The critical conversation about text: Joint construction

Joanne Rossbridge and Kathy Rushton

Leaders who do not act dialogically, but insist on imposing their decisions, do not organize the people – they manipulate them. They do not liberate, nor are they liberated: they oppress.

Paulo Freire (1972)

This quote from Paulo Freire can be considered at many levels of society but in the context of PETAA Paper 196 its application is to the classroom and the potential of purposeful dialogic discourse between teachers and students. This critical conversation sees the teacher in the leadership role with the aim of empowering students through critical conversations about texts impacting upon opportunities far beyond the classroom.

In this Paper we consider theory related to learning and pedagogy, particularly in regards to the joint construction of knowledge and language and then apply these ideas to practice by considering the design of teaching and learning sequences to scaffold language and knowledge. The focus on joint construction is due to its role in assisting students in the shift from spoken to written language. In doing so, we draw upon the teaching and learning curriculum cycle as a framework for planning to support students to engage in critical conversation around texts.

Before exemplifying classroom practice and in particular joint construction, consideration needs to be given to what teachers need to know in order to be able to design effective learning sequences and foster critical conversations. The key tools for teachers include knowledge about language and support for the learner.
Teacher knowledge is critical when it comes to being able to assist students in responding to and composing various modes of language. An understanding of a functional model of language and genre theory (Halliday, 1985; Derewianka & Jones, 2011) ensures teachers are equipped to support students with language choices appropriate for the audience and purpose of texts being composed across curriculum contexts. Conversations about language can be influenced by discussing how the subject matter (field) will be represented in texts; which choices best reflect the relationship between the composer and audience (tenor); and the organisation of features across texts to reflect written-like discourse when composing texts (mode).

The mode continuum (Martin, 1985) is useful as the sequencing of activities can be designed in order to gradually develop oral language while moving towards a more written-like mode. This results in greater lexical density, which is a key feature of written texts (Halliday, 1989). For example, in oral texts it may be adequate to name Participants (people, places or things) with personal pronouns however in written texts, although pronouns will be used for cohesive reasons, the naming of Participants becomes more critical in a context where the audience is not present and description and evaluation become more critical. As shown in Figure 2 the spoken-like form: ‘So when the British came they thought the Aboriginal people might fight with them.’ is very different from this more written-like form in which the ‘Aboriginal people’ are no longer actors who ‘might fight with them’. The language used relegates the Aboriginal people as marginal to the activity of the British the main actors: ‘On arrival the British believed violence may occur with Aboriginal people.’

In order to make changes in language choice explicit and relevant to the writing context, a shared metalanguage (language to describe language) needs to be developed and gradually built up by the teacher and students. For instance, in the example in Figure 2 the conversation might focus on the role of nominalisation when changing verbs into nouns and their placement at the front of the clause in Theme position eg, ‘came – on arrival’ and adjusting the choice of sensing verbs, ‘thought – believed’. This use of metalanguage is very powerful in helping students to understand the differences between ‘spoken-like’ and ‘written-like’ language. As indicated by Humphrey, Droga and Feez (2012), the talk about language

### Key principles of a critical conversation

#### Knowledge about language

In classrooms where talk is valued and fostered as a key learning tool, conversation becomes key to learning and language development. With opportunities for talk being abundant (Gibbons, 2002) a teacher can use many strategies including their own in-depth knowledge about language to assist students to not only draw on their oral language but also move to the educationally valued written form.

### FIGURE 1 • Choices for developing critical conversations

![Diagram showing choices for developing critical conversations]

- **Field/Subject**
- **Tenor /Audience**
- **Mode/Purpose**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What’s it about?</th>
<th>How does it make you feel?</th>
<th>How was it done?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Teacher knowledge is critical when it comes to being able to assist students in responding to and composing various modes of language. An understanding of a functional model of language and genre theory (Halliday, 1985; Derewianka & Jones, 2011) ensures teachers are equipped to support students with language choices appropriate for the audience and purpose of texts being composed across curriculum contexts. Conversations about language can be influenced by discussing how the subject matter (field) will be represented in texts; which choices best reflect the relationship between the composer and audience (tenor); and the organisation of features across texts to reflect written-like discourse when composing texts (mode).
as a system results in a ‘toolkit’, which can be shared between student and teacher be it through the explicit use of terminology about language or the use of such knowledge to devise guiding questions to support language choices.

