Making effective language choices

Roger McDonald, Senior Lecturer in Primary Education, University of Greenwich

Recently there has been a trend towards favouring language choices which are more ornate or 'powerful'. Roger McDonald argues for a more thoughtful – and effective – approach to language use.

Introduction

A distinct feature of many classrooms which I have visited as part of my role at the University of Greenwich has been the use of a hierarchical approach to language where children are encouraged to choose some words rather than others simply because they have been predetermined as more 'powerful'. In some classrooms this practice involves discarding words through methods such as placing them in a dustbin or in jail in order to emphasise the seeming irrelevance and unnecessary nature of selected words within our language. The implication is clear: simple language is undesirable and polysyllabic words are more valuable than monosyllables.

The Highwayman

Simple language can, given the context, be powerful. Look for example at Alfred Noyes' poem *The Highwayman* (2002). Here the reader is captivated by the ornate language used to describe the Highwayman:

> He'd a French cocked-hat on his forehead, a bunch of lace at his chin,
>
> A coat of claret velvet and breeches of brown doe-skin; They fitted with never a wrinkle: his boots were up to the thigh!
>
> And he rode with a jewelled twinkle,
>
> His pistol butts a-twinkle,
>
> His rapier hilt a-twinkle, under the jewelled sky.

Contrast this to the language used to describe the moment when Bess kills herself to warn him about the Redcoats:

> Nearer he came and nearer! Her face was like a light!
>
> Her eyes grew wide for a moment; she drew one last deep breath,
>
> Then her finger moved in the moonlight,
>
> Her musket shattered the moonlight,
>
> Shattered her breast in the moonlight and warned him – with her death.

This simple language does the job intended by the author in order to influence the reader. There is no need in the second example to include more powerful adjectives or to consider starting each line with a different opener. The writing is direct, intentional and effective.

Technical writing

Many schools in South East England have adopted approaches using familiar terminology which has the aim of raising writing scores by the end of key stage 2 (Barrett 2014). This terminology often adorns classroom walls and is used explicitly in marking and feedback. By adopting the teaching techniques associated with the terminology, children are expected to make progress by learning how to use a range of language features, such as connectives and openers in their writing and in turn are encouraged and taught how to develop their sentences. However as Cremin and Myhill (2011 p. 60) note, this widespread approach is 'little more than an incremental process of skill acquisition, which fails to recognise the role of reading, of texts and of literature in particular as a rich source of imaginative possibilities for writing'. This was evidenced in a recent writing competition I was involved in where the formulaic nature of this initiative was evident in over 70% of the entries. It was, interestingly, a home school tutored child who won the competition as their writing resonated with the readers in a way that some of the writing with formulaic features could not.

'Improving' writing

Creating the impression that some words are better or more powerful than others regardless of the context is flawed. A quick look through a variety of school websites giving advice to parents on the teaching of writing identifies the degree to which this philosophy is being repeated without any explanation of the pedagogy behind it. Vidcasts, newsletters, handouts and writing exemplars point to the need to children to 'up-level' their work. However, often the examples given do not exemplify a longer written piece where the intention of the writer can be ascertained but instead use sentences such as the example below which comes from a school website showing a vidcast of children explaining how they can 'up-level' their work.

The sentence displayed on the white board was:

'The cat sat on the mat.'

The explanation was that we can change the word 'sat' to a better verb namely 'slept' and the need to add an adverb to ensure an adverbial phrase could be identified. This resulted in the sentence becoming:

'The cat slept quietly on the mat.'

In this example, the meaning of the sentence is apparently unimportant as, in the first sentence, the cat was sitting which, in the desire to 'up level' and use a 'better' verb, changed, resulting in the cat now sleeping. Whether the adverb is needed at all is also debatable as, from a reader's perspective, we would probably assume that the cat was sleeping quietly unless we had been given clues previously to encourage us to think differently. In essence this example and many more work on a reductionist approach to language whereby the actual meaning of the sentence is secondary to the technical features being used.

Another example, which shows the extent to which this ideology has seeped into classroom practice, occurred when a teacher was reading to the class with the specific objective of 'up-levelling' the language. The teacher read to the point where the reader is told that the main character has a 'big bike'. At this point the teacher stopped and the conversations centred on the word 'big' with the children pointing out that 'big' was a 'boring' word and could be improved. Offerings from the children included: 'ginormous', 'enormous', 'massive' and 'huge'. However, in this story, the author did not mean that the bike was massive, enormous or huge; it was simply big. The author had chosen the most appropriate word within the context. The question that should have been asked is, 'Why do you think the author choose to use big?' Looking at the language of the book as a whole would be a better approach to developing vocabulary.

