

Chapter 6

Communication, Culture, and Conceptual Learning: Task design in the English classroom. Ian Thompson

Introduction

In English speaking countries, the pedagogy of English teaching, and related questions of what English is as a subject and what content English teachers should be teaching, have long been contested areas of school curriculums. English teachers can often feel under siege as they battle with the twin demands of high-stakes testing and ideologically driven political interference. Standards of grammar usage, spelling accuracy, the ability to write an extended text, the acquisition of reading skills: these are all highly politicised issues as likely to be debated on the floor of the House of Commons or on television chat shows as they are in the school staffroom. When evidence is cited as justification for literacy policy reform from educational research, as in the case of the requirement for all UK state primary schools to teach reading acquisition through systematic synthetic phonics, the contested nature of this research knowledge is often brushed aside.

Perhaps as a result of this scrutiny, English, as a secondary or high school subject, can appear to outsiders to have a split personality. On the one hand, English or literacy skills are viewed as instrumental to all curriculum understanding and attainment; on the other, English can be parodied as a soft subject concerned with aesthetics and feelings far removed from the scientific concepts that students have to understand in order to master the school curriculum. Aspects of English, through the medium of literacy across the curriculum, are seen as the

responsibility of all teachers in schools; yet when school literacy standards are deemed inadequate it is the English teachers who usually get the blame. At the heart of this critique is the dichotomy between the view of literacy as a skills-based activity and literacy as a tool for making meaning of the world. The separation between product and process is critiqued in this chapter as a false one. Literacy is best viewed as social and cultural practices rather than an exercise in technical skills or competencies. At the same time, English as a subject is also about the creation and understanding of language and literary processes and products. What linguistic approaches (e.g. Halliday 1993), sociocultural or activity theory approaches (e.g. Bazerman 2012; Ellis 2007; Mercer 1995; Prior 1998), and multimodal semiotic approaches (e.g. Kress et al, 2005) to English education have in common is an understanding that English is concerned with meaning making within social and cultural environments and about students' ways of knowing and acting on the world around them. This is true about both English pedagogy and the English or literacy curriculum.

One of the challenges facing the English subject teacher educator is how to help prospective English teachers to understand the challenges that their students face in the literacy curriculum. Let me make an obvious generalisation to make the point. Prospective secondary school English teachers are articulate speakers, expert writers, avid readers, and people who like working with young people. Often they are extroverts; always they are social beings. An adolescent may be all of these things; more likely they will be some but not others. Unlike the academically successful English teacher, they may have experienced frustrations and failures within the English classroom. English teachers need to understand the diverse cultural worlds of their students and to develop pedagogical skills if they are to involve or re-engage these students in making meaning of the complex and contradictory cultural worlds of English. But they need what Schwab (1978) describes as substantive knowledge (key concepts) and

syntactic knowledge (ways of knowing and representing) of the many 'subjects' of English: a variety of literary forms and narrative structures; linguistics; media, film, and cultural studies. Designing tasks that engage adolescents with the subjects of English involves careful planning.

So why do the term 'task design' occur so rarely in the literature relating to the English classroom? This, I suspect, has much to do with the reluctance of many English teachers and some researchers of English teaching to be placed within a form of constructivist paradigm that appears to emphasise structure over creativity. So, for example, a very good recent book on creativity and learning ends with a warning against 'control, conformity, standardisation and compliance, so offering a model of sharing values and methods imposed from above' (McCallum 2012: 150). Whilst I would share McCallum's concerns with imposition from above and the need to foster creativity, the implication is that teachers too can stifle the transformative aspects learning through a structured approach to lesson design. Yet English teachers do design tasks that involve structuring students' engagement with aspects of language and literature and at the same time celebrate diversity and creativity. The planning of schemes or units of work involves designing tasks that both draw on students' current and developing understandings of everyday concepts such as love and loss and also introduces new concepts such as literary criticism or linguistic analysis.

I have chosen the title 'Communication, Culture, and Conceptual Learning' in order to focus on what I believe to be the central task design question for English teachers: how do students acquire the conceptual understandings that allow them to engage with and act on the cultures of literate practices? Few would argue with the view that English as a subject is concerned

with the process of communication and of understanding language use in a wide variety of literary and linguistic forms. Not many would quibble with the association with the word 'culture' with the study of English, although definitions of what constitutes a culture are highly contested. In using the term 'culture' here I refer not only to the cultural understandings embedded within literate practices but also to the cultural and historical practices that shape the production, reception, and understanding of literary and non-fiction texts. The phrase 'conceptual learning' is often associated with Jerome Bruner's stress on the learner's active construction of meaning through the development of concepts based on existing knowledge. However, my reference to conceptual learning in this chapter refers to Vygotskian notions of concept development with specific reference to the secondary school student. Conceptual learning in the English classroom involves a task design focus on both the theories and practices of communicative activity: our learners need to know both why and how texts are produced or read and to be able to participate in the cultural worlds of the English classroom. As Bruner argues:

Although meanings are 'in the mind,' they have their origins and significance in the culture in which they are created....It is culture that provides the tools for organising and understanding our worlds in communicable ways. (Bruner 1996:3)

Barnes' (1976) warning that orthodox curriculum theory analyses from the teacher's objectives rather than the learners' understandings and their communicative actions is apposite for English teaching. This chapter argues that task design in the English classroom often focuses on the teacher's objectives for task completion produced under the pressure of performativity (assessing what the teacher teaches and the outputs their students produce)

rather than developmental demand for learners. That is not to say that objectives are not important, but rather that the objectives or goals of the task design must be focussed on the learning of the students rather than curriculum delivery. The challenge for English teachers and teacher educators lies in designing demanding classroom communicative tasks that create the conditions for learning to occur through social and cultural interaction.