In addition to understanding the features of targeted texts, questioning techniques can also assist in language development. As explained by Dufficy (2005), a shift from the common ‘Initiation, Response, Feedback’ patterns to the use of a more conversational style and open questions can result in more expanded utterances which is a shift along the mode continuum towards more ‘written-like language in the oral mode’. Such questioning strategies can result in what is commonly referred to as substantive communication.

Support for the learner

Successful learners need to take risks, play with language and develop a metalanguage to discuss what works and why. Teachers need to both engage and support students in the classroom to motivate them. Freebody, Maton & Martin (2008, p. 197) state, in reference to quality teaching that ‘the generic metaphors of “deep understanding”, “higher-order thinking”, and “personal constructions of knowledge” now need to be translated into more specific, actionable ways of talking about knowledge’. These aspects of quality teaching can be exemplified during guided writing /joint construction, as oral language is the medium through which learning takes place.

It is the teacher who has the most important role in preparing for and leading the joint construction because it is the teacher who has the overview of the lessons that lead up to and follow on from it. This preparation will include the careful selection of texts for modelled reading which will help to develop students’ knowledge of field, tenor and mode not just the field or subject matter of the text but also the audience, purpose and language choices appropriate to the genre. Prior to the joint construction students should be supported to build knowledge about the field or subject matter of the text and also about the tenor and mode. The preparation before writing is key to success in writing and must include all three ways of looking at a text.

The texts selected for modelled reading should be building students’ knowledge at all levels of text, from word, group and sentence to paragraph and whole text (Derewianka, 2011, p.11). This will support the writing of a text of the same or similar genre. In this way the teacher is able to provide scaffolding for students at both the macro and micro levels.
As well as the cognitive aspects of the writing process the teacher needs to address the organisation of time and resources, as the jointly constructed text needs to be developed over several sessions especially when students start to develop longer texts. The joint construction of a single text may take many sessions, as the teacher leads the class through stages or aspects of the text, focusing on particular choices at different stages or levels of text. At all stages, however, language choices will be the main focus and the text will need to be kept for a later session for editing and publishing or as a starting point when constructing longer texts.

A joint construction is not modelling. The teacher is the expert but the focus is on handing control over to the students at the site of the Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1986). If you watch ballroom dancing the dancers are modelling the dances for you but it is only when you dance with an expert that you are participating in the way students should in a joint construction. They should take to the floor! The students should be actively engaged in composing by sharing their ideas, words and the keyboard or pen. The teacher’s role is to support the composition of the text through the use of strategies which focus the students’ attention on their language choices when expressing their ideas. While the focus of the joint construction is on composing a written text it is spoken language which is central to the activity and in this scaffolded process, as Hammond (2001, p. 4) explains, the goal is to provide a high level of both challenge and support. As shown in Figure 3, the student is then enabled to use their own understandings about the subject and the text, which is being composed as both comments and questions are encouraged. Support can be provided by both fellow students and the teacher at word level by developing vocabulary through paraphrasing and recasting; providing synonyms while the students compose the text eg:

**Teacher:** What do you notice about these texts?
**Student:** They are different.
**Teacher:** Yes, I wonder how they differ …

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**FIGURE 3 ● Elements for supporting students in joint construction**

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The teacher can also think aloud/make statements to provide a commentary on the audience, purpose, structure and language choices being made during the process of composition as well as on the subject matter of the text.

During joint construction the learner is in a situation where they can call on all their own knowledge and understanding without, individually carrying the technical burdens of composition. The production of the text is shared so it is not just the ideas, but also the expression of those ideas, which is shared. Shared decisions are developed about punctuation, spelling and all other choices from word to group, clause pattern and sentence structure, paragraph and text structure and whether it is typewritten or handwritten. The joint construction provides the individual learner with maximum support in a guided experience that supports their own writing.

