students. The interviews concentrated on whether the students understood and used the concepts introduced in the intervention and if they found working in pairs beneficial. The following themes emerged from an analysis of the data.

New knowledge about sentences

In post-intervention open-ended group and individual student interviews, all students reported that they felt they had gained new knowledge and understanding about how to construct sentences. This included using fewer run-on sentences, using compound and complex sentences – coordinating and subordinate conjunctions – plus adding adjectives and phrases to their work. The students reported that because of the knowledge they had gained, they felt happier to try out new ways of structuring their sentences.

Run-on sentences

The initial interview questions focussed on the use of run-on sentences. Several of the participants felt they had a greater understanding of what constitutes a sentence and how it should be punctuated after the class activities, as the following response from one student who had struggled to write sentences that were not a paragraph long explains:

Teacher: Do you have more idea where to put full stops; that is, how to prevent run-on sentences?

Student: It actually gave me more time to take a breath. I didn't have massive long sentences. I also learnt where to put commas in the right spots.

While the last observation here was only partly true, the student felt she had gained knowledge and confidence in this area. Indeed, her writing did illustrate a significant change in her awareness of run-on sentences, although this was not consistent throughout her story. It is worth noting that she describes this in a markedly physical way; her new knowledge gave her time ‘to take a breath’, implying she made a particularly conscious decision about her sentences.

This was echoed by other students, one of whom replied that the activities in class helped her to ‘describe and visualise’ her sentences, while another explained that they ‘told me where to put commas and full stops and more ideas’. Here the activities were clearly linked to what they could see or notice about the shape of their sentences. Along with this, another student revealed that the use of microphones had assisted her to hear the sound of sentences, their beginning and ending. ‘You could know if you listened it sounded weird if it kept going, so when I learnt about run-on sentences it sounded better – so it didn’t keep going.’ Once again this comment reveals an element of physicality in the way students learn, something that will be examined later.

Structuring sentences

Many of the class activities were about structuring sentences in different ways; some of them involved sentence-combining as discussed in Chapter Four. The students interviewed explained that they found these activities helped them to construct different kinds of sentences from the types they had previously written, as their comments illustrate:

Teacher: Do you think some of the things we did in class like looking at different sentence combinations – changing things around, putting in conjunctions, changing how you might put things together helped. How did playing around with the sentences help you with your writing?

Student 1: It was interesting to find out how many versions you could come up with.

Student 2: I learn about re-arranging things like verbs at the start of sentences.

Student 3: Yes, it encouraged me to not think about having it one way writing a different way. I reckon actually that improved my story.

Here, the students explain that changing the sentence around and trying out different combinations helped them to realise that there are many different ways

of constructing sentences. This gave them licence to experiment with their own stories later on. It helped, as one student remarked at the start of her interview, ‘to think more creatively’.

As already discussed, many of the exercises involved exploring the use of conjunctions, both coordinating and subordinating conjunctions. The following comments indicate that previously students had only a vague notion about what conjunctions were and how to use them.

Teacher: Did you combine your sentences using conjunctions?

Student 4: Yeah, like putting in the ‘so’ and ‘because’ – because I didn’t really know what they were until this year.

Student 2: This year you learnt from the conjunctions like before I only knew, but didn’t know it was a conjunction. I didn’t know the purpose.

One student commented that she advised her partner not to use ‘common things like “and”,’ but instead suggested using the conjunction ‘while’. It is useful to note here that knowing a word is a conjunction has little point for a student unless its purpose is understood.

Adding description

Students experimented with the addition of adjectives, adverbs and phrases to develop the effectiveness of their sentences. Few students added adverbs to their sentences, whereas most of the students included adjectives and phrases to their work. Several students observed that adjectives made their writing more specific, as is illustrated by these observations:

Student 2: Say you just say a car went round the corner – you don’t know what kind of car or what colour it was.

Student 3: We could add things; may be it was a blue car or a fast car.

Student 5: I write whatever is in my head, then go back and think about it and see if I can add stuff to it.

These comments illustrate the deliberate nature of the additions.

The following response indicates that this student had previously given little thought to her use of adjectives, but now considered that having a conscious knowledge of what she was doing definitely improved her work.

Student 6: Normally I just put them in anyway, but I didn’t really know like what some were. So being able to put them in made it better.

Many of the students recognised the benefit of class activities. They acknowledged the role the exercises played in terms of adding detail to their work, something they now felt confident to do. One student described how this worked with her story.

Student 7: This time I was taking more time to describe. I've taken more time to describe the small things. Sometimes describing the small things can make a big difference.

A statement such as this sounds like the advice of a writer, someone who is concerned about the impact of her words. Indeed, it would appear to be a step towards the kind of consciousness required for writing competence.

Knowledge of metalanguage

Many of the students reported that they had some awareness of the labels of nouns, adjectives verbs and in some cases conjunctions. However, few of them really understood their purpose or related these terms to their writing. It is interesting to note that for some students, knowing the names of syntactical features had an advantage both for their stories and for helping others, as their comments illustrate. In response to the question 'Does knowing what they are called help?' several students explained the instructional use of knowing the labels or names for the features, as the following statements demonstrate:

Student 7: I think it's good knowing – knowing what a conjunction is because you can tell people. It helps [with] finding a conjunction.

Student 8: If you want to explain to someone about their story you know what to say.

Student 6: You could say you could add but, or a conjunction here.

Teacher: Is it the same with nouns and adjectives? Does knowing the name of them help? Does it make you stop and think about using them?

Student 5: I think that's a noun or that's a verb – I could add a word to it. If someone says you could add a conjunction you don't stop and say what's a conjunction?

Teacher: Does it help?

Student: It separates every word and they've all got their group.

In this exchange, the students present the advantages of knowing the name of the terminology; in effect it becomes a shorthand, an efficient way of explaining what is required in a sentence to other students. This is a distinct advantage in the collaborative environment of the writing classroom. However, not all students

deemed this knowledge necessary for writing success. In answer to the question, ‘Does knowing what they are called help your writing?’, one student answered, ‘In a test but not for constructing a sentence.’ This student considered grammar terminology was the kind of specialised knowledge one might meet in a test – quite different from the everyday matter of writing. In preference to using the name of the grammatical feature, this student was more comfortable describing to her writing partner what she thought should be changed or added to their writing.

