Smokey Wilson

Spinning Talk into Writing:
Behind the Scenes of a Research Project

In March of 1990, NCTE funded a teacher research conference at Asilomar. One of the issues that surfaced at this conference was a need for new ways to write about what teachers learn — readable, credible, useful, reports. About the same time, the Bay Area Teacher Research group that I am part of was asking for reports of the year’s research studies. As I was preparing my report in the light provided by discussions at the conference, I asked myself what might be useful to other teachers who find themselves embarked on studying some classroom question.

Often in our small groups teacher-researchers had been overwhelmed by the tasks they faced. It was hard to find a research question, or what seemed a single simple question turned out to be many questions. There was too much data, or no data, or too much of the wrong kind of data. And was “data” singular or plural, anyway? And once a focus was found, how to write about the discoveries? Because there are few records of the classroom research process — not only findings, but also talks of the hunt for them — everyone stewed in his or her own anxiety, alone.

Often as I had struggled with my research and was ready to give up in confusion, James Watson’s personal account of the discovery of DNA (The Double Helix, 1968) had kept me going. Classroom researchers need such comforting tales. Like Watson and Crick, we work often in the dark. We cannot say if what we are doing is folly or valuable. So in this report I decided to focus less on the findings of my research than on the search for these findings.

The research project I am describing has been around for a long time. My teenage daughter was a toddler at its beginning and is now a high school senior. It has been through all the tangles, has begun and begun again, and is finished but not forgotten. It made me think hard, it had a profound effect on my teaching, and it taught me how to study classroom questions.

I have studied ways that spoken and written language interweave and overlap. My particular interest has been in teachers’ power to promote literacy through talk. I mapped out the research process as I refined my questions, carried out pilot studies, planned a larger study. In retrospect, I can see that what seemed maddening confusion was in fact a
relatively orderly process of learning — research is, after all, learning. I can say that now. But this is now, and that was then.

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‘Write it down just the way you told it to me,’ I had said to dozens of basic writers. Had I been wrong?

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Meeting the Question

The introductions of research reports in journals look spick and span. The question has obediently become a hypothesis, elegant and distant. But how did it start out? For me, it began in a moment of shock, contradiction, when I had to talk for two minutes into a tape recorder about ‘The day Kennedy was shot,’ and then write the same story. An old journal entry from 1977, not long after I had returned to graduate school, captured my first reaction.

Robin [Lakoff, the professor] has asked us to tell the story of ‘where I was when I heard that Kennedy was shot’ and then write on the same topic. Whenever I do it, the one is going to be a mirror image of the other. My stories will be alike and she’s going to want me to find differences!! what will I write for my term report?

I also kept the paper that resulted from the assignment. My talk is transcribed verbatim from the tape (the slash marks mean pauses or end stops), and the story is the one I wrote without revision.

My Talk: I was in Austin Texas and I was at the University and we lived in a little house right behind the school … and the thing that stands out in my mind was the sort of Texas day / screen porches / old wooden houses / I hear the news on the radio / I didn’t believe it …

My Writing: Screen door slapping slapping banging, slapping. It was the wind, November wind but the day seemed warm and muggy and close. The picture of the small Texas house embroidered with gingerbread wood, old-fashioned, painted white, where everything cracked and squeaked and smelled old, stays with me as I think back to when I heard Kennedy had been shot. I heard the news on my grandma’s radio which she played night and day, but I didn’t believe it.

When I compared the talk and the writing, it made me ask how much I really understood about their connections. In spite of the family resemblance in the two, they were not the same. The “sort of Texas day” I had spoken about was evoked through concrete details in the written version. Against this backdrop of descriptive detail, five lines of it, “the day Kennedy had been shot” had been given a showcase position at the end of the sentence in the written version, but I didn’t even mention it when talking, since I could “assume” my listener knew. Repetition, modification, facts shifted for emphasis and effect — written strategies permeate even my harshest writing. For me, producing written language had been so natural it felt “just like talking.” Yet the sample of talk and writing in front of me contained undeniable differences. This indisputable fact violated a principle I had operated with every semester in basic writing classes at the community college where I taught. “Write it down just the way you told it to me,” I had said to dozens of basic writers. Had I been wrong? And so I found myself propelled into a study of the connections between talk and writing.

I began tentative experiments in my classes, using talk-and-write exercises like the one I had tried. They only puzzled me further, introducing new complications. Unlike my own efforts, the students’ oral stories were long and complex, but their writing was not. How did one learn to shift from elaborate speech to an elaborated written text? In spite of the Kennedy evidence, I stubbornly maintained that talk was a step on the road to writing. But what step, on what road, and to where?

