

SOME CLASSROOM STRATEGIES FOR SETTING UP EFFECTIVE PEER METALINGUISTIC TALK

It is worth thinking specifically about what teaching strategies might be particularly helpful in fostering rich metalinguistic discussion between peers. It is important to ensure that the peer talk is set up with a very clear and focused purpose for the talk, well-aligned to the learning focus for the lesson. The activities suggested below are simply starting-points for thinking about this and I am sure you will have many more constructive ideas!

With all of these examples, it is important to be clear about the *learning focus* you want to address, and to be sure that you are clear about *the link between the language choice and the effect it has in the text*. Some of the strategies draw on a model text, whilst others draw on students' own writing.

It is also important to think about how much time to give the peer talk task. Very often, a short burst of peer talk can be effective, and an excellent way into whole class discussion which builds on, extends and consolidates the learning,

1. Fill the Gap

Select an extract of text, probably a paragraph, which allows for students to see the language choice within its surrounding context, and delete the particular language choice you are going to explore. Invite students to discuss what might go in the gap, then reveal what the author chose, and discuss why the author may have made that choice.

2. Let's Compare!

One very effective way to help students see how different language choices can create different effects is to explore two different versions: this can be at the level of a word, a phrase or a sentence (possibly even two paragraphs?)

3. Sort it out

Giving students words, or sequences of words, printed on cards to undertake a card sort activity is helpful because the physical manipulation of the cards to create different possibilities also generates a lot of focused metalinguistic talk about the options. It works particularly well to explore the syntactic structure of a sentence.

4. Playing with possibilities

Invite students to generate a list of possibilities for a particular purpose eg a list of noun phrases to describe a character; or a list of sentences to describe an image of an event. Then invite them to choose two of their possibilities which create different effects, and to explain to the class what the effect is and what language choice is shaping this.

5. Thinking Questions

Crucial to the quality of the peer metalinguistic talk is how the talking activity is set up. Pay particular attention to the questions you give students to steer the activity into focused, purposeful discussion, but without constraining it with limiting or closed questions.

6. Collaborative Composition

Give students a short writing composition task to write together, perhaps just one paragraph. There should be a clear goal for this writing which will guide the talk which will occur during the writing. One

real benefit of collaborative writing is that peers have to articulate their choices and reasons for those choices.

7. Collaborative Revision

This is similar to the collaborative composition but more focused on deliberate decision-making through revision. It works particularly well when students are asked to rewrite together a short piece of text which involves an explicit change eg rewriting this character description to infer that he is gentle, not aggressive.

8. Questioning the Writer

In pairs, students read a text, or section of text, looking at how the writer has crafted a particular aspect of the text eg how an argument has been signposted; how formality or informality have been used; how a narrative opens. The students create a list of questions for the author about the language choices that they can see in this extract which link to the particular aspect under focus. These questions can then be used for subsequent group, and/or whole class discussion.

9. Text-marking

There are lots of different possibilities for asking students to read a text and mark the text in some way which highlights the language choices made. It could be highlighting all the prepositional phrases which evoke a setting; underlining any verbs which convey a sense of emotion; highlighting formal language in blue and informal language in red. As with the card sort and collaborative writing, it is the peer talk which occurs around this activity which is valuable.

10. The Author Talks

After a period where students have been composing their own texts, create time for students to explain their own authorial choices to peers. This works best when there is a focused question to consider and when students are asked to choose one example to discuss eg 'Choose one noun phrase where you are particularly pleased with how strong a visual image it evokes'. The peer talk is much less effective if student are asked to talk about their writing more generally.