A Vygotskian Conception of English Teaching

Burgess argues that Vygotskian theory, alongside linguistics and critical theory, can make a crucial contribution to the development of English teaching.

Where Vygotskian theory focuses attention is on the transformation of existing psychological functions as new resources from the culture are internalised and appropriated. For this there must be both the interaction of the child with culture as well as culture with the child. (Burgess 2007: 25)

Not only then does a Vygotskian conception of task design require the construction of classroom tasks and related activities that require students' active engagement with culture, but the students must also actively respond to their interpretation and participation in that culture. The Vygotskian theoretical focus on development through learning requires the English teacher to attend to both the work that students do as they tackle literacy tasks as cultural and communicative activities through social interaction, and also on the students' internalisation and appropriation of the psychological tools required to accomplish the activities that are embedded within the design of the curriculum task.

Vygotsky argues that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of mind:

Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological). This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals. (Vygotsky 1978:57)

Vygotsky's methodological approach of assessing potential development departs from the conventional focusing on individual performance towards a focus on assisted process. The central questions for Vygotsky are what are children doing and how do they try to satisfy task demands? Vygotsky argues that human consciousness is achieved by the internalisation of shared social behaviour. Unlike the predominant model of children's learning that sees the function of learning as acquisition of knowledge, Vygotsky's (1987) theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) stresses the importance of the educative process rather than the final outcome. The ZPD is the difference between existing and potential levels of development revealed through an analysis of how far a student is able to master a task by themselves or with help from a more knowledgeable other such as a teacher or more capable peer. As Edwards (this volume) and Chaiklin (2003) argue, Vygotsky's concept of the ZPD defines the potential development of a child rather than an abstract metaphor for learning. For Vygotsky, real learning is that which is in advance of development and is mediated through interactions with other people and through the social and cultural acquisition of sign systems. The ZPD indicates both the presence of maturing psychological functions and the possibility of meaningful interventions that stimulate conceptual development. This process of

conceptual development involves co-operation and collaboration between the teacher and the learner, or between learners at different levels of development. For Vygotsky, collaboration and co-operation are 'crucial features of effective teaching' (Daniels 2007:311). Vygotsky (1987) argues that learning takes place when the learning task is set at a level in advance of the student's current mental level of development. This has task design implications for the classroom teacher concerning the relationship between instruction and pupil development and the classroom environment. As Jan Derry (2008) points out:

[a] Vygotskian approach doesn't depend simply on individuals being placed in the required environment where they discover meaning for themselves. The learning environment must be designed and cannot rely on the spontaneous response to an environment which is not constructed according to, or involves, some clearly worked out conceptual framework. For Vygotsky concepts depend for their meaning on the system of judgements (inferences) within which they are disclosed. (Derry 2008: 60-61)

Vygotsky argues that school learning introduces something fundamentally new into students' development. By giving students specific tasks of understanding scientific concepts within a designed environment, school learning introduces new concepts that stimulate their psychological development. It is within the dialectical interplay between the students' grasp of everyday spontaneous concepts and the development of their scientific conceptual understanding that learning leads development.

As Burgess points out, concepts relating to the study of English are central to: students' use of critical literacy; the ability to compare texts; the reading of a novel from another period or culture; or when writing in different genres: 'English, no less than other curriculum areas, works with students' concepts and helps to form them (Burgess 2007: 31).' The teacher's role is to design tasks and learning environments that challenge students and enable them to acquire and internalise the tools necessary for them to develop independence through conceptual learning. The key to this development is collaborative or joint activity that engages students in mediated activity. Brice-Heath reminds us the importance of English teacher expertise in mediating their students' understanding:

To add breadth and depth to the linguistic repertoires of the young, teachers need to imagine and enable more and more valid roles through which young people gain meaningful practice with styles, genres and types of language. Brice-Heath 2007: 205.

For this practice to be meaningful, Brice-Heath argues, then English teachers have to intervene as expert mediators in their students' learning.

The Cultural Historical Context of English as a Subject

In order to understand the development of task design in English, it is helpful to briefly trace the historical and cultural contexts of the inception and development of English as a subject. English teaching has a long history of ideological debate in Britain. In historical terms, English as an academic and university subject is a relatively new discipline that only came into existence in the nineteenth century. Yet by the 1930s in Britain and in other English speaking countries under the influence of the Cambridge academic F.R. Leavis, the subject of

English claimed an unparalleled position as a cultural arbiter of both aesthetic worth and intellectual value. The Board of Education report of 1921, known as the Newbolt Report, identified three areas for the teaching of English in schools: communication, the scientific study of language, and the celebration of an English cultural and literary tradition.

But this was a very particular form of culture: the cultural assumptions of the British elite classes reasserting their moral values after the horrors of the First World War. In contrast to Raymond Williams' (1977) notion of culture as growth, this was a culture of class value and of class belonging. Eagleton (1983) has argued persuasively that literary study was successfully appropriated by an academic elite. Eagleton argues that the victory and impact of Leavis and his followers was far reaching and complete. Above all, English was seen as a subject of literature and the critical tool of analysis was literary theory. English teachers trained in the decades after Leavis were schooled in the tradition of the civilising and enriching nature of English. Shakespeare's insights into the fatal character flaws in his tragic heroes are still deemed universal and essential reading for all adolescents (watching is more optional apparently).