In such a bariapatch of questions many teacher research studies begin. This tangle led me back to books. Such publications as Jack Goody’s literacy in traditional societies or Walter Ong’s works such as rhetoric, romance, and technology made me see talk anew.

Ong’s discussion (1983) seemed particularly useful. He pointed out that oral cultures cannot “look something up.” There is no book where a word is located. In a series of contrasts, Ong suggested differences between spoken and written language. But these interpretations did not fit my question: Every one of the students in my basic writing classes had grown up in America’s schools, whereas the individuals whom Ong discussed had not. My students were, had to be, bombarded by print and thus were members of a literate, not oral, culture. Furthermore, studies began to come out showing that all speakers, no matter how literate, used certain oral structures when they talked. Tempting as it might be to assume that basic writers were products of an “oral” subculture and I of a literate one, the interpretation just didn’t fit. I turned away from the library, back for a closer look at the students I knew best.

Often in classroom practice we stumble on questions bigger than we first realized. Although we expect an answer to be available in a book somewhere, some-
times there is no good answer ready to hand. Sometimes these questions signal a gap in what scholars know about a particular area of inquiry. Excursion into what others have written is essential. But a movement back to the classroom after we absorb this thinking is no less essential. Theory frequently offers the teacher increased power to see patterns in classroom events that previously seemed random. But theory also sometimes distorts patterns, draws conclusions that do not fit. Shuffling between library and classroom can reveal gaps between what has been published and what we see in the everyday contexts of teaching and learning.

**Piloting the Question in My Classroom**

By 1979, about the time I started asking serious questions about relations between talk and writing, a decade of open-admission policies brought students who are often called “underprepared” into colleges. Teachers still knew little about these students, and scholars knew scarcely more. With a few exceptions such as Mina Shaughnessy’s *Errors and Expectations* (1977), what was published suggested that these learners had deficits of various kinds. I knew this was a wrong-headed notion, but I didn’t know what was right. I had ideas that scarcely had names and names that hid fuzzy ideas. Most hunches I had about how underprepared students learned to put ideas on paper came from my teaching. I had taught two courses of basic reading and writing each semester for ten years. Of these students, some of my favorites had been those personable, stylishly dressed, affable men and women, sometimes twenty years old, sometimes thirty-five, who came to my desk on the first day of class to say (to warm me up to protect themselves) “I can’t read too good, or to ask for help with writing, by which they meant penmanship. Asking these students to talk a story through before they wrote it had been helpful to them. Hadn’t it?

Portable video and audio equipment were available at my college. I jumped in, taping any kind of talk between teacher and student that occurred just before students wrote. The tapings exposed two questions, not one. I needed to know not only how talk changed as it became written language — and on these features Wallace Chafe and Jane Danielewicz had begun work and have had much to say (1986) — but also what happened between teachers and students as they talked; research had generally simply assumed that teachers were “prejudiced” and ignored certain kinds of students.

I did not ignore students. But what happened when I asked them to rehearse a story orally before they wrote it? Sometimes this talk went well. But the tapes did not lie. More often than I wanted to admit, it also went sour in unexpected ways. There was that interminable exchange with one of my students, Mark Dee. He talked in a steady stream for an hour, but I was never clear what a “barrat” was, or why its owner gave him and his friend some money: “then we went out to find uh to find the big barrat, the big yellow barrat, the barrat, and we couldn’t find it and then we were starved and then one day we seen it pulled up and then he gave us some more money uh fifty dollars each ...” Afterwards, I figured out that the car was a kind of Cadillac (to this day, I enjoy reading “Biarritz” on the back of a fancy car); I knew that the driver was a drug dealer and Mark his runner.

Other conversations started badly, but got on track. I began to learn from Mark and many others that there were more ways to tell a story than I had dreamed of. But it was Kelly who finally convinced me just how limited my ideas were about what made a story good. Like Mark, in class Kelly had recited tales that went on and on, and lacked what I called point, clarity, development. One day before class, he motioned me aside. He had something to show me. We went to my office, and he took out a deck of cards. I took out my hand tape recorder and invited him to begin:

**Teacher:** This is a story to go with the card trick, right? What’s it called?

**Student:** It’s called ‘Pimps, Players, and Hustlers.’

**Teacher:** Ok go.

Kelly changed posture, tone of voice, and speech rhythm. The “I” of the first line is a fictionalized character who requests the services of one “Mr. Bellhop.” I have transcribed his words exactly, using conventional punctuation to convey his voice quality; brackets indicate action rather than words:

**Student:** I was settin round the pad one day sittin all alone, had just moved into this big fine penthouse [turns up the two of diamonds] this deuce, look at that deuce, that deuce was bad, was a bad one, watch he a bell hop!