5.6.1 Positive changes in attitude

Interview data revealed that after the intervention, many of the students viewed their ability to write in a much more positive way. The aim of the interviews was to determine the effectiveness of the intervention from the perspective of the students. The interviews concentrated on whether the students understood and used the concepts introduced in the intervention and if they found working in pairs beneficial. The following themes emerged from an analysis of the data.

Work satisfaction and pride

Most of the students spoken to in the interviews expressed high levels of satisfaction with their stories and their overall progress. Many students also expressed pride in their stories. This was evidenced by their willingness to share their work. One student expressed pleasure from her partner reading her story, saying, ‘I’m proud of it and want them to read it.’ Another student was so pleased with her efforts that she kept a copy for herself as she revealed:

Student: It went great. I had to print of another, I loved it so much.

Teacher: To keep for yourself?

Student: Yeah.

Interestingly, this student had previously revealed that she had taken the story home for her mother to read and that her mother had declared her a ‘good writer’, something the student had previously not considered the case. Her new identity as a proficient writer changed her view of herself considerably; her confidence in the classroom was palpable. Another student expressed a similar sentiment when she said, ‘Yeah, I think it was pretty good. I took it home and read it to my Nana.

She thought it was pretty good.’ Another student, who was shifting cities and therefore schools, revealed that she included her story along with the enrolment documentation for her new school.

Improvement

Another theme that emerged was that most of the students interviewed felt that they had improved their writing and that they wrote differently after the intervention. One student commented that, ‘I reckon it has changed my way. I looked through old books from last year and noticed I write a lot different now.’ Asked if the intervention had influenced how they now write, one student remarked:

Student: I think I’ve kinda improved in my writing a little.

Teacher: In what way?

Student: Pretty much from the inventing. My sentences have become more interesting.

The word ‘inventing’ is interesting here; the student clearly identifies her new-found skills – those of sentence experimentation – as an improvement. Another student replied, ‘I felt I improved’ and, in response to this, another student in the group retorted that, ‘Last year we didn’t get much help – help from the teacher that much.’

Other students in the focus group made similar claims and, when asked if they would remember the concepts in the future, one student expressed a desire that the work would be continued when she said, ‘I hope the teacher can do what you did.’ And again in response, another student retorted, ‘I hope the teacher keeps it going; I hope they refresh.’

Active learning

Another benefit that the students recognised that they gained from the activities was that they were not passive; they were physically involved. This meant doing things: using microphones, mini-white boards, moving around words and sentences on the interactive whiteboard and later with cut-out words and sentences on their desks. The students revealed that for many of them it was the active, physical nature of the exercises that helped them learn. This, along with

plenty of repetition, helped the students remember how to use the concepts in their writing, as these students explained: ‘Yeah, I like to play around with words and put them into sentences and things... I remembered what to do for the writing.’ Another explained the advantages of ‘doing’ over simply writing down notes and examples of different types of sentences in this way: ‘I like doing stuff. It helps me to learn putting stuff together, so when we wrote on the boards putting stuff together, it helps me focus when I do things – not just like writing things down.’

5.7 Reflections on the cooperative classroom

As explained in the previous chapter, the students worked in pairs that provided them with feedback and on-going support with their writing. The idea was to have a more able student working with a less able one. During some of the class activities, the students had spent time in groups of four and so they had experience of both pairs and groups. Most of the responses regarding the pairs were positive; they found the experience of working alongside another student in such a close working relationship extremely rewarding. There was some discussion over the advantages of pairs over larger groups and vice versa.

Pairs or groups

Students viewed the advantages of working in pairs over groups as related to the rewards gleaned from the one-to-one focus afforded by the pair relationship. A partner could provide a more on-going and detailed response than that of a group, as expressed by this student: ‘Cos you can concentrate on one thing, one person.’ Along with this, the relationship helped to provide the students with differing perspectives, prompting the realisation from one student that, ‘I realised that there’s not just your way but there’s others.’

For some, groups provided a greater variety of response, because as these students expressed:

Student 4: You can get more ideas from different people’.

Student 2: If one person goes off task you can go to the next person. You can ask anyone.

However, off-task behaviour was a concern to some students, who felt that this wasn't a problem with a writing partner, as this student explained: 'For me bigger groups can get out of hand and people get off task and stuff, but with pairs you both stay on the same topic.' Another student expressed it this way: 'It's easier with one person than trying to maintain over the whole group.' Therefore, while groups provided a variety of comment, they did present some difficulties. Two students communicated what they felt could be a potentially damaging aspect of group work. They talked of the possibility of the group exploiting their efforts by either claiming their work as their own or by not 'pulling their weight' adequately. This revelation was expressed in these terms: 'In my experience of the group I had to do the whole thing. They wouldn't help. It was all my own work and they said they had done it. It's better working one on one.'

In a counter to this, another student guardedly explained that this could be a problem, but one that could be mitigated by careful surveillance: 'But in the group I didn't let that happen – people take my ideas like that. I told them not to. I kept a distance from that because I knew that could happen.' Another student expressed a similar idea regarding working with her partner: 'I was always worried they may steal my ideas and stuff.' These two students were the only students to express this feeling to me. This was reassuring, given that the purpose of the collaborative writing classroom was to foster the uncompetitive sharing of ideas.

An unanticipated social benefit of working in pairs rather than groups was the protection it afforded to students whom others were not keen to work with and who could possibly be left out in group work. This comment by one student neatly sums up this dynamic: 'I think it was good one-to-one because in bigger groups your thoughts don't get put in and stuff.'

Problems with pairs

Most of the negative comments about the pair grouping had to do with the incompatibility of some of the students. One student felt that working in a pair was useful but questioned the coupling of some of the pairs. She explained that the pairs were, 'Good, because you got the other person's ideas but some of the pairs may not have worked.' Another felt, 'Some of the pairs were a bit funny.'