The Teaching and Learning cycle

The Teaching and Learning cycle (sometimes referred to as the Curriculum cycle) is used as a tool for planning and teaching students through critical conversations. It shows that there are many steps involved in deconstructing texts before moving into joint construction.
The genre-based pedagogy known as the Teaching Learning Cycle was originally developed by Sydney School genre theorists working with primary and secondary teachers in the Metropolitan East Region of Sydney’s disadvantaged Schools Program [DSP] (Callaghan & Rothery, 1988; Derewianka, 1990) and adapted for adult second language learners by TESOL teachers in the NSW Adult Migrant Education Program [AMEP] (Feez, 1998).

(Humphrey & Macnaught, 2011, p. 99)

Writing historical narratives

A relevant curriculum context is required when planning for critical conversations in jointly constructing a text. The subject area of History has been selected to demonstrate the use of the teaching and learning cycle with a focus on joint construction. Students involved in the historical inquiry process are required to develop understandings of perspectives. The Australian Curriculum: History suggests that students should be involved in both examining a range of sources and the construction of a range of texts including those that develop an historical perspective and interpretation.

For example:

The nature of contact between Aboriginal people and/or Torres Strait Islanders and others, for example, the Macassans and the Europeans, and the effects of these interactions on, for example families and the environment (ACHHK080).

Experiences of Australian democracy and citizenship, including the status and rights of Aboriginal people and/or Torres Strait Islanders, migrants, women, and children (ACHHK124).

(ACARA, 2014)

This context provides opportunities for using historical literature in which language is constructed from various perspectives requiring deconstruction and reconstruction for the interpretation of perspectives. Literature is a powerful tool for developing the critical conversation about historical concepts and can be used to compare perspectives on events. The following examples show how the critical conversation can be developed from existing language and background knowledge. In a middle years classroom, as students engage with a variety of texts, there is a development towards a more specialised and critical understanding of the construction of historical texts and their role in society.

Building the field

The texts ‘My Country’ by Dorothea Mackellar and ‘Little Murri be a Murri before an Australian’ by Lionel Fogarty are written in different eras by very different Australians. The two poems could be used to build the field and show how texts can convey different perspectives often due to the writer’s context. Dorothea Mackellar was born in Australia and wrote her famous poem before the First World War, before Federation and Gallipoli. In her poem she defines herself as an Australian first rather than identifying with her cultural and ethnic roots or the country from which they grew. The second poem is by a contemporary Aboriginal poet, Lionel Fogarty, whose culture, ethnicity and language are all tied to his country. This poem was written before Mabo and Wik when legally Australia had been regarded as ‘terra nullis’ or empty land. Read together these poems vividly present two perspectives of colonisation and what it has meant for both Aboriginal and non Aboriginal Australians. They also provide a great focal point for field building activities in which groups of students could develop a Readers Theatre or a play or participate in a drama activity to explore the feelings and emotions which inform their perspectives.

Strategies such as floorstorming and ‘I see, I think, I wonder’ (Visible Thinking, 2014) are also useful for building the field and activating prior knowledge whilst moving along the mode continuum. In Figure 5 students were asked to see, think and wonder when responding to a group of images related to first contact. Students were contributing single words and not until the final two responses; ‘foreign men’ and ‘Aboriginals’ were human participants noticed. When moving to ‘I think …’ the responses became more extended and showed a greater knowledge and more detailed language related to the topic. When considering ‘I wonder’, questions began to be posed. Students were able to add to each other’s ideas, and the use of the prompts assisted students in thinking aloud and posing their own questions about the topic.
By reading a range of texts during modelled reading many opportunities are created for building the field and exploring differing perspectives surrounding an historical event such as first contact.

Other texts for exploring perspectives on an historical event such as first contact:
- *Australians All* by Nadia Wheatley (2013)
- *My Place* website (2011)
- *David Collin’s Journal* (1798)
- *Surgeon John White’s Journal* (1797)

**Text deconstruction – vocabulary development**

Through critical conversations about texts the field continues to be developed while simultaneously developing a *metalanguage for questioning* language choices in context. A teacher can guide students to compare the language choices for instance, of the authors of these two poems. This will help students develop an understanding of the authors’ perspectives based on their language and vocabulary choices.
| **My Country**  
Dorothea Mackellar c.1908 | **Little Murri be a Murri before an Australian**  
Lionel Fogarty 1990 |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| The wide brown land for me  
sunburnt; ragged; droughts;  
flooding rains;  
beauty; terror; ring-barked forest  
She pays us back threefold; wilful; lavish; brown country | I’m proud to be an aborigine  
I’m the voice of the mission years  
a migglou mate who is proud to be an Australian  
never let dem buy your spirit; getting rich off  
never let dem sell your sensitive land |