However, Leavis' rejection of popular culture was fundamentally elitist and in the 1960s elements of educational research began to reject the civilising role of English and take up the view of English as personal empowerment through personal growth. This key concept of personal growth in English teaching came largely from the ideas in John Dixon's *Growth Through English* (1967). Dixon explicitly questioned the categories for writing identified by the 1921 Board of Education as well as the heritage model of Leavis:

The skills model is only indirectly aware of such a purpose: its ideal pupils might well be copy-typists. And that is ironical, since the insistence on correct spelling, etc., is avowedly in the interests of better communication, of unimpeded sharing! A heritage model, with its stress on adult literature, turns language into a one-way process: pupils are readers, receivers of the master's voice. How, we may ask, do these private activities of writing and reading relate to the stream of public interaction through language in which we are all involved every day, teachers as much as pupils? The heritage model offers no help in answering, because it neglects the most fundamental aim of language-to promote interaction between people. (Dixon, 1967, p.6)

The central focus in this passage is on learning as an interactive or dialogic process and language is seen as central to that process. The English classroom proposed by Dixon is one both of interaction and growth through the creation of shared experience. But there is also a form of progressive liberal idealism that came to permeate much of the child centred and student directed learning that dominated many English classrooms in the 1970s and early 80s. For example, the teacher-less process writing workshops (see Murray 1972; Graves 1994) argued against composition theories that try to structure writing and proposed that 'we should teach unfinished writing, and glory in its unfinishedness' (Murray, 1972, p.12). Graves' approach also focussed attention away from the finished product of writing and onto the processes young pupils need to go through as writers. Process writing theories were particularly influential in UK primary schools before the introduction of the National Literary Strategy. However, Applebee (1986), in a critique of the original concepts of process writing,

argues that many projects failed because of an inadequate understanding of what writers do when they write for specific purposes. He goes on to advocate instructional support based on the idea that:

Learning is a process of gradual internalisation of routines and procedures available to the learner from the social and cultural context in which the learning takes place. (Applebee, 1986, p.108)

From the 1970s to the present there has existed a tension between attempts to reshape the teaching of English through a return to so-called basics and traditional methods of skill based approaches, whilst at the same time a series of government-commissioned reports have referred back to the social and language-based nature of English teaching. For example, the key message of the DES publication *A Language for Life*, also known as The Bullock Report, was that competence in language use comes through using language for a purpose rather than decontextualised exercises. The Bullock Report changed the three categories of Newbolt (1921) to English as skills, English as social change and English for growth (following Dixon). The Bullock Committee was set up in response to a series of Black papers which claimed a decline in standards of literacy sufficient to damage the national economy. The Bullock Report in fact found no evidence of a decline in literacy standards and advocated the teaching of language across the curriculum, greater focus on oracy, and less prescription in areas such as grammar and spelling.

The Kingman Report (DES and WO, 1988) built on the ideas of Bullock and put forward the concept of 'Knowledge about Language' (KAL). The Kingman report recognised the

diversity of uses for English and that language is socially situated. The DES publication *Report of the English Working Party 5-16* (1989) that became known as The Cox Report expanded the categories for English that Bullock identified to five areas: personal growth, cultural heritage, adult needs, cultural analysis and cross curricular views (DES, 1989). Cox was one of the members of the Kingman Committee and he highlighted the central importance of speaking and listening. Like the Bullock Report, the Cox Report was initially attacked by the conservative press for a perceived lack of focus on basic skills.

The Language in the National Curriculum (LINC) training project that followed the Cox report was due to be published by HMSO in 1991 but was withdrawn by ministerial order in a move widely seen as political censorship. The approach of LINC to language owed much to the functional-systemic linguistics theorists Halliday and Hasan (e.g. 1989). Genre theory (e.g. Cope and Kalantzis) which lays stress on students being explicitly taught the conventions of text genres was also influenced by the systemic functional model outline by Halliday and Hasan (1989) which draws explicit links between the functions of language, what language is for, and the ways we make lexical and grammatical choices to achieve this.

The genre approach to teaching writing claims to empower disadvantaged groups by revealing the power structures involved in adult writing. Hodge and Kress (1988) categorise the ideological nature of genres as 'typical forms of texts which link kinds of producer, consumer, topic, medium, manner and occasion' and argue that these genres 'control the behaviour of producers of such texts, and the expectations of potential consumers' (Hodge and Kress 1988, p.7). Although teaching in this theory focuses on the language features or conventions of texts in each genre, the genres themselves are viewed as social processes. For example, Kress defines a genre as 'a kind of text that derives its form from the structure of a

(frequently repeated) social occasion, with its characteristic participants and their purposes' (Kress, 1988, p.183). Myhill (2001) argues that children who lack prior knowledge of the conventions of genre types are significantly disadvantaged in the school curriculum. Cope and Kalantzis outline the practical implications for teachers using a genre approach:

A genre approach to literacy teaching involves being explicit about the way language works to make meaning. It means engaging students in the role of apprentice with the teacher in the role of expert on language system and function. It means an emphasis on content, on structure and on sequence in the steps that a learner goes through to become literate in a formal educational setting. (Cope and Kalantzis, 1993, p.1)

It should be pointed out that North American genre theorists (Freedman and Medway, 1994; Swales, 1990) view genres as more fluid than in this model and consequently criticised process writing teaching in Australia and the UK as being static and prescriptive. Likewise, Marshall hints at a 'potentially mechanistic, fact-orientated strain in genre studies' that suggest the teacher holds the knowledge that the pupil needs to learn (Marshall 2006 : 13). In fact genres in the North American model of genre theory are not simple sets of definable text conventions but specific literacy practices that act in themselves as mediators of activity (see Bazerman 1994; Russell, 1997).

However, the stress in systemic functional linguistics on the dynamic and evolving nature of language of is in stark contrast to the incremental attainment definitions that were published in the National Curriculum (NC) that was introduced for England, Wales and Northern Ireland schools in the Education Reform Act of 1988. The NC established the concepts of key

stages, programmes of study, assessment levels and attainment targets alongside the publishing of national league tables. A narrow form of genre theory was embedded in the programmes of study. There has also been an obsessive and recursive focus on grammar in English strategies from both New Labour and the Coalition (Conservative and Liberal) governments of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. This is despite research that demonstrates that the explicit teaching of grammar has either little or no effect on pupils' literacy skills (e.g. Andrews et al: 2006) or that effective grammar for learning teaching has to be contextualised (Myhill et al: 2012).

