Manchester Metropolitan University

e-space

Manchester Metropolitan University's Research Repository

Please cite the Published Version

Bell, Huw and Hardman, William (2018) 'More fronted adverbials than ever before'. Writing feedback practices and grammatical metalanguage in an English primary school. Language and Education, 33 (1). pp. 35-50. ISSN 0950-0782

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2018.1488864

Publisher: Taylor & Francis (Routledge)

Version: Accepted Version

Downloaded from: https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/621681/

Additional Information: This is an Author Accepted Manuscript of a paper accepted for publication by Taylor & Francis in Language and Education.

Enquiries:
If you have questions about this document, contact openresearch@mmu.ac.uk. Please include the URL of the record in e-space. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our Take Down policy (available from https://www.mmu.ac.uk/library/using-the-library/policies-and-guidelines)

‘More fronted adverbials than ever before’. Writing feedback practices and grammatical metalanguage in an English primary school.

Abstract

This case study investigates writing feedback practices and their relationship to the grammar, punctuation and spelling (GPS) objectives in the 2014 National Curriculum for England, with a particular focus on grammatical metalanguage. Our data is composed of authentic examples of children’s writing in three classes at one primary school in the North-West of England over the course of almost a year. We investigate how primary-stage GPS objectives are reflected in the feedback practices of both children and teachers, and how children respond to this feedback. The findings indicate that, despite evidence of good feedback practice and useful knowledge of grammatical metalanguage among teachers and children, there is a tendency for feedback to be conducted at the surface level with a focus on metalinguistic features, sometimes at the expense of content-related concerns. We hypothesise that this is largely because of the focus on test preparation and the need to provide evidence of progress.

Keywords

Writing feedback, metalanguage, primary school, National Curriculum for England, grammar

Background

The use of specialised grammatical metalanguage such as ‘fronted adverbial’ and ‘coordinating conjunction’ in written feedback in UK primary schools would have been relatively rare prior to 2000, as for the final 40 years of the 20th century there was no systematic approach to the explicit teaching of grammar in the UK (Hudson and Walmsley, 2005). In recent years, however, grammatical instruction has made a comeback, first with the introduction of the

National Literary Strategy and then, more notably, with the grammar, punctuation and spelling (GPS) objectives introduced by the 2014 National Curriculum for England (henceforth NCE2014) (DfE, 2013). There has been a significant increase in the amount of specialised grammatical terminology children are expected to learn (Bell, 2016), and an apparent shift in focus towards the learning of metalinguistic terms and concepts in their own right rather than as part of a more functional approach (Myhill and Watson, 2014; Bell, 2014). This increased emphasis on grammatical metalanguage reflects renewed interest in explicit grammar teaching in schools across much of the Anglophone world (Schleppegrell, 2007; Derewianka, 2012; Jeurisson, 2012).

In England, GPS now forms part of national assessments at Key Stage 2, alongside core subjects such as reading, writing and mathematics. The inclusion of GPS in high-stakes testing has significant implications for the role of grammar in the curriculum: as Myhill and Watson (2014) point out, it is the assessment framework rather than the statutory guidelines that have the greatest impact on teaching practice. Indeed, Safford (2015), one of the few studies into the practical consequences of GPS, found that teachers were conscious of the high-stakes nature of the tests; that grammar teaching and testing had become a priority in the curriculum; that teachers incorporated explicit grammar teaching into literacy lessons; and that the test design led teachers to encourage the memorisation and regular use of grammatical metalanguage.

The increased emphasis on grammar has been controversial in the UK (cf. Marzal, 2012; Brown, 2014) and there have been concerns internationally (Derewianka, 2012; Jeurisson, 2012). This controversy could be viewed as a continuation of the 'grammar debate' (Hudson and Walmsley 2005), which has seen highly polarised arguments and viewpoints from both sides, often based more on ideology than learning (Keen, 1997). Overall, there has been 'little coherent and developed articulation of the contribution that grammatical understanding might make to students' learning about language' (Myhill and Watson 2014, 45). In particular, the

relationship between metalanguage and writing feedback is a contested yet under-researched area. Metalanguage can clearly be a useful tool to facilitate the discussion of writing choices if its use is linked to the role of grammar in creating meaning (e.g. Keen, 1997; Myhill and Newman, 2016). However, teaching metalanguage also has the potential, particularly when combined with a testing regime, to place undue emphasis on the *identification* of grammatical features rather than on meaning, to generate ambiguities and inconsistencies in terminology, and to result in an excessive focus on accuracy of form – the restricted use of grammar as a normative tool for 'error correction' (Crystal, cited in Brown, 2014; Myhill *et al.* 2012). To add some much-needed detail to the picture of how metalanguage is used in feedback, our paper investigates how the GPS objectives are being reflected in writing feedback practices with a particular focus on the use of grammatical metalanguage. We address two questions:

1. How are primary-stage GPS objectives, particularly those related to grammatical metalanguage, reflected in writing feedback practices?
2. How do children respond to these practices?