There is much to discuss here and the comparison between the language choices from these two poems will produce a rich discussion about the purpose and the audience. This will also help students to understand that the field may be the same but that the tenor is very different. In ‘My Country’ (Mackellar, 1908) there is a defence of the nation built on a comparison with another country’ for example: ‘my love is otherwise...’, ‘The wide brown land for me’. Lionel Fogarty, however, defines ‘our’ country as an abstraction: a teacher or concept that can be held in the mind: ‘you little Murri boy holds my and our country in your brain; school is in travelling your country’. As the authors are addressing two different audiences in different eras, the differences in tenor are clearly demonstrated by the choices at word level as Lionel Fogarty also uses words from his own Aboriginal language such as migglou and Murri and directly addresses a young person from his community while Dorothea Mackellar is addressing an audience who do not call Australia home. The mode or how the text is constructed is loosely the same as both texts are poems but again comparison will highlight differences which will help to elaborate the perspectives of the authors. For instance a comparison of the choice of pronouns shows clearly the perspectives of the authors, who they each think owns the land and what the land itself means to each of them.

### Text deconstruction – participants and perspectives

Perspectives are often realised in the way Participants are referred to within the text. In this extract from Nadia Wheatley’s Australians All we can see how the naming of Participants through carefully selected noun groups not only communicates the field but also a perspective in constructing the tenor of the text. When investigating the topic of first contact the understanding of participants involved is critical to being able to discuss perspectives and points of view.

**These aliens** obviously didn’t have the slightest clue about the Law, or the right way to behave.  

**Some of the men** threw their spears, to let the trespassers know they were not welcome. On the third morning, one of the redcoats made fire come out of a stick.  

**There was nothing to be done but wait patiently for the ghosts to go back into the clouds, as those other ones had done. Obviously they wouldn’t stay here. This wasn’t their country.**

Wheatley, 2013, p. 55

In contrast a ‘factual text’ may contain quite different language choices to name and describe Participants. The choice of ‘the visitors’, ‘the English’ and ‘the new settlers’ is quite different to ‘the trespassers’ and ‘these aliens’ due to the perspective in interpreting historical events.
Conflict between the Indigenous people and the English continued as the visitors took over more and more land for farming and settlements. The Indigenous people’s strong connection with the land was being disrespected as the English used it for their own needs. Many Indigenous people were killed by the new settlers and many more were forced off their ancestral land and became displaced. (Skwirk Online, 2005)

Students can use metalanguage to discuss the choices of writers of historical literature as they later jointly and independently discuss their own choices when writing.

The following questions can be discussed with students when deconstructing texts:

- How are the groups of people named?
- Which groups of people aren’t named?
- How do we know the perspective or ‘voice’ of the writer?
- What is the effect on the audience?
- How does this differ to other texts?
- What is the impact on our interpretation of historical events?

**Joint construction**

The My Place website contains numerous videos from a range of historical periods in which varying perspectives can be explored and interpreted. To plan for writing students could view the video First Contact Episode 24 1788: Dan from My Place. After a first viewing students could identify who was taking part in the events and how they are named as well as the actions they undertake.

Just prior to jointly constructing a text, to support students in understanding perspective as well as develop ideas through oral language the drama activity, ‘Conscience Alley’, (Drama Resource, 2014) could be played. In the activity, the class forms two lines facing each other and one student takes the role of the protagonist walking between the lines to receive advice on the situation.