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*I needed to know not only how talk changed as it became written language ... but also what happened between teachers and students as they talked ...*
so I said Mr. Bellhop it’s Friday night, do you know anybody around?

Kelly went through all fifty-two cards, every one a character engaged in this Friday night adventure. Smooth, composed of formulaic phrases that permitted extraordinarily rapid delivery, this story was (he told me afterwards) a part of the repartee essential to a street-corner gambling game called Three Card Molly.

Toni Morrison says that what makes her fiction distinctive is “the saying of words ... it’s a love, a passion.” Kelly showed the same distinctive love for language and for him, “the worst of all possible things that could happen would be to lose that language” (LeClair, 1981; cited in Meier & Cazden, 1982). I learned to admire these virtuoso verbal performances; I began to see what reduction to print did to them; I began searching for ways to help the students capture in writing the flavor of their talk.

My practice was feeding my research, suggesting answers to go with my questions. I began to see patterns in ways teachers and students communicated, patterns that seemed to relate to who became skilled writers. Mark and I never resolved communication problems, and he wrote little if at all in my class. But Kelly and I began to talk about our different ideas of “story,” and he became adept at composing anecdotal narratives to illustrate topic sentences.

I had seen something, something important — that talk and writing interweave, and that whether or not teacher and student talk meshed influenced students’ progress. I tried to get an article called “From Talk to Writing” published. Editors were not interested. The argument I made was not convincing. Not enough students. A fluke. At that time, research sought universals, not local knowledge. Even I was not convinced. There were still too many holes, too many things I did not understand. I began to lay plans for a more formal study. Planning — kinds of data to collect, kinds of analysis — took up the next two years.

Digging In: Collecting and Preparing Data

By 1984, I was convinced that the talk teacher and student engaged in before students wrote compositions influenced students’ writing, and indeed shaped their college progress. It was not just a question of teachers liking their students, of friendliness or rapport, or of students being motivated. I had seen some basic writers quickly master the kinds of writing they needed to move into college-level classes. I had seen others, not very different in terms of ethnic background, socioeconomic status, or motivation, who did not power out of remedial classes in this way, but rather spun round and round in remedial waiting rooms which were whirlpools of frustration and aimlessness.

While my hunch was that talk was the foundation for development of school-based literacy, I had learned enough not to trust the big generalization. I needed to think small. I needed to verify teacher-student communication patterns and how they affected particular compositions. Eight experienced teachers agreed to conduct individual writing tutorials to gather data on this question. We agreed on the kinds of information we would seek in these tutorials. Teacher and student would talk in pairs about topics which the student had mentioned in a letter of introduction. The teacher would try to hone in on one topic and develop it through talk. Then the student would “write just what you told me.”

No more case studies. I wanted at least fifty students to participate, but I had to think about which students to include. After struggling with whether or not to include students who were acquiring English as a second language, which was really a question about whether to eliminate complications or to leave the classroom context complicated, I decided that I needed to prune away anything that made the answer to my question harder to come to. In the end, then, I focused on the students who had first caught my attention, including only African-Americans who had gone to American schools; of this group, I included only those receiving financial aid, public assistance, or employed at minimum wage jobs and placed in remedial classes three levels below freshman composition. Having much in common with Mina Shaughnessy's “strangers in academia” and with underprepared students described in recent publications (Hull, 1988), these were the students I knew best, those who “got lost in our schools, who could not enter the job market in any ascendant way” (Rose, 1989, p. 215). I also wanted to be sure that students and teachers had not already developed a teaching relationship in previous writing tutorials, so the teacher-student talk needed to take place on the second day of a new semester, the first day of instruction.

Whittling, shaping, planning; I emphasize ways I handled one of the major hurdles classroom researchers face — decisions about how to simplify the class-
room without distorting it. Having decided that a good clean look at my question was more urgent than rendering the full classroom context, I outlined the factors I considered — of population and method, as they are known in experimental studies — so as to make data analysis (an iffy task at best) at least a possible one. It is not, I believe, that this was a “right” or “wrong” decision, but only that as researchers plan their studies, these are unavoidable decisions, and it is best to walk into them with eyes open.

About this same time, new publications on talk and writing began to appear. The oral and written dichotomy was weakening in favor of what came to be called an oral-written continuum. Deborah Tannen (1985) found that some speakers’ oral style was “message-centered,” a kind of “public talk” relying heavily on strategies similar to those used in writing. In contrast, she found that other speakers used a “high involvement” style that relied more on communicating ideas through tone of voice and assumed the listener shared background information. Sub-cultural differences in structuring talk also began to be reported (Michaels, 1981; Gumperz, Kalima, & O’Connor, 1983; Erickson, 1984). In general, teachers expected school talk to be message-centered, but often basic writing students, it seemed, brought other speaking styles to class. Communication conflicts, I could see, might arise from teachers and students having different expectations about talk.