Feedback on writing

The theoretical origins of writing feedback in the English primary classroom reside in the process writing movement of the 1970s, assessment for learning (e.g. Black and Wiliam, 1998) and the work of sociocultural theorists such as Vygotsky (1978). The fundamental principle is that provision of supportive comments or scaffolding by a more capable instructor, with opportunity for reflection and revision, leads to improvement (Clare *et al.*, 2000).

There is empirical evidence of the benefits of such feedback. Parr and Timperley (2010) found a significant relationship between quality of feedback and improvement in primary students' writing performance. Among elementary and middle school students, Clare *et al.* (2000) found noticeable progress on those aspects upon which feedback was given, but not on those that received little attention. Meanwhile, Matsumara *et al.* (2002) concluded that *type* and *amount*

of feedback were important factors. The common theme in these studies is that writing feedback is not automatically beneficial but instead depends on factors including the nature, type, quality and amount of feedback. Thus, to inform our analysis of the teacher's feedback and the children's responses, we review the available literature in terms of directness, student response, use of metalanguage and written corrective feedback.

Directness

The notions of direct and indirect feedback have had a strong resonance in studies of feedback on second language writing, where, in contrast to first language writing pedagogy, a focus on 'accuracy' and avoiding 'error' forms part of mainstream teaching practice and research. In direct feedback, the teacher makes changes *for* the student; in indirect feedback, suggestions are highlighted for students to self-edit (Ferris, 2010). Initially, indirect feedback was thought more effective because it forced the student to respond and thus enabled greater cognitive engagement (Lee, 2013). However, in recent years it has been suggested (Storch, 2010) that direct feedback is more successful at improving subsequent revisions. Ferris (2010) proposes that the balance may alter according to the learning goals: direct feedback may be most suitable when the aim is the accurate use of Standard English (Ellis *et al.* 2008), while indirect may be better suited to training students in editing and proofreading (Ferris, 2006). Interestingly, both goals are explicit in NCE2014 (DfE, 2013), although only accuracy is tested.

Student response

Feedback that encourages revisiting a text and provokes a response is widely regarded as beneficial for writing development, because it is seen to promote essential self-editing and revision skills (Ferris, 1997, 2010). Sommers (1982, 154) suggests this response should go beyond what students are capable of identifying themselves to force them 'back into the chaos…to the point where they are shaping and restructuring their meaning.' A number of strategies have been identified as effective in enhancing student response, such as promoting

peer-editing and self-editing, making the task engaging and useful, and giving students time to reflect on and respond to feedback (Lee, 2013; Boon, 2016). Ultimately, Lee (2013) suggests, irrespective of the strategy adopted, promoting student response should be the fundamental principle.

Metalanguage in feedback

Metalanguage is an inexact term and there is a lack of 'conceptual clarity around metalinguistic ideas' (Myhill and Jones, 2015, 839); indeed, much of the literature we review below does not specify a working definition. In principle, metalanguage includes any terms used to talk about language. We focus here specifically on grammatical terminology of the type specified in NCE2014, which is used 'for describing underlying patterns and relationships within and between words, phrases, clauses and sentences' (Keen, 1997, 435).

The general role of metalanguage in feedback is clearly important as feedback relies on explicit communication about the language choices made while writing. While van Lier (1998) and Gombert (1992) agree that writers can make deliberate, conscious linguistic choices without access to metalanguage, even skilled writers cannot usually express implicit knowledge of language structure explicitly without more formal technical metalanguage (Myhill and Jones 2007). Myhill *et al*. (2012, 143) further argue that metacognitive knowledge is essential for making the choices required during writing. They support Bereiter's and Scardamalia's (1982) suggestion that one benefit of metacognition is its ability to reveal hitherto covert processes and increase the accessibility of otherwise tacit knowledge; intuitively, this seems likely to also be an essential role of writing feedback. In other words, if the role of feedback is to provide students with explicit indications of potential areas for improvement and explanations of how these can be achieved (Hattie and Timperley, 2007), then surely it can be beneficial to provide teachers and students with greater linguistic resources (i.e. metalanguage and metalinguistic knowledge). Indeed, Williamson and Hardman's (1995) study, which examined trainee

teachers' ability to apply metalinguistic knowledge when giving feedback on children's writing, found lack of metalinguistic knowledge was preventing teachers from providing accurate and meaningful feedback.

However, while there is a good case to support the use of metalanguage in feedback, there remains the question of what form this should take. In response, Keen (1997, 437) distinguishes between a loosely-defined '"natural" metalanguage of discourse' – for example, terms relating to speech acts *(warn, threaten)* or social interaction (*chat, gossip)* – which is part of people's everyday vocabulary and enables the discussion of language use; and a more systematically defined 'metalanguage of structure'. He points out that although many people possess a rich and varied natural metalanguage of discourse, there are scant available resources for talking about language structure in common usage. Therefore, although people have a vast implicit knowledge of language structure, they are virtually incapable of expressing this knowledge explicitly without grammatical metalanguage. Through analysis of children's written work, Keen (1997) demonstrates how grammatical knowledge and metalanguage, if used to explore and reflect on writing from a meaning-oriented perspective, can be an effective tool for writing development. This suggests that for feedback on writing to be effective, some form of metalanguage is often necessary and potentially beneficial. This does not necessarily have to be *grammatical* metalanguage, although sometimes grammatical terminology may be the most accurate and specific way to provide feedback.