So how does the cultural historical context of English relate to the setting of tasks? Task design for the followers of the great tradition consisted of setting exploratory questions designed to provoke discussion and analysis of particular identified writers' genius. In extreme cases of new criticism, culture is entirely divorced from history as we are asked to celebrate the timeless and universal quality of a literary text. Yet throughout the discussion of the literature as a civilising and moral force there remains a disconcerting sense of elitism: literary high culture for the educated elite; basic skills for the masses. Task setting under the pressure of the NC and external examinations has meant guiding students through the attainment levels by means of tightly structured three part lessons. These task design assumptions and contradictions are encapsulated in the following statement from the Office for Standards in Education in the UK(Ofsted) in the 2012 document 'Moving English forward: Actions to raise standards in English':

There can be no more important subject than English in the school curriculum.

English is a pre-eminent world language, it is at the heart of our culture and it is the language medium in which most of our pupils think and communicate. Literacy

skills are also crucial to pupils' learning in other subjects across the curriculum.

(Ofsted, 2012)

This is the language of Newbolt revisited: for authority at least, it appears little has changed in the priorities for English teaching.

Of course for teachers, change is an everyday occurrence. Classrooms are increasingly diverse in both cultural and linguistic senses. The production and reception of texts are radically different today from even ten years ago through the impact of new literacy technologies and mediums. Yet efforts to measure what constitutes subject knowledge in English can sometimes result in checklists of teachers' knowledge of subsets of literacy skills. For example, most UK initial teacher training programmes in English conduct a subject audit of knowledge (Ellis 2009). Unsurprisingly, at the start of their training prospective secondary school English teachers with English Literature degrees worry about their understanding of grammar at sentence level whilst linguistic graduates are concerned by their lack of knowledge of key literary texts.

So what knowledge does an English teacher need to teach their subject in a way that develops the learning of their students? As a subject English is concerned with a wide range of interrelated literacy practices: the study of various text genres of literary and non-fiction texts; an understanding of the development of the English language and linguistic structures; cultural representation within literature and the media; practices of written communicative; active reading; speaking and listening.

The high degree of imagination, information gathering, mental framing, and meaning making required for reading and writing suggests that literate processes are constantly adaptive to and constructive of situations, organizing the brain for situated action.

(Bazerman, 2012: 102).

This situated activity of participation in literate processes and practices is not an isolated individual act of cognition as the learning takes place within specific cultural and historical activity settings in which social interaction plays a crucial mediating role. As Derry (2013) argues 'it is necessary to look beyond the individual and to attend to external mediation in the formation of higher mental functions' (p.3).

So what sort of English classroom environments enable learners through mediated activity to engage in social learning as active agents? Pictures of Victorian classrooms show densely packed classrooms arranged in rows facing the authoritarian figure of the knowledgeable teacher. This is the classroom and learning environment lampooned by Dickens in his portrayal of Thomas Gradgrind's exhortations for the teaching of facts. Yet as a teacher educator I have observed English lessons where the students are arranged in rows facing a PowerPoint presentation bearing 'learning objectives' such as 'To learn how Shakespeare uses language to create meaning' or conversely 'To learn how to use a semi-colon.'

Smagorinsky (this volume) follows Newman, Griffin and Cole's (1989) metaphor of the classroom as a construction zone for conceptual development. This view of knowledge as a co-constructed activity is an important link to the Vygotsky's (1987) conception of social

interpersonal learning leading intrapersonal (individual) development. Michael Gove, the current Secretary of State for Education in the UK, holds a very different view of education. In a recent speech, Gove championed knowledge transmission and attacked what he views as progressive educational strategies:

All too often, we've seen an over-emphasis on group work - in practice, children chatting to each other - in the belief that is a more productive way to acquire knowledge than attending to an expert.

Although, as the great Texan President Lyndon B Johnson said, 'you aren't learning anything when you're talking.' (Gove 2012)

This is easy for a politician to say of course, and in many ways a simple argument to refute: talk comprises of an interaction with others and can be a way of restructuring and developing thought. But the challenge in Gove's twin assault on group work and on classroom talk here is a real one. For group work is not productive if it is not designed in a way that focuses the talk on the purpose of the communicative task. Put another way, the group task design has to provide an intervention in the students' learning. In Vygotsky's (1997) terms, if 'nothing changes, then nothing has been taught' (p.104).

Anne Edwards' (this volume) heuristic of the quadrant model for task sequencing is instructive here as collaborative English tasks often start from her definition of quadrant three: open tasks that allow learners to apply key concepts to their understanding of a text through reading or creation of a text through writing. But those key concepts will have been previously introduced by the teacher through a quadrant one sequence of modelling and

examples. The transformational change comes through the students developing the ability to apply their conceptual understanding of literacy to their everyday understandings. In this way, and through interaction with others, the students learn through their experience of engagement with literate practices.

In the two task design examples that follow on writing and reading I develop a Vygotskian understanding of the development of pupils' interactions with language and literature through a task design focus on collaborative learning, interactive teaching, and social communication in the English classroom.

Task Design for Writing

Writing can be viewed as both a social and an individual activity. When we write we do so for an audience: we are, in both the real and metaphorical senses, engaged in a dialogue with others. At the same time, writing can be viewed as the translation of inner speech or an attempt to make thought visible. As a teacher educator, an important starting point for my work with prospective English teachers in the teaching of writing have been two relatively recent books by Peter Smagorinsky, *Teaching English by Principled Practice* (2002) and *Teaching English by Design* (2008), and a much older work that came out of the influential School Councils Research Studies project of the late sixties and early seventies in the UK published under the title *The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18)* (Britton et al., 1975). Britton et al remind us of the central importance of the function of the writing genre and the intended audience of the writing. Smagorinsky in the books cited and in this volume (see

Chapter 10) makes a powerful case for the design and instruction of conceptual units based around: a theme such as conflict; an author or group of authors; a reading strategy; a period such as the Victorian era; a regional theme; a literary period; a literary movement such as romanticism; or a literary genre.