Unfortunately, such comments may have been a reflection of the social status in the class of two of the students, who were often left out of social activities and at times were the recipients of snide remarks and teasing. Both of these students enjoyed the experience of being part of a writing pair. One, in particular, flourished and her observations are recorded here: 'You can spend more time on their story, except when you have a bigger group you have to go around and you get less time.'

Embarrassment

Some of the students reported initial embarrassment with the idea of sharing their work with a single partner and person whom they possibly did not know as well as their friends. All the students interviewed overcame their feelings of embarrassment as a trade-off for the feedback they received from their partners.

The students explained their feelings about embarrassment in the following way:

At the beginning I was quite embarrassed 'cos that was before I started going through and changing things and I felt it wasn't good enough. And yeah, and now I'm sort of really confident with it.

Another student described her initial reluctance to another student reading her work like this: 'Yes, I always say it isn't finished, but in the end I give it to them.' Here, the student has hidden her discomfort by pretending she does not want help and has finished her work, before relenting and sharing her work. The following student showed she had come to realise the benefit of sharing her work when she said, 'Sometimes. It was ok though.' By the end of the intervention she was happier about receiving and providing feedback to her partner.

Feedback

Two of the students interviewed found the feedback given by pairs inadequate and another student explained that she used feedback from other students as well as her partner. She maintained, 'It helped getting different opinions.' The dissatisfaction was to do with the amount of feedback given. This student felt she gave comprehensive feedback, while her partner didn't provide enough guidance and this affected her progress. She felt, 'I couldn't extend my writing.'

Reassuringly, another student responded to this saying: 'If you did get along it

was like two opinions instead of one.’ However, in another interview, a student explained she found that the feedback she received presented her with compositional challenges. She explained: ‘I got something back, but didn’t know how to change it...I understood but didn’t know what to write.’ This may be a result of an unequal pairing ability-wise or simply unfamiliarity with the process of changing the writing in response to comments made.

Another important aspect of feedback was that it helped students to clarify their own thinking. One student explained this when she said, ‘When I was reading other people’s stories it gave me some ideas.’ Along with this, the feedback gave the students the experience of working through difficulties with their partner, as these comments illustrate:

Teacher: Did it help giving feedback to someone else?

Student: It kinda did because I was working with Ruth¹ and stuff and I said it didn’t make sense and stuff.

Teacher: Did she understand?

Student: Yeah, I think so, because we talked about it. It was like the description was a bit muddled up and some of her words were a bit muddled up. Sometimes she spelt it wrong.

Most of the students used a combination of both written and verbal feedback, utilising the facility of the feedback sheet for ideas, as this student explained: ‘I gave verbal and wrote some down. Mandy wanted it written down so she could remember.’ This comment reveals the value and status of the feedback given by students to each other. It illustrates the capacity of peer comment to provide the kind of guidance that is useful enough for a partner to want it to be written down.

5.8 Conclusion

The pre- and post-intervention assessments and the group and individual interviews showed that the students made certain gains as a result of the intervention. Their writing did improve; they learnt to use a greater variety of sentences more deliberately and more fluently. Their interview comments indicate a shift in attitude; they wrote longer pieces and on the whole enjoyed the experience. Most of them considered that they had made progress and some went

¹ Pseudonyms have been used.

so far as to consider themselves 'good writers'. Others hoped that they would continue to learn in this way, so that they could build on their new knowledge and make further progress.

In the main, they saw themselves as benefiting from working closely with another student, receiving and giving feedback. This dynamic helped to reinforce learning already undertaken in class exercises. The pair partnerships encouraged them to examine their work closely and consider different ways of expressing their ideas.

Finally, many of the students expressed an enjoyment of writing – something their initial questionnaires did not indicate. Indeed, comments from the questionnaires revealed a considerable amount of writing apprehension prior to the intervention, something that the intervention went some way towards ameliorating.

Chapter 6

Summary and Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

Writing is a difficult cognitive activity (Graham & Perin, 2007) and, as mentioned earlier, one that can profoundly affect the life chances of those who do not master it well. In the busy life of a secondary school teacher, it is all too easy to draw conclusions about the ability of students based on limited assessment criteria, and to view students who struggle as problematic, and even at times beyond help. For a myriad of different reasons, the structure of schools and school teaching practices do not meet the needs of all students, and at times privilege some students over others (Dutro, Kazem & Balf, 2003; Clark, 2010; Prior, 2006). Students enter classrooms with literacy practices developed in their homes and wider community, and, for many, these may be at odds with the literacy conventions of school (Prior, 2006). Furthermore, many students arrive at secondary school having had discouraging writing experiences and, all too often, teaching practices do little to change the situation. The experience of many students at school confirms what they already suspected – that they are ‘no good at writing.’

With almost all the major assessments at secondary school involving writing, a failure to master this activity has implications across all school subject areas. Many teachers who are aware of such issues, however, tend to get caught up in what Langer and Applebee (1986) describe as microscopic variations of teaching method, rather than revisiting fundamental conceptualisations on the nature of teaching and student development. If teachers are to be effective in supporting students in their learning, it is imperative they have a clear understanding of what

they want to their students to understand and how they intend to execute this in their teaching programmes.

This research is an attempt to do just that in terms of the teaching of writing. Specifically, it has examined ways of enhancing syntactical fluency through the teaching of grammar in the context of a writing programme. The central research questions examined whether teaching syntactical concepts within the context of a writing programme would improve student writing and whether writing with a partner would enhance student progress. The design of the intervention was informed by research which demonstrates that the writing process is complex and therefore not amenable to highly prescriptive approaches (Witte & Faigley 1981, p. 202), especially the teaching grammar in isolation (Elley et al., 1979; Hillocks, 1986; Andrews et al., 2004).