However, grammatical metalanguage in feedback is not always beneficial. Teachers with less grammatical knowledge have been found to make 'meaningless comments about grammar' in their feedback (Myhill *et al*., 2012, 159); that is, comments that lack the specificity to be useful for students and appear to assign intrinsic value to the mere use of linguistic features without considering the impact of how different choices affect meaning.

Written corrective feedback

Aside from the form that feedback can take, it is also important to consider what *aspects* of writing it might address. It could, for example, tackle *meaning-related aspects* such as the impact of word choices in relation to the writing purpose and the audience, or the coherence and cohesion of the text, which has strong empirical support in the writing feedback literature (Truscott, 1996). However, feedback could also focus on the *form* of the writing and whether it conforms with the conventions of Standard English. This type of feedback is commonly referred to as 'error correction' or 'written corrective feedback' (henceforth WCF). WCF can be applied to a diverse range of writing features (e.g. spelling, punctuation, grammar, register and layout), in varied forms (e.g. underlining, circling or crossing out) and is often associated with prescriptive notions of 'accuracy', 'error' and 'correctness'. A discussion of WCF is relevant to our paper, as not only does WCF feature in the GPS context (Safford, 2015), but also the widely-held association of grammar with accuracy of form rather than with meaning is central to the controversy surrounding the debate on the usefulness of grammatical metalanguage.

From the 1970s on, the dominant perspective on WCF for native speakers was highly dismissive: proponents of process writing argued that the emphasis should be on developing content and writing skills rather than achieving a flawless end product by focusing on correctness, as this could potentially stifle creativity (Elbow, 1981). This view was supported by language acquisition theorists (e.g. Krashen, 1984). Comprehensive reviews of the literature at the time (see Truscott, 1996) found that grammatical error correction had little or no impact on the quality of students' writing. Since then, little research has been carried out into WCF in native speaker writing (Ferris, 2010).

However, this does not mean that WCF does not occur in primary schools. Safford (2015) found that teachers reported an increased tendency to focus on 'technical accuracy' in their feedback; studies by Matsumara *et al*. (2002) and Clare *et al*. (2000) found that the large

majority of writing feedback focused on what they considered to be 'mechanical', 'technical' or 'surface-level' concerns – grammar, spelling, punctuation and layout – rather than 'deeper' content-related aspects. Although the classification of grammar and punctuation as 'surface-level', 'mechanical' or 'technical' is somewhat reductive given that most aspects of grammar and punctuation must at some level be connected to 'deeper' meaning-making, it certainly suggests that there is a tendency for feedback to focus on accuracy rather than content. This matters because content-level feedback is generally more effective at improving the quality of final drafts (e.g. Parr and Timperley, 2010), and because teachers often lack the linguistic knowledge to address deeper text-level features (Williamson and Hardman, 1995; Myhill *et al.*, 2012).

Another issue raised by the prevalence of WCF is whether it is being applied in a way that accommodates non-standard forms. NCE2014 is relatively non-prescriptive, merely stipulating that children learn about the differences between standard and non-standard English (DfE, 2013). However, in practice, Safford (2015, 19) found teachers often struggled to teach the GPS curriculum *and* accommodate non-standard forms, sometimes telling children their writing was 'wrong' and becoming frustrated when they were unable to self-correct. The failure to place error correction in the context of standard and non-standard varieties may affect children's well-being and achievement (Cheshire and Edwards, 1991) and mean the opportunity to learn standard forms is missed (Williamson and Hardman, 1995).

Method

Context

The study was conducted in a non-denominational, mixed primary school in a city in the North-West of England in 2016. The school was below national average for free school meals and special educational needs, and slightly above the national average for English as a second

language. The school was classed as outstanding by Ofsted in 2015 and ranked among the top 1000 primary schools in England (Gurney-Read, 2015).

Participants

The study uses data from three teachers and 15 children from Year 4, which has three classes of around 30 children. In Year 4 a significant number of metalinguistic concepts are introduced and the school starts to focus on more formal learning. Five children were selected by each teacher to provide a range of different writing abilities. Nine boys and six girls were finally included.

All three Y4 teachers participated. They had 5-12 years' teaching experience and none had formally studied language or linguistics. Teachers are referred to as T1, T2 and T3; children are referred to as C1-1, C1-2, and so on (where the first number refers to the teacher and the second to the child – so C2-3 is the third child in T2's class).

Design

We adopted an essentially qualitative case-study research design to obtain greater depth through fine-grained analysis of a relatively small dataset, and so that the analysis will be of use for teachers considering how GPS objectives may be influencing their own writing feedback practices (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Our data was chosen to provide a broad range of perspectives on the writing feedback provided by both teachers and children, and consisted of feedback extracted from children's writing workbooks, and interviews with children and teachers. We will discuss our interview data in a subsequent paper; here we examine only the feedback given by teachers and any visible responses to it by children such as further corrections or reflections in the workbooks.