Understanding language choices

The disregard of certain words in our language is also evidenced through the response to the word 'nice'. In some classrooms this is seen as a word only worthy of placing in the dustbin and in some instances has been banned. However, looking at the use of the word in a specific context shows how powerful it can be. Take the first page of *Piggybook* by Anthony Browne (2008) for example:

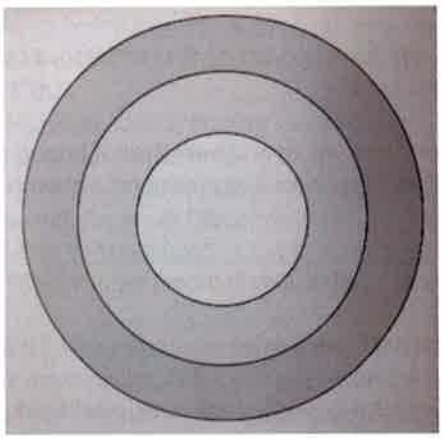
> Mr Piggott lived with his two sons, Simon and Patrick, in a nice house with a nice garden, and a nice car in the nice garage. Inside the house was his wife.

Here, the word 'nice' conveys the meaning relevant within the context of the book. One interpretation could be that, at the start of the story, Mr Piggott lived a comfortable, predictable and ordinary life. We would not, in this example, consider 'up-levelling' or placing the word in the dustbin as the word has been chosen with regard to both context and meaning. Indeed, children would possibly be fascinated by the changing meaning of the word over time acknowledging that its original derived from the Latin nescius meaning ignorant. From the late 1300's the meaning started to change to refer to a person's conduct or appearance and was associated with people wearing luxurious or lascivious attire. In the 1400's nice also focused on both personality and appearance addressing someone who is finely dressed, reserved or shy. The meaning continued to change with its current meaning being pleasant, enjoyable or satisfactory and a lot more! See www.thefreedictionary.com/nice. Instead of wasting time on a single word, the children would learn a lot more about language if they were invited to search the web for different meanings of the word 'nice'.

An alternative approach

The zone of relevance develops the notion that language choice depends on the context given and that what might be considered a powerful word in one context may not be in another. The zone of relevance is used by placing the most appropriate or powerful words, depending on the context, near the centre and less effective words away from the centre.

The zone of relevance



This can be exemplified through work students were involved in when exploring the text *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* by Jon Scieszka (1991). Within the work students identified the characteristics of the wolf and wrote their words and phrases on sticky notes. They then decided which were their most effective words and placed these near the centre of the zone of relevance. It was interesting for students to compare their choice of vocabulary with those of other groups.

Once discussions had taken place about which words were seen as the most effective and students had the chance to justify their opinions, the context was then changed. They were invited to consider the characteristics of the wolf from

the perspective of his grandmother. It was interesting to see how the students moved some of the words and phrases around, bringing words such as 'misunderstood' nearer the centre and words such as 'devious' away from the centre. In groups students then took an alternative perspective again choosing from: the policeman, news reporter, grandmother, the pigs or the reader, and arranged and added words which they felt were most appropriate from their chosen perspective.

What was evident from using the zone of relevance was the need to adapt and manipulate language given the context and that none of the words could be deemed to be more powerful than others when taking the context into consideration.

Classroom application

Having experienced this approach in the workshops students applied it to their own practice within the classroom. In one example the student was reading *The Green Children* by Kevin Crossley-Holland (1997). Within the text we meet two children who have entered an unfamiliar world where the environment, people and colours are not what they are used to. Soon they are taken in by a family and looked after. Throughout reading the text children took part in a range of interactive activities to deepen their understanding of the characters and their situation. Over the course of the week children built up descriptions of the characters at various points in the story.

We feel empathy for the green girl at the point where she goes to the fair only to be jeered and shouted at by the townsfolk. Here the student introduced the zone of relevance to the class. Children had already thought about their vocabulary choices relating to the green girl and used the zone of relevance to differentiate their choices based on the context. They were encouraged to explore the thoughts, feelings and description of the green girl from the perspective of the family, the townsfolk and the green girl herself. The student commented upon the degree of conversation within the classroom as children were discussing the relevance of the vocabulary. This was distinctly different from previous practice of highlighting a single 'powerful' word. The student commented on how this new approach of using the zone of relevance had positive implications for the message children receive about language, its use and its manipulation.

Conclusion

Creating a love and interest in language is paramount. Investigating words, their origins, their usage and how meanings have adapted and changed over time is fascinating. Introducing children to new words which they did not know before is also powerful and this needs to be done within a context. The effect on the children's understanding of language will be more profound than for example, offering a discrete 'powerful' word of the week which is displayed on a notice board and expecting children to use it in their work regardless of the genre being taught. What the students found was that understanding the context is the key to making effective language choices.

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