6.2 The study

The study reported on in this thesis involved the examination of the impact of a teaching intervention that was informed by writing theorists who argue for the teaching of grammar within a writing programme. Teaching grammar within a writing programme makes available a range of tools which allow students to take control of the work of composition and meaning-making (Myhill, 2010a; Myhill et al., 2012; Micciche, 2004). Much research into the effect of teaching grammar on writing has not taken into consideration that what was being taught has not been transferred into writing because it makes no reference to writing (Myhill, 2005; Myhill et al., 2012; Kolln, 1996). Further, if students absorb all they ever need to know about grammar innately, then it would make no sense to teach grammatical features as part of the writing process. Instead it would be better to leave teaching grammar out of writing instruction, and concentrate solely on the composing process. However, if this is not the case, and if students do need to acquire knowledge of grammar – a writer’s grammar – then it is essential that this be taught so that students are able to make decisions about how to convey meaning (Hancock, 2009). The intervention was, therefore, informed by a recognition that writing instruction to enhance syntactical fluency is most effective when students are actually making meaning through writing.

The intervention was also informed by co-operative writing theories. These emphasise the importance of establishing a positive, encouraging environment that enhances writing instruction. These theories also stress the value of talk between students as a way of enhancing of the writing process (Bakhtin, 1978). A further expression of this was the establishment of writing pairs within the writing classroom as a way of supporting students making progress around their zone of proximal development (Dauite & Dalton, 1993; Vygotsky, 1962).

The impact of the intervention was examined through an action research case study, informed by the principles of practitioner research. This approach accommodated the need for responsiveness in the teaching process as activities were tailored to meet the needs of the class. At times we spent longer than normally would have been allowed to ensure the students understood key grammatical features. The case study approach allowed for a variety of research techniques. Both qualitative and quantitative data methods were used: in-depth qualitative interviews, a semi-structured questionnaire and attitudinal survey, writing scores, and a reflective journal.

6.3 Findings

The findings indicated that the students did make progress. Their writing can be shown to have improved in all of the measures that were used. A holistic marking of students' writing indicated that their ability to create a narrative was enhanced by the intervention. Their writing improved across all the dimensions of the marking rubric from the pre-intervention writing to the post-intervention writing. The interviews and attitudinal survey indicated that the students did feel differently about writing after the intervention. Their responses revealed that their knowledge of grammatical features and how to use them improved their writing, and enhanced their attitude because it helped to promote a degree of confidence and enjoyment in writing. Their comments also indicated they found the activities to be enjoyable and this created an atmosphere that could almost be described as festive, which in turn resulted in encouraging students to try new concepts and view writing as a pleasurable activity.

The use of writing models

The intervention was situated in the context of a study of short stories and other texts, and these texts proved to be a useful aid in developing student knowledge of the techniques involved in writing narratives. Using quality exemplars as models exposed students to rich examples both before they began their stories and while they wrote them, and helped them to contextualise their own writing. This helped to remind students of what it is that constitutes a story. Students kept copies of the stories we had studied and re-read them throughout their writing as a way of checking, for example, on their usage of direct speech or how to develop a character. The stories became an on-going resource and another source of support for the students as they wrote.

Sentence variety

The results indicated that the students learnt to use a greater variety of sentences in their post-intervention stories and that their stories were longer. The improvements were not huge and in some cases quite modest. While some students made fewer errors with run-on sentences – one of the agreed aims between the teacher and the class – they made other errors that compromised their work, often with features such as the punctuation of direct speech.

However, the results overall were significant for what they represented. It was interesting to note students' willingness to try out different ways of constructing sentences and their keenness to discover what other students had come up with. The emphasis during class activities was always on discussing the effect produced by different combinations. The idea of the intervention was for students to use grammatical concepts so that they could take ownership of their writing and become, in effect, designers (Myhill, 2009). That meant that students were trying different constructions in an effort to improve their work and make their writing more effective. The sentence combining activities served to focus the students' awareness on the effect of their sentences in a way that their writing had not shown before. Up to this point, they had often been unwilling to change sentences – almost frightened to change anything once it was written down. The activities, concentrating as they did on moving parts of sentences around, seeking for the most effective combinations, showed the class that changing sentences was not

only possible but that it was necessary if their writing was to be effective. The students quickly recognised the benefit of this, firstly in the whole-class activities, and later, as they tried out ways to add detail using adjectives, adverbs and phrases to their own stories.

This new adventurousness was also evident in the increased use of complex and compound-complex sentences. The students were more willing to experiment with the use of conjunctions, deliberately trying different combinations in their writing to give it greater impact. Along with this, the use of simple sentences, in many cases, showed an awareness of the impact afforded by using shorter sentences, to draw attention to an aspect of the story, for effect. The point here was that students were learning to make deliberate choices. Teaching syntax in this way, therefore, can be seen to have the potential to provide students with greater control and the chance to consider the effect of their choices.

Another result of the class activities which focussed on sentences was the uptake of strategies for adding descriptive detail in order to ‘show’ rather than ‘tell’. This paid off as they went on to develop their own narratives, because they began to see the benefits of judiciously adding descriptive detail through the addition of adjectives, adverbs and adjectival phrases.

Metalinguistic awareness

As well as these improvements, the students reported an enhanced knowledge of grammatical features. In the interviews the students testified to a growing understanding of how to use the features we had practised during class activities and it was evident to me as a teacher that they were more proficient in their use of the appropriate metalanguage. This was supported by results from the attitudinal survey administered at the completion of the intervention. The replies here indicated an increased confidence in both using and identifying grammatical features such as conjunctions, adjectives and verbs.

This knowledge was built up gradually. The initial discussions with the class about sentences centred around the effect of using different sentence lengths. At this stage the correct meta-language was not used’ and examples were described as being either long or short sentences. This was a useful springboard for a

discussion about run-on sentences and how easily clarity and meaning could be lost when sentences ran on. Once the students began actively changing sentence order and adding detail, it became useful to use the correct terminology in order to identify the various parts being arranged. From then on, I made an effort to use the appropriate terminology to refer to the concepts being taught.

Whilst students showed an understanding of adjectives and conjunctions, some remained confused about adverbs and others indicated that they were unsure about the function of verbs. As the intervention proceeded, many of the students came to realise that verbs indicated tense and that leaving out an auxiliary verb meant the sentence did not make sense or was possibly an incomplete sentence. When pressed, many students could see and usually hear that their sentence needed to be changed because the sentence lacked an auxiliary verb. However, issues with tense were an on-going problem and students often needed to be prompted to think about tense, through questioning about when the events of their story were taking place.