Cognitive theories of writing stress the individual cognitive developmental properties of students learning to write academic texts like accomplished adult writers. Collaborative writing, on the other hand, moves the assessment focus away from the finished product to an emphasis on process. As I have argued elsewhere (eg Thompson 2012a, 2013b), communicative activity plays a mediational role in the co-construction of social and cultural meaning that is involved when pupils write collaboratively. The teacher's focus in the task design of collaborative writing is on the process of composition.

In this section, I focus on the task design and sequence of a collaborative expressive writing task that would form part of a conceptual unit. By setting a collaborative writing task the teacher can create the potential for dialogical activity as students negotiate meaning through their use of the cultural tools required to negotiate a writing task. Of course simply pairing or grouping students of differing ability does not guarantee development. Rather, it is through complex processes of semiotic interaction involved in collaborative activity that pupils develop the psychological tools required to appropriate the cultural significance of language. The scaffolding sequence that I present here is not supposed to be either a blueprint or a straight-jacket. Sensitivity to the nuances of the learning actually going on in the classroom and the ability to change a plan or task sequence accordingly are essential tools for good teaching.

Collaborative writing can take the form of paired or small groups writing a text together. Some tasks lend themselves naturally to pairs writing. For example a dual narrative, where students use different narrative voices to tell a single story from two contrasting perspectives. However, prospective students are also encouraged to organise small groups of three working on expressive pieces of writing such as editorials or blogs where students negotiate the shared production of a text.

Task design for collaborative writing involves attending to the mediating roles and functions of the teacher and peers within 'the in-the moment interpretations of how learners are engaging with classroom tasks and the actions that might assist that engagement (Edwards 2010: 73). I have previously (Thompson 2013) defined categories that describe mediated activity within the classroom:

- Direct instruction from a teacher or more capable peer. Whilst initially didactic the instructive voice can be internalised by the learner as part of their own inner speech.
- Modelling of a behaviour or task by an expert that the learner initially imitates and ultimately internalises;
- Feedback, either oral or written, that offers guidance on performance;
- Questioning to assess or assist performance;
- Reassurance and reinforcement of partially understood concepts;
- Joint exploration of meaning between teacher and learner or between students;
- Peer collaboration involving critical thinking, problem-solving or making decisions;

- Scaffolding of a task, or of part of a task, by the teacher in order to provide a constructive framework for the learner's developing mental processes;
- Redirection through the learning process;
- Conceptual restructuring whereby perception, memory, and action are re-evaluated and re-ordered. The internalisation of this structure becomes part of the learner's inner self-regulating voice. (Adapted from Thompson, 2013: 272)

These various forms of assisted performance are not mutually exclusive and successful mediation may include several of these elements. Some may appear to be more restrictive of students' creativity than others. The important point for considerations of task design for writing here is the relationship between these various forms of assisted performance and learners' mental development over time as their emerging psychological processes develop.

When working with my prospective teachers for task design for students' writing in their classrooms, we begin with a discussion of the function of the forms of writing that their students will write in the English classroom and the intended audience of that writing. In looking at the processes involved in writing, whether linguistic or psychological, Britton et al (1975) reject the traditional rhetorical categories of writing: exposition, argument, description and narration. In reducing writing to these four levels of discourse, they argue, traditional theories of writing focus on the finished products of professional writers. The concern of traditional categorisation is the prescriptive tradition of considering what people should write rather than how they actually do write. In order then to counter the reductive impact of the traditional rhetorical categories Britton et al attempt to devise a different system of categories in order to consider the processes and functions of pieces of writing. This categorisation takes

the form of answers to the following questions considered critical to the process of writing: who is the writing for (audience) and why is it being written (function)? In the case of function, the broad categories identified are for mature writing: transactional (writing to get things done); expressive (revealing thought or feeling); and poetic (writing as an art form). Transactional writing is by far the dominant mode encountered by students in the secondary school curriculum. However, Britton et al assert the primary importance of the expressive function in the development of a child's learning because it builds on 'linguistic resources - the knowledge of words and structures he has built up in speech' (1975: 82). The expressive mode, in terms of development, 'is a kind of matrix from which differentiated forms of mature writing are developed' (ibid: 83).

Much if not all writing is multi-dimensional and deploys various rhetorical and modal elements in composition. For example, a narrative may employ elements of exposition, argument, and description to tell a story. Narrative lends itself to widely different forms of writing: a piece of fiction, a factual report, a scientific account, and so on. To illustrate this point the sequence for collaborative writing begins with a genre rewrite where, for example, a fairy story is retold as a hard boiled thriller or historical romance draws. The story is then retold in the form of a recipe and a newspaper report. These activities require an understanding of genre conventions of language use and narrative structures (Cope and Kalantzis 1993) . The teacher begins by drawing on their students' current knowledge of the 'rules' of a genre type. In the writing task the students are encouraged to both use and break these rules as well as to draw on their individual and collective knowledge. In this way the students' everyday conceptual understanding of genre are challenged by scientific concepts of genre structures and functions.

The next part of the task design follows Britton et al's (1975) three elements or phases of the writing process: conception, incubation and production. The conception stage is the process that leads up to the act of writing. In school this is largely a request from a teacher, but the learner has to select from what they know and think: the ability to recall is critical at this stage. What previous knowledge or experience can students bring to the task? The learners' personal histories are integral to this process.