Children's writing workbooks

Students' writing workbooks included all work produced from September 2015 to June 2016. The school used 'light-touch' and 'in-depth' feedback. 'Light-touch' was more superficial and

rarely elicited a response from students, so was excluded from analysis. 'In-depth' feedback was more considered and longer, and often demanded a response from students. Some workbooks included more marked writing than others; the total number of in-depth pieces was 7-10 per workbook. To obtain an approximately even amount of data from each teacher, only the first seven pieces of writing from each student were included.

T3 had taken over her class from another teacher halfway through the year. For consistency, only marking by T3 was included, so her figures are based on a smaller amount of data. In total, 133 pieces of work were analysed: 56 from T1, 56 from T2, and 21 from T3. The total dataset included 405 teacher comments and 482 instances of WCF.

Feedback was given on a variety of written task types including stories, reports and recounts. Data from writing workbooks were classified independently by both authors using criteria developed from the literature review, and differences resolved by discussion. The following sections provide a detailed description of the criteria adopted.

Structural and meaning-related metalanguage

In order to illustrate the nature of the metalanguage used, we distinguish between 'structural metalanguage', which could perhaps be considered 'more systematic and objective' (Keen, 1997, 435) and is used to describe aspects of language structure and text organisation (grammar, punctuation, and layout), and 'meaning-related metalanguage' (content, audience, language resources and genre). Since every element of any text must contribute to meaning at some level, the structural-meaning distinction is inevitably slightly artificial. We therefore adopted it not only because other feedback studies have made similar distinctions (e.g. Matsumura et al., 2002; Parr and Timperley, 2010), but also based on the focus apparently intended by the teacher. We could not access the teachers' thought processes at the time of writing the feedback, so to an extent this was an exercise in sympathetic projection, and in practice it was often difficult to discern any relationship between the use of grammatical

terminology and meaning-making – possibly in part because teachers are not always successful in highlighting such relationships (Myhill and Newman, 2016, 182).

The structural category, in addition to the grammatical terminology in NCE2014 (e.g. conjunction, preposition), also included terms apparently created by teachers to aid simplification (e.g. time phrase, sentence opener); we label these 'idiosyncratic.'

'Meaning-related' metalanguage included literary devices (e.g. alliteration, word play) and vocabulary-related terms (e.g. synonym, vocabulary), as in this context they were employed to describe specific content-related aspects of the students' writing, and were (sometimes) used to draw links between the choices made and the writing genre or purpose. Since 'direct speech' was often used as a content feature relating to narrative writing, it too was classified as 'meaning-related.'

Descriptive comments were included; evaluative comments were ignored, so 'excellent adjective' was recorded as 'adjective'. For standardisation purposes, only singular forms were recorded, so 'use a variety of conjunctions' was recorded as 'conjunction' (see Table 1 for more examples).

Table 1 Classification and examples of metalinguistic terms

Structural metalanguage		Meaning-related metalanguage
Standard	Idiosyncratic	
adverbial, pronoun, sentence, punctuation, inverted commas	sentence opener, which-phrase, how-phrase, temporal conjunction	synonym, direct speech, description, word play, alliteration, detail

Teacher comments were counted and grouped into type (grammar, punctuation, content, etc.) and structural and meaning-related.

WCF

WCF was categorised by type (grammar, punctuation, spelling etc.), focus on structural or meaning-related features, and directness. In direct corrections, the teacher corrected the

writing; in indirect corrections the ‘error’ was highlighted by symbols or underlining and left for the student to correct. References to standard/non-standard forms and spoken/written English were also recorded.

Student response

Student responses were classified as ‘effective’ and ‘ineffective’. Effective responses entailed meaningful revisiting of the text, including completing tasks suggested by the teacher, replying to teachers’ comments or applying three or more WCF suggestions. Ineffective responses included non-existent or minimal responses, such as initialing the teacher’s comments, giving short answers such as ‘sorry’ or ‘I agree’, or applying fewer than three instances of WCF.

Results and analysis

This section presents the results of our analysis and considers them in their immediate context. In the subsequent discussion section we draw out in more depth the implications for the wider educational context.