An advantage of using the correct metalanguage was in the way it helped the students when they gave each other feedback, as several of the students explained during the interviews. It allowed them to quickly explain to their paired writing partner how to make changes to a sentence. In many instances, being able to name a concept aided understanding. This resulted in the terms conjunction, adjective and adverb being used regularly by most members of the class. Instead of advising their partner to add more description students became confident directing their partner to use an adjective or even add a phrase to a sentence to make it more effective. The understanding that an adjective describes a noun became useful knowledge in the feedback process, because they could easily see how the addition of a specific adjective could improve the description. Instructions like, 'Adding an adjective here describes it better,' were not uncommon.

The physical dimension

Another significant finding was that the physical nature of some of the activities helped students to engage with their writing. This was similar to findings by Thompson (2012), who discovered that activities that incorporated a physical

aspect helped to engage a reluctant writer. The activities my class participated in allowed them to move around the classroom, sometimes from group to group, observing how other students had arranged their cut-up sentences or had written on their mini-whiteboards. Thompson (2012) explained that activities like these helped to integrate his student into the life of the class, and to focus on work in a positive way. Likewise, the physical nature of the activities we engaged in helped the students to recall the concepts and how they worked. Englert et al. (2006) make the point that tools like these, 'support cognitive performance helping writers organise mental reasoning by offloading aspects of thought or function onto the tool' (p. 211). In other words the tools we used assisted student thinking processes and had the added bonus of making the concept memorable.

This physical dimension of the activities showed in a graphic way that it was possible and even useful to change sentences around and try different combinations. Because the students were not writing in books, they were happy to make several changes either by erasing their efforts on the mini-whiteboards or changing the order of their paper, cut-out sentences. One student commented that she enjoyed doing something other than writing in her exercise book at a desk. The kinaesthetic nature of the tasks assisted their learning in such a way that by the time they began writing in their workbooks they were more willing to make changes and even begin again. This attitude transferred to the computer lab, where many of the students made last-minute changes on the advice of their writing partner or another student whom they trusted.

The cooperative classroom and writing pairs

Another positive outcome of the intervention was the creation of a different kind of classroom, one that allowed everyone the opportunity to experiment with writing and experience the fun and enjoyment this afforded. If students are to have the opportunity to discover the power and satisfaction of learning how to use a variety of techniques in their writing, they need to have an environment where experimentation and risk-taking are acceptable. On these occasions, the students enjoyed the competitive element and fun the activities engendered and were usually only too happy to provide an account of why they chose to construct a

sentence the way they did and share these choices either with the class as a whole, neighbouring peers, or with me.

In this environment, the role of the teacher is much more flexible, changing from facilitator to observer and back to expert consultant, depending on the demands of the class. This allowed me to stand back and give the students space to work together helping each other, utilising the power of talk and the interchange of ideas to tackle their writing. This meant that students learnt from each other (Johnson & Johnson 1999). They explained to me during conversations and later in interviews that they found that the discussion of another student's work helped to clarify their own thinking, as well as giving them ideas for their own work. This student talk was advantageous because students speak the same language, and they are often more adept at explaining a concept in a way that their peers can understand than a teacher is.

In addition, students revealed during interviews that the use of paired writing partnerships was an asset as they wrote. In the context of a close working relationship, the students felt able to ask their writing partner for explanations that might have been embarrassing to ask me or even larger group of students. In this way feedback was tailored to meet their needs whilst being in the most part immediate. The result of a fast response combined with accompanying advice achieved two things with the students; it had a metacognitive effect because it demanded they make decisions about what their writing partner had proposed and reconsider their writing in the light of recommendations made and provided. It also helped to encourage the students to persevere with their writing, because the presence of an instant audience, one that showed interest and care in their work was a support, and had the added benefit of encouraging them to persist with the task. Along with this, the knowledge that another person would read their work regularly, motivated the students to produce their best work. Whilst these are not qualities that are easily quantifiable, they are in no small measure essential if students are to make discernible progress in the demanding enterprise that is writing. Ultimately, writing is an individual venture, but it does not need to be a solitary one. The presence of a ready audience, willing and prepared to read, comment and take seriously a writer's efforts and, where appropriate, provide feedback and advice, is invaluable.

The opportunity to assume a mentoring role boosted the confidence of many of the students, and in the case of one student, who had spent much of the year outside the social groupings of the class, the chance to feel genuine acceptance for the first time. The effect on her self-confidence as a class member and, importantly, as a writer, was astounding. She declared herself to be a good writer, after having previously stated that she hated writing and was no good at it. Even more pleasing was the effect it had on her work. Formerly she had written very little and refused, in an almost belligerent fashion, to develop her work. However, by the end of the intervention she had written several pages of her story and in the process had made a diligent effort to adopt many of the strategies used in class. She spoke glowingly of how she now understood how to change her writing to achieve different effects.

Development of audience awareness

An important aspect of writing I wanted the students to bear in mind while they wrote was that of audience, in other words, I wanted them to consider the impact of their writing on a potential reader. This was enhanced by the use of the paired writing partnerships, which helped to provide a ready, interested audience prepared to give feedback. The creation of a co-constructed feedback sheet helped to develop this quality too, and it afforded a more thoughtful kind of comment from the students to their writing partners, both with spoken and written feedback. The feedback sheet served as a procedural facilitator, one that over time became internalised (Englert et al., 2006) for both the giver and receiver of feedback.

Another way of reminding students of the importance of audience to their writing was a phrase I introduced during the intervention and used throughout – ‘courtesies to the reader’. This became a cue for students that as writers they must keep an audience in mind and their first consideration was to make sure that all their sentences made sense to the reader. In some exchanges with students, I mentioned that I could not follow a section of the writing or some aspect was unclear. Often the student would reply, ‘I know what I mean.’ My retort was, ‘Remember, courtesies to the reader.’ This reminder allowed for further

questioning and the chance for the student to see their writing through the eyes of another.