Students could then select a perspective of one of the main characters, be it Waruwi’s or Dan’s. When re-watching the video students could use the dialogue in the audio to record descriptive noun groups used to name and describe. The teachers needs to point out that without the support of image and sound, our written language will need to work harder in order to not only capture the events but also communicate a particular perspective. This means more descriptive noun groups will need to be developed as language choices move along the mode continuum from oral to written text.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Audio from video</th>
<th>Perspective to convey through writing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dan’s perspective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘the British’</td>
<td>The Governor men Dan</td>
<td>Sir Governor ignorant men cheering marines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘the dog’</td>
<td>a native dog fine looking animal a hunting dog a dog</td>
<td>Lapa Waruwi’s dog victim captive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Waruwi / the Indigenous people’</td>
<td>someone a native the natives Waruwi</td>
<td>my new friend the honest native girl my disappointed and betrayed friend</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
After this preparation for writing the teacher and students jointly construct a narrative. In the extract below the teacher and students chose to write in the third person from Dan’s perspective.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jointly constructed text</th>
<th>Extracts of dialogue between teacher and students</th>
<th>Knowledge about language and support for the students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>As Dan and another marine set off to capture Waruwi’s dog they discussed that the natives may not own things, Dan didn’t agree with this. When he headed down a track on his own he saw Waruwi and warned her that the ignorant marines were coming to steal Lapa.</td>
<td>T: they set off to … S: to take, no capture T: What were they discussing? What did Dan think about this? S: That natives weren’t important that they may not own things. T: I wonder what Dan thought about this. S: He thought it was stupid. He didn’t agree. T: How would Dan be perceiving the marines now? Let’s get inside his head. S: the ignorant marines T: Great noun group to show Dan’s perspective T: she didn’t understand so she was … S: mmm … trustworthy T: and innocent S: she didn’t understand T: what Dan was … S: signalling T: OK you can take over (Hands pen to student) S: Dan was signalling T: Great vocab choice T: So this is another big noun group to describe them (the marines) T: The cheering members of the party … what did we say S: were approaching T: approaching who? S: Dan T: who? If we add who we’ll end up describing Dan more through an extended noun group S: who was torn about what to do.</td>
<td>Recasting to develop vocabulary Guiding questions to develop elaboration and perspective Think aloud to develop elaboration and perspective Student response followed by open question to convey perspective Development of noun groups and shared metalanguage from modelled reading experiences Teacher paraphrasing to develop vocabulary Student contributions develop vocabulary Student composes through sharing the pen Shared metalanguage and questioning to develop extended noun groups to elaborate and convey perspective</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
During the joint construction the teacher may use several strategies from think alouds/statements to guiding questions, paraphrasing and recasting to support students in making choices to construct the narrative and also determine language choices. These choices construct the field and also the tenor in conveying a particular perspective to the reader. The teacher and students negotiate using a shared metalanguage to compose a text. This shifts the text from the oral to written mode through choices in vocabulary and in particular the naming of Participants through noun groups. It should be noted that the joint construction through critical conversation about text was very much dependent on the prior teaching during field building and modeling and deconstruction of related texts. To continue the critical conversation after writing students can reflect on the choice of language used in the joint construction and how the choices convey particular perspectives to the reader.

Visit the PETAA website (www.petaa.edu.au/teachingresources/petaa-papers/pp-196) to view a video demonstrating critical conversation between a teacher and a group of students to jointly construct a text.

Independent construction

Independent construction should be seen as independent from the teacher not as individual construction. There is no need to force young students to create their own texts individually until they are ready. Working together produces many benefits especially for students who strive for perfection or fear failure. A supportive group can be very beneficial to young learners and those benefits will be demonstrated by young writers keen to express themselves rather than be demoralised by their perceived inabilities in spelling, punctuation or handwriting and not lost for words as the teacher and their fellow students will have supplied them.

Conclusion

Critical conversations as students move from spoken-like to more written-like texts need to be carefully considered and planned. The sequence described earlier is an example of macro-level scaffolding due to the use of the Teaching and Learning Cycle, however, this sequence could not have been developed without thorough teacher knowledge about language as well as understanding of how to support student learning through choices based on language development. By focusing on the development of critical conversations the emphasis is placed on language rather than just the choice of teaching strategies.

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ABOUT PETAA

The Primary English Teaching Association Australia (PETAA), founded in 1972, is a national professional association supporting primary school educators in the teaching and learning of English and literacies across the curriculum. For information on how to join and to view professional learning resources, visit the PETAA website.

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WEBSITES


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