Table 2 Metalanguage, comments and WCF in teachers' feedback

		T1	T2	T3
Metalinguistic terms	Total	134	102	43
	Average no. per piece	**3.8**	**2.9**	**2**
	SS%*	*48*	*50*	*25*
	IS%*	*22*	*5*	*5*
	MR%*	*30*	*45*	*70*
Comments	Total	190	157	58
	Average no. per piece	5.4	4.5	2.8
	Focus on structure %	64	32	23
	Focus on meaning %	36	68	77
WCF	Total	164	247	71
	Average no. per piece	**4.7**	**7.1**	**3.4**
	Direct %	49	80	31
	Indirect %	51	20	69
	Focus on structure %	*94*	*90*	*69*
	Focus on meaning %	*6*	*10*	*31*
	Spelling %	20	27	25
	Content %	5	8	25
	Punctuation %	55	48	27
	Grammar %	18	17	11
	Layout %	1	0	6
	Language resources %	1	0	6

* SS standard structural; IS idiosyncratic structural; MR meaning-related

Metalanguage and feature-spotting

T1 and T2 used more structurally-oriented metalanguage (70% and 55% respectively), while T3 used more meaning-based metalanguage (70%). One factor that seemed to be driving the

use of specialised metalanguage was the practice of 'feature spotting', where particular features of the text (e.g. conjunction, fronted adverbial) were highlighted for praise without any explanation of their benefit to the communicative purpose of the writing; the metalinguistic term was simply written above the relevant feature in the text. Feature spotting was particularly extensive for T1, accounting for 49% of her total metalinguistic terminology, and to a lesser extent T2; this could partly explain why both T1 and T2 used more structural metalanguage than T3.

Comments

T1 and T2 provided significantly more comments on average than T3. T1's comments were mostly about structural aspects, whereas comments by T2 and T3 focused mostly on meaning-related features. The feature-focused approach noted earlier was also evident in comments, where students received praise purely for including certain features: 'Adding a dropped-in clause – fantastic' (T2); 'Good job using fronted adverbials' (T3). Similarly, many comments highlighting possible improvements implied simply that a particular feature needed to be used: 'Next use a rhetorical question' (T1); 'Please include clauses to extend your sentences' (T3). Such feedback gave no indication of where features might fit into the text or why they were necessary; it was often not clear whether comments referred to the text in hand or simply set out the next target. Similarly, 'variety' was sometimes recommended with no suggestion as to which features were required or for what purpose, providing the children with little useful information: 'Use a variety of openers and conjunctions' (T1); 'Think about other good openers you could use to help you' (T2).

The use of pre-defined writing objectives tended to prioritise the inclusion of specific metalinguistic features. For example, a task in T3's class ('Can I use a variety of sentence types to write a witness account?') resulted in the feedback: 'You did use a variety of sentence types'. The feedback was framed explicitly against lesson objectives, yet neither the objective nor the

feedback provided information on how using such a variety would help the writing achieve its purpose.

Feedback checklists also focused on features rather than meanings, and this too tended to promote feature-spotting. For example, a checklist for a witness statement task included (in idiosyncratic terminology) 'AA sentence', 'compound', '–ly opener', 'drop-in which/who phrase', '–ing opener', '-ed opener', and 'if, then'. None of the items on the checklist required the children or teacher to re-read or understand what was actually written in the witness statement itself. This issue appeared to have more to do with the feature-focused design of some criteria than with the use of checklists themselves.

Finally, teachers sometimes provided prescriptive and over-generalised rules in their comments: 'Remember stories need to be past tense' (T1); 'Don't make your sentences too long' (T2); 'Make sure the tense stays the same. Past or present?' (T3).

WCF

Almost all writing contained some corrections, and it was not unusual for there to be double-figure numbers. Yet Table 2 shows a considerable difference in the average number of corrections provided by the teachers, with T2 correcting considerably more frequently than T1 and T3. T1 only provided indirect feedback on around half of her corrections, while T2 overwhelmingly favoured direct feedback. Only T3 provided mostly indirect feedback. In their WCF, all three teachers focused heavily on punctuation; T1 and T2 allocated approximately half of their total corrections to it. Spelling also dominated, at around 20-25% of all corrections. T3 had the most even distribution across categories, and focused more on content than on grammar.

Judging from its frequency, WCF was considered important by all three teachers. However, it was interesting that none referred in feedback to differences between standard and non-standard, or spoken and written English, and we conclude that they either lacked the knowledge

or failed to see the potential benefits of raising awareness of different varieties of English. This sometimes led to unnecessary corrections: for example, in a direct-speech first person narrative, the colloquial 'me and my mum' was corrected by T3 to 'my mum and I', when arguably the former was more suited to the genre and register of the task.

WCF may well have raised children's awareness of some of their 'errors'. C3-5, for example, in response to persistent corrections on her capital letters wrote: 'I wonder if I can ever stop putting capital letters, BAM in the middle of a sentence?' However, this comment also perhaps alluded to the futility of T3's ongoing correction in terms of eliminating the 'error' from her writing, as such feedback ultimately made little impact on the frequency of teacher corrections.

Children's response

No children responded to all the feedback tasks set, and response frequency varied considerably. Four out of five children in T1's class responded more than 80% of the time, whereas two children in T3's class did not respond at all. Overall, just over half the children responded to more than half their teachers' comments.

Workbooks and interviews indicated a range of factors influencing response rate. Children usually ignored tasks that seemed illogical or unclear, or did not refer explicitly back to the text. This often occurred when teachers recommended using particular linguistic features unconnected with the communicative purpose of the writing: 'Try using prepositions to say where things are e.g. flowerbeds besides the pond' (T2); 'You have used some good persuasive language. Use persuasive language throughout' (T3). In many instances, though, specialised metalanguage was used effectively to explain tasks, and the student response was likewise effective:

> T1: Re-read your work to make sure it makes sense. See the full stop I've put in. How does this help your writing make sense?