The value of a focus on sentences

A focus on writing at sentence level may appear to be prescriptive, dealing with the micro rather than the macro, in other words with technique rather than the larger issues of ideas generation or purpose. Noguchi (1991) admits that, ‘The very focus on the syntactic structure of sentences ensures that grammar instruction will have much to say about the form and style of sentences but little to say about content of writing and organisation of writing, areas which extend beyond the borders of the sentence unit’ (p.106). The implication here is that sentence-level investigation has little to offer the writing student. However, this does not tell the whole story, as Andrews et al.’s (2004) finding on sentence-combining would suggest: ‘the teaching of syntax appears to put emphasis on “knowledge about” the construction of sentences. Sentence-combining suggests a pedagogy of applied knowledge – at its best, applied in situations of contextualised learning; at its worst, drilling’ (p. 52). The important word here is ‘applied’, using an understanding of how a sentence works in a piece of writing to produce a desired effect. Many of the activities we engaged in during the intervention had their genesis in sentence-combining. These activities provided mechanisms with which to experiment with different sentence beginnings and eradicate problems like run-on sentences. The focus on the detail of the sentence provided, therefore, powerful teaching moments.

Crafting noteworthy sentences helps to develop a piece of writing in a profound way. Joseph Heller (in Plimpton, 1974) credits the sentence unit with the power to inspire. He explains: ‘My novels begin in a strange way. I don’t begin with a theme or even a character. I begin with a first sentence that is independent of any conscious preparation. Most often, nothing comes out of it: a sentence will come to mind that doesn’t lead to a second sentence. Sometimes it will lead to thirty sentences which then come to a dead end’ (Plimpton, 1974). Similar claims in relation to the power of sentences to inspire are made by other authors. Tolkein in *The Hobbit* (1937), Mantel (in Mullan, 2012), and Rusdie (2012) have all claimed that a single sentence initiated a novel. While this does not directly have to do

with the study of the sentence unit per se, it does help to underline the importance of the sentence as a unit of meaning, and its significance in helping to convey an idea that is possibly larger than its dimensions. At times, as writers we work out what we want to say, but need the right kind of sentence to express it well. Facilitating competence with sentence construction is, therefore, a most worthwhile endeavour.

6.4 Reflections on the teacher experience

Practitioner research

Using an action research/practitioner research approach meant a certain flexibility for me and the students. At times we spent much longer than normally would have been allotted for the class to grasp some concepts. One of the students remarked in the interviews that the number of times we revised concepts had helped her understand them thoroughly and meant she made an effort to use them. One of the drawbacks of a tightly scripted teaching sequence is that students are sometimes forced to move on to other work without fully understanding what they have been taught. This is disheartening for the teacher, who may feel that the student has not tried or is simply not up to the task, or that he or she has done a poor job. Often understanding simply takes time. I became aware that the new understanding the students were gaining from the intervention could easily have been lost had it not been revised and built on as they learnt.

My grammatical knowledge

Grammatical knowledge was not something I was taught at school – not in any systematic way – coming from an era where process principles were in their ascendancy and language teaching was minimal. In fact the concentration of teaching during my schooling was largely literary, teacher-centred, top-down instruction. My teacher training did not discuss grammar in relation to pedagogy. The subject English component of the training course was largely focussed on literary texts. Therefore, my knowledge of grammar was mostly self-taught, and on the job.

For this reason the intervention was a learning experience for me, too. I was learning about grammar and what was appropriate for my students and how to introduce what might be difficult concepts. I was very aware of how difficult traditional grammar was to teach and of how little impact it had on student writing. I had been in schools that expected their junior students to work their way through workbook exercises that required students to underline parts of speech, fill in cloze tests and the like, as a way of fulfilling a grammar requirement in their syllabi. I was also aware of how irrelevant many students found these activities. This was because the categories of traditional grammar were not useful, and because the definitions of parts of speech ‘prove hopelessly ambiguous’ (Smith, Cheville and Hillocks, 2006, p. 264) for students. With this understanding in mind, I chose to focus on features of syntax that would help the students write more clearly and give them techniques that would provide them with some autonomy and choice in their writing. To this end, sentence combining provided a necessary basis from which to proceed and offered the kind of ‘hands-on’ activities necessary to engage the students and facilitate the competence required for the students to make full use of what they had learnt.

6.5 Caveats

This was a small-scale, largely qualitative piece of research. It has a number of limitations. The intervention was interrupted at one point by the exigencies of other school demands and therefore may have lost some momentum. The scaffolded story meant there was some difference between the way students planned their first piece of writing and the way the second piece of writing was executed. This may have had an impact on the writing results because the paragraph starters used by most of the students in the second piece of writing may have meant that they received too much support. The results of the intervention were also the outcome of what happened in one classroom with a particular group of students who had a specific set of needs. In this respect, the findings cannot be generalised to other classrooms or other groups of students.

However, I contend that some general, emerging principles do apply to other classroom settings. From my nearly 30 years of teaching I have found that few

students in the New Zealand secondary schools I have taught in have had a working knowledge of syntax that they could easily employ to make their writing effective. Along with this, few teachers I have taught alongside possessed a working knowledge of how to teach syntax in a way that students might utilise for effect in their writing. Moreover, I argue that teachers need to discover which concepts are the most appropriate for their students based on their knowledge of the class. This is in keeping with the kind of practitioner research I undertook which was in response to what I perceived were the writing needs of my students, based on my knowledge and experience of teaching.

6.6 Final thoughts

Introducing syntactical concepts did have an impact on my students' writing. It also promoted a degree of confidence and enjoyment about writing amongst the students. Whilst these are not qualities that are easily quantifiable they are in no small measure essential if students are to make discernible progress in the demanding enterprise that is writing. It is also clear that for most writers – and by this I include school students and even teachers writing master's theses – support from others, as they write, is essential.

An academic ranking once attained can be very difficult to change. A reputation for poor performance, whether deserved or not, once acquired, is difficult to turn around, in both the minds of students and their teachers. As in the case of Max (Dutro et al. et al., 2006), a student who believed he was a poor writer and whose beliefs were reinforced by the school system, many students believe they are unable to achieve. Sometimes this is because the school system has failed them. It is vital that all students have as many chances as they need to realise their potential, and neither the school system nor the curriculum should deny them access to future success. Therefore it falls, first and foremost, to the classroom teacher to find ways (as eventually happened for Max) to facilitate students' success, despite the exigencies of the curriculum. It was this kind of awareness that prompted me to design an intervention that would go some way to help ameliorate the writing difficulties I observed in my class.