At the point that writers know what they are going to write, and for what purpose, they move into the incubation phase. In this phase the writers develop ideas and plan the outline of their writing through talk about their text. The structuring of this talk is crucial for this is the point of negotiation (Doyle and Carter 1984) where the teacher has to allow sufficient talk for the students to develop their ideas whilst maintaining their focus on the task demand. The pedagogical task design challenges for teachers here is when to structure talk as a significant other and when to allow the process of incubation to develop through peer group discussion as students' everyday concepts begin to converge with the higher order concept or scientific concepts required. Talk is as the key to this process of incubation.

The final phase of production is the most crucial as far as the development psychological processes are concerned. Britton et al (1975) analyse Vygotsky's writing on the movement from inner speech (internalised thought) to outer speech (in spoken words or finally in writing) involving the deliberate control of semantics particular to the process of writing. Britton et al describe this process as 'the dialectical interrelationship of thought and

language' (1975: 39). For the individual writer an essential part of the writing process is explaining the matter to oneself. In this way the writer moves from the inner speech of incubation to the external form of written composition. However, talk in the form of the inner dialogue of inner speech remains central to this process. In collaborative writing students are required to verbalise thoughts as they negotiate the writing of text. The phases of conception, incubation and production are not linear stages in writing in that elements of redirection or redrafting can take place within talk about the content and composition of the text.

A sequence for collaborative writing might then be:

- An introduction to the task concepts
- Examples of the conventions of the writing genre through work by an accomplished writer/ or modelling of the writing process by the teacher
- Conception: introduction to the task, previous conceptual knowledge, personal history as writers.
- Incubation: ideas and plans, talk, inner speech
- Production (paired or group writing): translation of inner speech to written text; negotiation of meaning; teacher feedback on the collaborative writing through whole class discussion of common problems or successes; written feedback for pairs/groups; revision of text.

Task Design for Active Reading: Class Readers, Literature Circles, and Themed Books

One of the most common targets set by English teachers for their students is a variant of the exhortation to read widely for pleasure. Of course the irony is that this target is often set for those pupils who most dislike picking up a book. For prospective secondary school English teachers it can be a shock to hear students say that they have never read a book in their life. Of course these students will have books read to them: if not at home then certainly in their experience through the primary classroom and in secondary school English lessons. What they are telling us is that they have not actively engaged in the negotiation of meaning that is involved in the reading of a text.

The class reader provides English teachers with several interrelated problems. What whole class reader will appeal to the divergent interests of my class? How do students working at different stages of reading comprehension work on a shared text? What cultural and social factors from the students' backgrounds need to be considered? What cultural and social concepts are important to develop a critical reading of the text? Should the text be read aloud? How do I get through the book in the allotted time? How do I ensure that my students are active readers? How do I plan talk around the text? What are my students learning when they read the text?

The task design dimension for the teacher when planning a scheme of work for the class reader is related to the objective of helping students understand the social, cultural and historical aspects of the novel studied as well as aspects of the author's craft as a writer, authorial intentions and literary quality. But the design also has to attend to the students' conceptual understandings of the past, cultures, social class and so on. It would be impossible to fully comprehend a Dickens novel without an understanding of Victorian conceptions of

morality or justice as well as the prevailing social realities of class. The scientific concept of a literary critique requires the acquisition of the tool of a meta-language for analysis. Yet everyday concepts such as love, power, loss, or separation can be powerfully understood by the adolescent whether they are a refugee from Afghanistan or the flood plains of southern England.

In the UK, probably the most common novel read at Key Stage 4 (ages 14-16) is John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. This popularity is based on years of collective teacher knowledge of the power of Steinbeck's story to affect young readers including boys who previously showed little appetite for literary texts. It is also a powerful tale of the Great Depression in the US that confronts mature themes of friendship, belonging, gender, race, and social class. The novel is short and readily available in the store cupboards of cash strapped English Departments. For many years I taught the novel as an exam text to groups of underachieving 16 year olds. I discovered that each 'chapter' (not a word Steinbeck uses for each section) could be read aloud to the class in a single lesson. Year after year I experienced the pleasure of seeing my captivated audience enjoy hearing a great story; many told me it was the first the book they had read. In this sense, it was an important experience for the students. Yet their engagement was at a purely receptive level and their critical reaction to the book when asked to write about it remained at an emotive level rather than analytical.

Of course another danger in whole class teaching is the tendency for teachers to rely on oral forms of reading where students take turns to read aloud from the text. In practice, this often means confident readers are allowed to read extended passages with students who struggle reading for a few lines prompted by the teacher. In play readings, the Mercutios and Hamlets

tend to be the same students who read extended passages of prose. What do these practices teach the students about reading or the teacher about the pupils' reading development? Virtually nothing of course. For the reluctant or unconfident reader, or the reader for whom English is not their first language, reading aloud in front of your peers can be a terrifying experience. Even for confident readers, this is an essentially passive form of reading that involves nothing more than reciting words from a page. In fact, as O'Donnell-Allen (2006) points out, student engagement is often minimal in this reading exercise. Collaborative reading, on the other hand, involves both active engagement on the part of students and effective task design from the teacher.

Applebee (1996) argues that in literature discussions, teachers often close down real debate about texts through a belief that they have the 'correct' interpretation. Miller (2003) picks up on Applebee's argument for conversation about literature to argue that talk focussed on multiple perspectives about literature can help shape students' critical thinking about texts. Harvey 'Smokey' Daniels (1999) coined the term 'literature circles' to describe a task based structured approach to small group reading developed by many US English teachers in the early 1980s. In his initial version of the literature circle, the teacher assigns specific reading roles to each group member designed to mirror the analytical and cognitive decoding tools used by experienced and successful readers. For example, Daniels lists the following student roles: Questioner, Connector, Literary Luminary, Illustrator, and Word Wizard. Students read chapters from the point of view of their particular role using open-ended prompts on role sheets and then join a group discussion on the chapters in question. Roles are to be rotated as the literature circle progressed. Talk is student-centred in that discussions are led by the students through their reading roles. These roles are designed to be temporary supports or

scaffolds. In this way the task design aims to recreate the cognitive reading processes of mature readers.