C1-3: It helps because it separates two different ideas.

Grammatical metalanguage could also enable otherwise unobtainable precision:

T1: What pronoun could you use instead of repeating pasta?

C1-3: 'It'.

However, specialised metalanguage was not always necessary, and very simple requests could inspire lengthy responses. For example: 'How would you develop your story? Do you have an idea for this?' (T3) resulted in a detailed additional paragraph from the child.

For some children, completion of the post-feedback tasks set by teachers to appeared to depend on their complexity or how time-consuming they were: requests to write another paragraph in response to feedback were frequently ignored, for example.

The focus on features rather than deeper meaning sometimes led children to superficial self-evaluation. Many peer and self-feedback comments resembled those of teachers: 'I used a lot of adjectives. Next time I should use more rhetorical questions' (C1-1); 'I put more fronted adverbials in than ever before' (C2-5); 'Wow amazing appealing adjectives. Next time use word play' (unidentified peer). Such comments provided no evidence of meaningful reflection on content among children, and offered no useful suggestions for improvement. However, the children's mimicking of the teacher's feedback comments could also be viewed as their receptiveness to strategy training, which at times showed consideration of the impact of writing choices on the reader: 'I like your description because it paints a picture in my mind' (unidentified peer); 'I liked your fronted adverbials, because the fronted adverbials told you where they were' (unidentified peer).

The provision of WCF seemed to do little to motivate student response, as the indirect feedback provided by teachers was frequently ignored. However, it was noteworthy that many children applied their own corrective editing independently (in a different colour pen to provide evidence). Often this was more detailed than the teachers' corrections across a broader range

of categories, dealing with aspects such as text cohesion and coherence which teachers' feedback rarely addressed. Thus, it seemed that, in terms of promoting self-editing, allowing students to carry out self-corrective feedback beforehand was more efficient than WCF provided by a teacher, without the potential negative impact on the children's self-esteem.

Discussion

Our findings carry a number of interesting implications for the wider context. One is the frequency of teacher feedback which focuses on a feature of language with little or no mention of purpose or effect: following Myhill *et al.* (2012), we suggest that such a feature-focused approach potentially assigns intrinsic value to the mere use of linguistic features, regardless of impact on the reader, which could lead to children losing sight of the purpose of their writing. Our research suggests that this 'feature spotting' results from a combination of policies. In interviews, all teachers acknowledged the need to provide evidence of the children meeting their targets to school inspection authorities, which meant texts were sometimes superficially scanned for the presence of the features without engaging with meaning. The use of pre-defined writing objectives and success criteria checklists, which are well supported in the literature (Black and Wiliam, 1998; Parr and Timperley, 2010), also tended to result in feedback focused on discrete linguistic features, with no requirement to re-engage with content. The implication for practice is that more thoughtfully-designed checklists which encourage engagement with 'deeper' areas of the text may better promote more comprehensive self-assessment. Finally, all three teachers acknowledged the need to provide evidence of the children meeting their targets to the school inspection authorities, which meant texts were sometimes superficially scanned for the presence of the features without engaging with meaning. This supports both Crystal (cited in Brown, 2014), who argues that the decontextualised nature of the GPS assessments can place excessive emphasis on *identification* of grammatical features rather than on meaning,

and Safford (2015), who noted that teachers used metalanguage to facilitate memorisation of grammatical concepts in preparation for tests.

The dangers – or, perhaps more appropriately, the missed opportunities – presented by this focus on form appear to be part of a network of linked causes and effects. For example, the frequency of WCF in teachers' feedback seems surprising, given that this has long been discredited in the literature (Ferris, 2010). Yet teachers are working in a test-driven national context towards a high-stakes test of discrete knowledge, and this must have an impact (Safford, 2015). The reasons why teachers used mostly direct feedback, on the other hand, were less clear; there was no apparent link with GPS objectives. It may suggest teachers are applying corrective feedback reflexively rather than being fully cognitively engaged (McMartin-Miller 2013); alternatively, direct feedback may just be quicker to provide. Overall, the predominant focus on structural features is consistent with other studies of similar age groups (Clare *et al.* 2000; Matsumura *et al.* 2002). But also, the focus on form and accuracy, the use of direct feedback and even the use of vague generic comments noted in our data is almost certainly tied to a lack of strong content knowledge (e.g. Jeurisson, 2012; Bell, 2016). Lacking in-depth declarative content knowledge, and the ability in particular to relate form to meaning and the overall writing purpose, teachers may fall back on feature-spotting or suggesting 'variety', which require less skill. In this light, we might also view a preference for WCF and direct feedback as an assertion of control – a teacher who cannot effectively articulate the relationship between form and meaning can still 'do things with grammar' and may focus on what is 'wrong' rather than how meaning is created. Further training in linking grammar with meaning-making might help, since embedded grammar teaching of this nature is a specialised skill (Lefstein 2009).