At the start of the year, the students in this class were ranked by the school as average to below average as a result of reading and writing tests. It is heartening that by the end of the year most of the students had improved in the reading and writing tests required by the school. This meant that they had, in the main, attained the required curriculum level for their age group.

Students have a right to be taught techniques that will help them decide how to make their writing effective; they need to have some basic syntactical concepts to utilise in their writing, because this gives them the opportunity to make deliberate choices as they search to make their writing effective. Writing is a demanding and at times difficult endeavour, one where support at every juncture is vital. This research has helped to emphasise for me that students can improve and achieve, given the time to do so and the right kind of classroom environment.

6.7 The future

Notwithstanding Myhill et al.'s (2012) research and findings regarding the introduction of syntactical concepts during the writing process, further research is necessary. There still remains a dearth of research in this area and little theoretical material on which to base classroom practice.

The need for practitioner research

It has been my experience as a classroom teacher in New Zealand that theoretical knowledge rarely makes it into the minds of busy practitioners. Classroom teachers seldom have the time or access to peruse academic research, and rely on the expertise of curriculum writers to signal changes in pedagogical direction, which means relying on outside experts who may have little knowledge of the realities of the classroom. Unfortunately, the direction in recent times of secondary education in New Zealand has been a focus on assessment, rather than classroom teaching. It is my contention that the pendulum needs to swing back toward an investment in classroom pedagogy, one that would encourage wider investigation and curriculum development in areas such as dealt with in this thesis. Curriculum development is all too often an area of political debate and increasingly one that has little or no input from classroom practitioners.

The New Zealand education system is similar to systems in other parts of the world in that teacher knowledge is seldom sought or used as a source to build up professional knowledge. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) claim that teachers' roles as 'theorizers, interpreters, and critics of their own practice is often ignored' (p. 1). Although teachers are regarded as decision-makers in their classrooms, they are rarely included in decisions over what areas of education require research. Teachers are expected to be the recipients of knowledge generated by professional researchers and accept its legitimacy for their day-to-day decisions (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). In effect, this means that 'throughout their careers, teachers are expected to learn about their own profession not by studying their own experiences but by studying the findings of those who are not themselves school-based teachers' (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p. 1).

For me, the attraction of practitioner research was that I was researching an area that I had observed needed attention, based on years of experience. The assessment of my class's writing ability was not based on results from outside tests such as TTTle, or theories from outside authorities, but instead was the result of my in-depth knowledge of the writing my students produced. This may be at odds with supposedly reliable educational initiatives based on large-scale quantitative research that arrive at clear-cut measurable outcomes and conclusions (Campbell et al., 2004). While such research endeavours provide an indication of general trends, they do not provide the up-close, detailed explanations that the practitioner researcher is able to provide and that are necessary if student needs are to be met in an authentic way.

Along with this, it is important that teachers are not wedded to narrow curriculum objectives or sets of skills that must be covered (Wyse, McCreedy & Torrence, 2008). Such approaches to teaching may fulfil a government policy or curriculum document but, if followed to the letter, they rob teachers and students of the chance to experiment and take risks that may lead to increased learning opportunities and greater student engagement. Alluding to the political dimension of educational practice Campbell et al. (2004) remind us that 'what goes on inside the classroom is closely related to what goes on outside it' (p. 13). Decisions about educational policy are not always in the best interests of students or teachers.

Enhancing knowledge of grammar in context

To become confident, competent writers, students need to be taught how to utilise grammatical features in their writing. A collaborative approach to writing instruction has been shown to be effective, suggesting the teaching of writing needs classrooms where student talk is valued and dignified, where student opinions are sought, and where experimentation is the order of the day. Teachers need to realise that they can be more effective if they employ collaborative writing classroom practices. Such collaboration can also be extended to the practice of teaching itself. There is much potential in Cochran-Smith and Lytle's (2009) proposal for the cultivation of teacher 'collectivities – pairs, groups, within or across schools, face-to-face or virtual networks' (p. 140). Working together and sharing insights not only powerfully supports professional development, but it can also contribute to the knowledge base of education. Such endeavours are vital if we are to become more effective in supporting students to develop a degree of syntactical knowledge that allows them to take control of their writing, and it has enormous potential to help develop teacher effectiveness in the Twenty-First Century.

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Appendix 1

Creative Writing Rubric

	4	3	2	1
Ideas/content	<p>Engages audience interest through careful and deliberate selection of events, choice of setting/s and well-chosen detail</p> <p>Indicators *The writing is clear & focused; it holds the reader's attention throughout *The writer has excellent control of the narrative and has selected details that enhance the story *The writing has a clear sense of who, what, where, why & how</p>	<p>Gains audience interest through selection of events, choice of setting/s and detail</p> <p>Indicators *The writing is mostly focused clear & focused & holds the reader's attention *The writer has some control of the narrative and has selected appropriate details *The writing has a sense of who, what, where, why & how</p>	<p>Attempts to interest audience through choice of events, setting/s and detail</p> <p>Indicators *Some of the writing is unclear & difficult to follow. * Some details are unclear *Some aspects of who, what, where, why & how are missing</p>	<p>Loses the interest of the reader because of poorly chosen events setting/s and detail</p> <p>Indicators *Writing is unclear & difficult to follow *The detail is unclear and confusing</p>
Structure/organisation	<p>The story follows a carefully planned sequence</p> <p>Indicators *The beginning grabs attention *The ending is satisfying *Events are thoughtfully placed to strengthen the message *Ideas, paragraphs & sentences are smoothly and effectively tied together</p>	<p>The story follows a sequence</p> <p>Indicators *Has a clear beginning *Has a clear ending *The placement of events contributes to the message * Ideas, paragraphs & sentences are tied together</p>	<p>There is some evidence of a sequence although the writing lacks a clear structure</p> <p>Indicators *The beginning & ending are poorly developed * The reader is confused by events that don't fit where they are placed *Ideas, paragraphs & sentences are not tied together effectively</p>	<p>The story is difficult to follow- the reader has re-read for it to make sense</p> <p>Indicators *There is no clear sense of a beginning or end *Ideas are not tied together and the paragraphing is absent or inconsistent * Events seem out of order</p>
Voice	<p>The writer constructs a world the reader can enter and presents experiences or observations of character with sincerity &</p>	<p>The writer constructs a world the reader can see and presents experiences & observations</p>	<p>The writer constructs a world</p>	<p>The reader can- not imagine the world created in the story</p>