However, Daniels (2006) came to realise that in many classroom scenarios the reading roles were often dominating the work of literature circles and often limiting the type of talk about text that the circles were designed to foster. Excessive concentration on roles leads to a series of reports rather than a genuine discussion. Daniels in his later work advocates a form of teacher continual assessment of small group student led discussions. This then becomes an important purpose for the teacher in setting the task of collaborative reading. From a Vygotskian perspective this involves direct mediation with students as they talk about reading with their peers. Prospective teachers that are introduced to literature circles in the English PGCE course at the University of Oxford are encouraged to adapt the reading roles to the contexts of their classrooms and the learners within them. They are also encouraged to sit with the groups and intervene as part of their assessment of both actual and potential levels of students' understanding. The ability to listen to students think aloud is a powerful diagnostic tool for assessment.

O'Donnell-Allen (2006) posits an alternative approach of book clubs that allow small groups to four to six students to choose their own shared text. The role of the English teacher within the talk in a reading group is more interventionist than the student centred task design of the literature circle. The English teacher provides a variety of cultural tools to respond to text including reading logs, illustrations and talk. Perhaps above all, the task design principle in the book club is to promote sustained talk about the levels of meanings embedded in texts. This type of talk about meaning mirrors Barnes' (2008) and Mercer's (2000) definition of

exploratory talk where students explore potential meaning through a dialogic process. Book clubs of this type use several texts in the same classroom often grouped around thematic links that allows the teacher to make choices about the mixed ability mix involved in particular groupings. Following John-Steiner (2000), O'Donnell-Allen (2006) makes a crucial distinction between co-operation and collaboration within student reading groups. In co-operative activities such as Daniels' early version of a literature circle, each member fulfils a separate task which piece together to create the complete reading experience. In contrast, a collaborative learning activity requires collaborative whole task completion. O'Donnell-Allen cites the research of Alvermann and her colleagues (1996) who found that open-ended tasks that require group collaboration, as opposed to division of labour among individuals, are an essential component of effective discussion in small groups. Edwards' (this volume) third quadrant is once again paramount in this design.

I would argue that both forms of reading group follow a social-constructivist approach to designing a learning activity and the learning environment in which that activity takes place. The task design element of each form of collaborative reading attends to the concern with active reading for meaning and for students to both engage with the cultures embedded in that text and to act on this knowledge through their collective interpretation. Collaborative reading engages students with concepts of genre and theme as well as literary analysis and interpretation. The object of this activity is the collaborative act of meaning making through interpersonal discourse. John-Steiner (2000) explains that collaborative learning is characterised by 'fully realized equality in roles and responsibilities' because participants 'see themselves engaged in a joint task' (p.13). But the conducting role of the teacher, as assessor and as prompt, is equally important.

Conclusion

I have argued in this chapter that one of the key goals of English teaching is the development of students' conceptual understanding through communicative tasks that actively engage students with the cultural and social tools required for meaning making and interpretation. Concept formation is central to literate practices. The Vygotskian stress on the dialectical interaction between students' developing scientific and spontaneous concepts means that the focus of assessment is on the process of learning that leads development rather than the final products of literary tasks. Through assessing both the incubation of thought in reading for meaning and the development of writing through interaction it may be possible to glimpse the development of higher psychological processes.

The implication for task design in the English classroom is that whilst English teachers need to promote opportunities within their classrooms for students to write expressively for a defined audience or to read actively for meaning, students also have to have time for incubation and opportunities for talk. The task design models that I have presented here represent communicative tasks that involve students' interaction with the social, cultural, and historical shaping of language and literature. Writing in this model is the ability to make our own thinking visible and talk is central to the process of developing thought into written language. Reading is primarily a receptive rather than a productive process: but collaborative reading requires active engagement on the part of the readers. Through collaborative activities of reading and writing these literacy processes can be internalised and appropriated through interpersonal or interpsychological activity that in turn develops intramental processes of psychological tool use. It follows then that the process of task design for students' active engagement in the processes of reading and writing involves an engagement

with the dialectical interaction between the development of thought through inner speech and the mediational properties of interaction through talk. The teaching of meaning making within the social environment of the English classroom may be subject to the pressures of teaching towards summative tests, yet it is in the very complexity of literacy processes that the heart of the learning lies.

References

Alvermann, D. E., Young, J. P., Weaver, D., Hinchman, K. A., Moore, D. W., Phelps, S. F., Thrash, E. C. and Zalewski, P. (1996) Middle and high school students' perceptions of how they experience text- based discussions: A multicase study. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 31: 244-267.

Andrews, R., Torgerson, C., Beverton, S., Freeman, A., Locke, T., Low, G., and Zhu, D. (2006). The effect of grammar teaching on writing development. *British Educational Research Journal*, 32(1), 39-55.

Applebee, A. N. (1986). Problems in process approaches: Toward a reconceptualization of process instruction. In A. R. Petrosky & D. Bartholomae (eds), *The teaching of writing*. 85th yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education (pp. 95-113). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Applebee, A. N. (1996) Curriculum as conversation: Transforming traditions of teaching and learning. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Barnes, D. (1976) *From Communication to Curriculum*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Barnes, D. (2008) Exploratory Talk for Learning in N. Mercer and S. Hodgkinson (eds) *Exploring Talk in School*. London: SAGE.

Bazerman, C. (2012). Writing, cognition and affect from the perspectives of sociocultural and historical studies of writing. In V. W. Berninger (ed), *Past, Present and Future Contributions of Cognitive Writing Research to Cognitive Psychology*. New York: Taylor and Francis.

Brice-Heath, S. (2007) Afterword. In V. Ellis, C. Fox, and B. Street (eds) (2007) *Rethinking English in Schools: Towards a new and constructive stage*. London: Continuum.