Another area of concern from our findings is the complete absence in feedback of any discussion of standard and non-standard, local and national, or spoken and written forms of

English. Our earlier example (‘me and my mum’) almost amounts to hyper-correction and certainly ignores the relation between language choices made depending on context. We cannot draw too much from a small sample, perhaps, but the failure to contextualise feedback in terms of language varieties is consistent with previous studies (Williamson & Hardman, 1995; Safford, 2015), and it seems likely that teachers still lack the knowledge of the potential benefits that drawing attention to linguistic varieties can bring (see Cheshire & Edwards, 1991). However, we also cannot overlook the compressive effect of the focus on form and identification in the GPS assessment: put simply, space to consider the relationship between linguistic choices and language varieties may well have lost out to the need to produce Standard English in the test. Ironically, this combined tendency tends to reinforce a narrow, normative, prescriptive view of language that is not overtly expressed in the 2014 National Curriculum itself (Bell, 2014). Perhaps greater emphasis, both in teacher training and English language curricula, on the value of teaching Standard English in the context of non-standard varieties, would enable feedback to focus more on meanings created in the mind of the reader rather than prescriptive notions of objective ‘accuracy’.

Nevertheless, despite these potentially negative outcomes, it was also interesting to observe how a shared specialised metalanguage was sometimes used as tool to facilitate the communication of writing choices (cf. Keen 1997; Myhill *et al.,* 2012), and in particular the apparent ease with which it was adopted by the children. The fact that children tended to advocate the ‘adding-in’ of additional metalinguistic features seemed to be more indicative of the strategy training they had received from the teachers than any natural propensity to use metalanguage in this way. It would certainly be interesting to further explore how, with more effective strategy training, metalinguistic knowledge might be used to facilitate the communication of writing choices via children's self and peer feedback.

Conclusion

To conclude, this small study has shown how grammatical metalanguage is used in one year group in one school, and provides some evidence that such metalanguage is largely used in the service of a focus on formal accuracy. The study provides clear indications of the influence of GPS objectives on writing feedback practice, and adds evidential depth to the observation that teachers have made 'changes to the ways in which they mark pupils' written work and give feedback, with an increased emphasis on technical accuracy and targets for grammar' (Safford, 2015, 11).

It is clear that a larger study would be useful to ascertain whether the patterns we have found are discernible in the wider context. Yet much other work also remains to be done. Given that teachers and children spend a lot of time writing and responding to feedback, it would be useful to know, for example, on a feature-by-feature basis, how far children benefit from the feedback they receive. Does it actually affect writing performance? Does WCF have real value, and in what forms? Further research into the comparative benefits of strategy training and autonomous editing would also be useful.

On a wider scale, it might be revealing to unpick the relationship between feedback on GPS and the test-focused nature of the curriculum. If there were no Year 6 GPS test, and less requirement to provide evidence, then there might be less use of success criteria checklists and less memorisation and decontextualised teaching. Currently, it seems to us that the actual and potential benefits of deliberate teaching of grammatical metalanguage are largely obscured by the performance-focused curriculum in which it is embedded and of which it is emblematic.

References

1. Bell, H. (2014). "The Dead Butler Revisited: Grammatical Accuracy and Clarity in the English Primary Curriculum 2013–2014." *Language and Education* 29 (2): 140-152.
2. Bell, H. (2016). "Teacher Knowledge and Beliefs about Grammar: A Case Study of an English Primary School." *English in Education* 50 (2): 148-163.
3. Black, P., and Wiliam, D. (1998). *Assessment and Classroom Learning. Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy and Practice* 5 (1), 7-74.
4. Boon, S. I. (2016). "Increasing the Uptake of Peer Feedback in Primary School Writing: Findings from an Action Research Enquiry." *Education* 3-13, 44 (2): 212-14.
5. Brown, Jessica. 2014. "Why grammar lessons should be renamed 'understanding language." *The Guardian*, 11 July. https://www.theguardian.com/media/mind-your-language/2014/jul/11/mind-your-language-grammar-day
6. Cheshire, J., and Edwards, V. (1991). "Schoolchildren as Sociolinguistic Researchers." *Linguistics and Education* 3(3): 225-249.
7. Clare, L., Valdés, R., and Patthey-Chavez, G.G. (2000). "Learning to Write in Urban Elementary and Middle Schools: An Investigation of Teachers' Written Feedback on Student Compositions. (Center for the Study of Evaluation Technical Report No. 526). Los Angeles: University of California, Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST).
8. Derewianka, B. M. (2012) "Knowledge About Language in the Australian Curriculum: English." *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*. 35 (2): 127-146.
9. DfE. (2013). "English Programmes of Study: Key Stages 1 and 2. National Curriculum in England." Department for Education. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/ attachment_data/file/335186/PRIMARY_national_curriculum_-_English_220714.pdf

Elbow, P. (1981). *Writing with Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