	<p>perception</p> <p>Indicators *The writer communicates effectively according to purpose and audience</p>	<p>Indicators *The writing is appropriate to the purpose and audience</p>	<p>Indicators *The writer lacks purpose & interaction between the writer & reader</p>	<p>Indicators The writer does not appear to have an audience in mind or be writing to anyone in particular</p>
Word choice	<p>The writer thoughtfully chooses words that communicate ideas effectively</p> <p>Indicators *Vocabulary is striking but appropriate Uses a range of vocabulary suitable to audience *Words help to create pictures in the reader's mind</p>	<p>The writer chooses words that communicate</p> <p>Indicators *Vocabulary is appropriate *Uses a limited range of vocabulary *Words communicate ideas Words may not paint pictures</p>	<p>Word choice does little to help convey ideas</p> <p>Indicators *Words are ordinary & do little to convey the ideas *Repeats words uses clichés and a limited range of vocabulary *Clear pictures are not painted</p>	<p>The writer has had difficulty finding the right words</p> <p>Indicators *Words or phrases are repeated but not for effect *Some words are used in the wrong context</p>
Imagery	<p>Uses striking figurative language to convey ideas</p>	<p>Uses figurative language to convey ideas</p>	<p>Some figurative language used to convey ideas</p>	<p>Little or no figurative language used</p>
Sentence structure	<p>Sentences are carefully crafted</p> <p>Indicators *Uses a variety of sentence types & lengths *Uses dialogue effectively</p>	<p>Sentences are crafted and make sense</p> <p>Indicators * Uses a limited number of sentence types & lengths *Uses some dialogue</p>	<p>Sentences are often difficult to follow and some do not make sense</p> <p>Indicators *Uses similar sentences throughout *Uses little dialogue</p>	<p>Sentences are rambling and difficult to follow</p> <p>Indicators Uses incomplete or ungrammatical or difficult to understand sentences *Uses little or no dialogue</p>
Conventions	<p>Spelling & punctuation is correct</p>	<p>Spelling & punctuation is mostly correct</p>	<p>Frequent errors with spelling & punctuation</p>	<p>Spelling and punctuation errors are intrusive & affect the meaning of the writing</p>

Appendix 2

Copy of letter sent to parents of student participants

May 2011

Dear Parents/Caregivers

A research team based at the University of Waikato, and led by Professor Terry Locke, has begun a two-year project aimed at finding effective ways of teaching writing in primary and secondary classrooms. Our particular focus is on “teachers as writers”, since we believe that if teachers themselves think of themselves as writers as well as teachers of writing, then our students will benefit. We have identified teachers with an interest and expertise in this topic who have agreed to be co-researchers in this project. Your child’s teacher is one of these experts. This means that we will work alongside teachers to study ways of improving students’ writing/composition of a range of texts. The research will complement the existing classroom programme so it does not mean disruption to your child’s programme.

The principal, the teacher(s) and board of trustees have been consulted and have given their consent for this project. It also has the approval of the School of Education, University of Waikato, Ethics Committee. We now seek your consent as parent/caregiver to have your child involved.

What will this mean for your child? As mentioned above, this study will be part and parcel of the classroom programme. Our teacher-researchers will be thinking about the ways they have been teaching writing and as a result will develop innovative ways of helping students write/compose a range of texts. As I’m sure you know, writing has a key place, not just in literacy programmes, but in all curriculum areas, since it is widely recognized that we use writing *to learn*.

What we would like to do is collect “data” or information from your child as they take part in classroom work around writing. This is an evolving project and the exact data that will need to be collected is not being decided beforehand.

However, the data will be relevant to your child’s classroom writing programme.

These data may include some or all of the following:

- responses to questionnaires
- classroom observations
- occasional group interviews
- occasional one-on-one discussions during a lesson
- work samples with the pupil’s consent

We would like to make it clear that in the course of this project no child will be identified by name.

We see this as a very valuable project for all concerned, especially because New Zealand students’ performance in writing lags behind the performance in writing. Through the information produced, this project will make a contribution to the

wider educational community in New Zealand. As the study unfolds we plan to use some data in conference presentations to share with the professional and academic communities. Any such data will be carefully selected and all efforts made to ensure anonymity of data and protection of children's identities.

If you have any questions please contact your child's teacher (co-researcher) or Professor Terry Locke (director). Please could you tear off and return the slip below to your child's teacher. We hope that you do give your consent but if you do not your child's learning programme will not be affected.

Yours faithfully,

Terry Locke (Prof): t.locke@waikato.ac.nz

I have read the attached information sheet and

I/We (name of parent(s)/caregiver(s))_____ (PLEASE PRINT)

consent / do not consent (circle one) to the involvement of my child,

(name of child)_____ (PLEASE PRINT)

in the "Teachers as writers" study. I realise that this study is part of the classroom programme but will require some data collection such as discussions and work samples. Some of these samples may include taped interviews and I am aware that my child will not be identified by name.

PLEASE SIGN: _____

Appendix 3

Student's informed consent form

I _____ am willing to be involved in the study on finding better ways to teach writing in secondary classrooms.

It is possible that I may be photographed during class time. However, photographs will be taken in such a way that no one will recognise me.

I understand that sometimes there will be observers in class and notes may be taken and occasionally discussions taped. I don't mind if you "quote me" without revealing my identity.

I understand that you may want to make copies of my classroom work (including assignments and results) to share with other researchers and teachers. I don't mind you doing that as long as you don't reveal my identity.

I understand that all information will be looked after carefully. I understand that any information about me, if used in a presentation or report will be done in such a way that my identity will be kept confidential.

Signed _____ Date _____