Britton, J., Burgess, T., Martin, N., McLeod, A. and Rosen, H. (1975) *The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18)*. London: Macmillan.

Bruner, J. (1996) *Culture, Mind, and Education*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Burgess, T. (2007) The Picture of Development in Vygotskian Theory: renewing the intellectual project of English. In V. Ellis, C. Fox, and B. Street (eds) (2007) *Rethinking English in Schools: Towards a new and constructive stage*. London: Continuum.

Chaiklin, S. (2003). The zone of proximal development in Vygotsky's analyses of learning and instruction. In A Kozulin, B. Gindis, V. Ageyev and S. M. Miller (eds). *Vygotsky's Educational Theory in a Cultural Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cope B. and Kalantzis, M. (eds) (1993) *The Powers of Literacy: A Genre Approach to Teaching Writing*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Daniels, H. (2007) 'Pedagogy.' In H. Daniels, M. Cole and J. Wertsch (eds) *The Cambridge Companion to Vygotsky*. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp.307-331.

- Daniels, H. 'S'. (1994). *Literature Circles: Voice and choice in the student-centered classroom*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.
- Daniels, H. 'S'. (2006) *What's the Next Big thing with literature Circles? Voices from the Middle* 13 (4): 10-15.
- Derry, J. (2008). Abstract rationality in education: From Vygotsky to Brandom. *Studies in the Philosophy of Education*,27: 49–62
- Dixon, J. (1967) *Growth Through English*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Doyle, W. and Carter, K. (1984). Academic tasks in classrooms. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 14:129-149.
- Eagleton, T. (1983) *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Edwards, A. (2010) 'How can Vygotsky and his legacy help us to understand develop and teacher education?' In V. Ellis, A. Edwards and P. Smagorinsky (eds) *Cultural-historical Perspectives on Teacher Education and Development*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Ellis, V. (2007) More than soldiering on: realising the potential of teacher education to rethink English in schools. In V. Ellis, C. Fox, and B. Street (eds) (2007) *Rethinking English in Schools: Towards a new and constructive stage*. London: Continuum.
- Ellis, V. (2009) *Subject Knowledge and Teacher Education*. London: Continuum.
- Freedman, A. and Medway, P. (1994) *Learning and Teaching Genre*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Gove, M. (2013) Michael Gove speaks about the importance of teaching. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/michael-gove-speaks-about-the-importance-of-teaching>.

Halliday, M.A.K. (1993). Towards a Language-based Theory of Learning. *Linguistics and Education*, 5: 93-116

Halliday, M.A.K. and Hasan, R. (1989) *Language, Context and Text: Aspects of Language in a Social-Semiotic Perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hodge, R. and Kress, G.(1988): *Social Semiotics*. Cambridge: Polity.

John-Steiner, V. (2000) *Creative Collaboration*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kress, G., Jewitt, C., Bourne, J., Franks, A., Hardcastle, J., Jones, K. and Reid, R. (2005) *English in Urban Classrooms: a Multimodal perspective on teaching and learning*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.

Marshall, B. (2006) What do we Know in English: Facts and Fiction in an Arts Based English Curriculum. *English in Education*, 40(3): 7-20.

McCallum, A. (2012) *Creativity and Learning in Secondary English: teaching for a creative classroom*. London and New York: Routledge.

Mercer, N. (2000) *Words and Minds: How we use language to think together*. London: Routledge.

O'Donnell-Allen, C. (2006) *The Book Club Companion: fostering strategic readers in the Secondary Classroom*. Heinemann.

Mercer, N. (1995) *The Guided Construction of Knowledge: Talk amongst teachers and learners*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Mercer, N. (2000) *Words and Minds: How we use language to think together*. London: Routledge.

- Miller, S.M. (2003) How Literature Discussion Shapes Thinking: ZPDs for Teaching/Learning Habits of Heart and Mind, in A. Kozulin, B. Gindis, V.S. Ageyev and S.M. Miller (eds.) *Vygotsky's Educational Theories in Context*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Murray, D. (1972) Teach Writing as a Process not a Product. *The Leaflet* (Nov. 1972): 11-14.
- Myhill, D. (2001) *Better Writers*. Westley: Courseware Publications.
- Myhill, D. A., Jones, 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
- Newman, D., Griffin, P. and Cole, M. (1989) *The Construction Zone*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- O'Donnell-Allen, C. (2006) *The Bookclub Companion: Fostering Strategic readers in the Secondary Classroom*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann
- Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) (2012) *Moving English Forward: Action to Raise Standards in English*.
- Prior, P. (1998). *Writing/Disciplinarity: A sociohistoric account of literate activity in the academy*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Schwab, J.J. (1978) *Science, Curriculum and Liberal Education: selected essays*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Smagorinsky, P. (2002) *Teaching English by Principled Practice*. New Jersey: Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Smagorinsky, P. (2008) *Teaching English by Design*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Swales, J. (1990) *Genre Analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Thompson, I. (2012a) Stimulating Reluctant Writers: a Vygotskian Approach to Teaching Writing in Secondary Schools. *English in Education*. 46 (1): 84-91.

Thompson, I. (2012b) Planes of Communicative Activity in Collaborative Writing. *Changing English*. 19.2, pp.209-220.

Thompson, I. (2013) The Mediation of Learning in the Zone of Proximal Development. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 47.3: 247-276.

Vygotsky, L.S . (1987) *Educational Psychology*. Boca Raton, Florida: CRC Press.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978) *Mind in Society: the development of higher psychological processes*. Boston: Harvard University Press.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1987) 'Thinking and Speech.' In *L.S. Vygotsky, Collected Works* (Vol. 1). New York: Plenum Press.

Williams, R. (1977) *Marxism and Literature*. London: Oxford University Press.