10. Ellis, R, Sheen, Y., Murakami, M., and Takashima, H. (2008). "The Effects of Focused and Unfocused Written Corrective Feedback in an English as a Foreign Language Context." *System* 36 (3): 353-371.
11. Ferris, D. R. (1997). "The Influence of Teacher Commentary on Student Revision." *TESOL Quarterly* 31 (2): 315-339.
12. Ferris D. R. (2006). "Does Error Feedback Help Student Writers? New Evidence on the Short- and Long-Term Effects of Written Error Correction." In *Feedback in Second Language Writing: Contexts and issues,* edited by K. Hyland and F. Hyland. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 81–104.
13. Ferris, D. R. (2010). "Second Language Writing Research and Written Corrective Feedback in SLA." *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 32 (2): 181-201.
14. Gombert, J. E. (1992). *Metalinguistic development*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
15. Gurney-Read, Josie. (2015). Primary league tables 2015: Top 1,000 primary schools. *The Daily Telegraph*, 10 December. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/2016/03/14/primary-league-tables-2015-top-1000-primary-schools/
16. Hattie, J., and Timperley, H. (2007). The Power of Feedback. *Review of Educational Research* 77 (1), 81-112.
17. Hudson, R., and Walmsley, J. (2005). "The English Patient: English Grammar and Teaching in the Twentieth Century." *Journal of Linguistics* 41 (3): 593-622.

18. Jeurisson, M. (2012). "'Perhaps I Didn't Really Have As Good a Knowledge As I Thought I Had.' What Do Primary School Teachers Know and Believe About Grammar and Grammar Teaching?" *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy* 35 (3): 301-316.
19. Keen. J. (1997). "Grammar, Metalanguage and Writing Development." *Teacher Development* 1 (3), 431-445.
20. Lee, I. (2013). "Research into Practice: Written Corrective Feedback." *Language Teaching*, 46 (2): 108-119.
21. Lefstein, A. (2009). "Rhetorical Grammar and the Grammar of Schooling: Teaching 'Powerful Verbs' in the English National Literacy Strategy." *Linguistics and Education* 20 (4): 378-400.
22. Marzal, A. (17 December 2012). "'Back-to-basics' grammar tests for 11-year-olds revealed." *The Daily Telegraph*, 17 December. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/9749862/Back-to-basics-grammar-tests-for-11-year-olds-revealed.html
23. Matsumura, L. C., Patthey-Chavez, G. G., Valdés, R., and Garnier, H. (2002). "Teacher Feedback, Writing Assignment Quality, and Third-Grade Students' Revision in Lower- and Higher-Achieving Urban Schools." *The Elementary School Journal* 103 (1), 3-25.
24. McMartin-Miller, C. (2013). "How much feedback is enough?: Instructor practices and student attitudes toward error treatment in second language writing." *Assessing Writing* 19: 24-35.
25. Myhill, D., and Jones, S. (2007). "More Than Just Error Correction: Students' Perspectives on Their Revision Processes During Writing." *Written Communication* 24 (4), 323-343.

26. Myhill, D.A., S.M., Lines, H. and Watson, A. (2012). “Re-Thinking Grammar: the Impact of Embedded Grammar Teaching on Students’ Writing and Students’ Metalinguistic Understanding.” *Research Papers in Education* 27 (2), 139-166.
27. Myhill, D. & Jones, S. (2015). “Conceptualizing Metalinguistic Understanding in Writing | Conceptualización de la competencia metalingüística en la escritura.” *Culture and Education* 27 (4), 839-867.
28. Myhill, D. & Newman, R. (2016). “Metatalk: Enabling metalinguistic discussion about writing.” *International Journal of Educational Research* 80, 177–187
29. Myhill, D. and Watson, A. (2014). “The Role of Grammar in the Writing Curriculum: A Review of the Literature.” *Child Language and Teaching Therapy* 30 (1), 41-62.
30. Parr, J. M., and Timperley, H. S. (2010). “Feedback to Writing, Assessment for Teaching and Learning and Student Progress.” *Assessing Writing* 15(2): 68-85.
31. Safford, K. (2015). “Teaching Grammar and Testing Grammar in the English Primary School: The Impact on Teachers and Teaching of the Grammar Element of the Statutory Test in Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar (SPaG) in England.” *Changing English* 23(1), 3-21, DOI: 10.1080/1358684X.2015.1133766
32. Schleppegrell, M. J. (2007). “At Last: The Meaning in Grammar.” *Research in the Teaching of English* 42 (1), 121-128
33. Sommers, N. (1982). “Responding to Student Writing.” *College Composition and Communication* 33: 148-156.
34. Storch, N. (2010). “Critical Feedback on Written Corrective Feedback.” *International Journal of English Studies* 10 (2), 29.
35. Van Lier, L. (1998). “The Relationship between Consciousness, Interaction and Language Learning.” *Language Awareness* 7 (2-3): 128-145.

36. Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). Interaction between learning and development. In *Readings on the Development of Children,* edited by M. Gauvain and M. Cole, 29-35. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

37. Williamson, J., and Hardman, F. (1995). "Time for Refilling the Bath? A Study of Primary Student-Teachers' Grammatical Knowledge". *Language and Education* 9 (2): 117.