Armed with these ideas, I faced the task of transcribing fifty teacher-student conversations. I have stressed the importance of planning what data to collect. But that is only the first of many such decisions — each one momentous before it was made, insignificant in retrospect, crucial nevertheless. For example, some teacher-student talk continued for forty-five minutes. Did I transcribe exact words for the entire tutorial? Or only the part where they began to talk about the topic the student later wrote about? It took twenty-two hours to transcribe one forty-five minute tape using the first approach. After that, I opted for the second alternative. Shuddering slightly at what I was missing, transcribing in long-hand as I watched my children play in the back yard, I promised them I would be finished soon, but as I looked at the shelf of tapes I knew that I was lying.

I’ve sketched the headaches and uncertainties that are subterranean to any research process. But the breakthrough moments made up for them. One of the most memorable breakthroughs, in fact, emerged from this very problem of transcribing talk. One of my favorite student stories told about a childhood in the South on a farm. I had listened to Gloria tell this story about getting up early to work in her grandmother’s cotton fields, but transcription was difficult. The words I transcribed were:

hot sun, picking cotton n sun just burnin you pullin
this sack down the field down the cotton row, you
would get up before the sun comes up and leave out
the field till the sun go down.

But on the tape she had said so much more. She had stretched the words hot and sun until the heat was almost tangible. She stressed down the field, which demanded that the listener visualize the small body moving back and forth along the rows. She pitched her voice into a high falsetto to describe the rising sun, and then let it fall low and raspy to describe sunset. Her words did not communicate this tale. Her voice played the notes that sang the story. But writing what she conveyed so vividly in face-to-face talk required sophisticated shifts. Topics had to turn into full sentences. Emphasis on key points achieved by voice pitch had to be put into words. I decided to try my hand at putting on paper the story, using my own written strategies. I arrived at this “translation”:

When I was a child in Mississippi, working in the
cotton fields was hot and dirty work. We worked in the
field every day under a sun that burned into our backs.
I pulled the cotton sack behind me as I trudged down
row after row, endless rows. We began preparing to go
to the fields before the sun came up, and we stayed in
the fields until it had gone down.

I had a new taste for the difficulty Gloria faced in trying
to force face-to-face talk, with its gestures, its short-
hand, its reliance on voice patterns, into the narrow
channel allowed by words and syntax. There was no
really adequate way to render those lo-o-o-ng cotton
rows her voice evoked. No wonder spoken language,
so rich, became pale when unpracticed writers tried to
write it — it was tough for me in spite of my years of
experience producing written narratives.

With this insight, I knew better what I was listening for:
students who relied on expression — tone of voice — to
carry their message; I expected they would have more
trouble communicating with teachers than those who
used words and written-like sentence structures to
make their point as they talked. I went back to transcrib-
ing with new determination, checking my idea as I
listened.

Major patterns of teacher-student communication began
to emerge. Some teacher-and-student pairs communica-
ted smoothly: they shared similar meanings for words;
talk turns moved without interruptions. Their talk was like a duet, with teacher and student playing two voices on a single theme. But other pairs were less effective. They had difficulty agreeing about what certain words meant. Their talk was jerky, broken by pauses or interruption. Their talk grated against the expectations we have for conversation. There were other important patterns as well: those that started out smoothly but (as soon as the teacher began to force the talk into written-like patterns) deteriorated; those that started badly but, through some sensitive listening and responding, became smooth.

In this teacher-student duet, Amele, the teacher, and Jean, her student, quickly locate a mutually satisfactory topic:

**Teacher:** do you have a day in mind? can you remember back on an experience that was very important to you, that you can remember? the details about it? what happened? how you felt about it? what you went through? the emotions?

**Student:** I guess um I can remember when I first ... started ... to learn how to ... drive.

They develop the topic, two speakers' voices interweaving to shape one story:

**Teacher:** mm okay, how old were you at that time?

**Student:** fifteen.

**Teacher:** Fifteen. Okay, can you remember the day, was it in the daytime. Or nighttime?

**Student:** It was daytime, early in the afternoon.

They continue for thirty-five turns, until the event has been sketched out in detail. Written stories demand descriptive detail, and in these exchanges the teacher helps the student express in written-like talk what the student will write. We do not often recognize what a monumental achievement such smooth school talk can be. It is not easy for two strangers, a teacher and a student, to start up a conversation that will become a piece of writing. I listened awe-struck to these smooth interactions. The story was being built as the teacher asked questions and the student offered answers that fit the teacher's expectations. I could hear the teacher's voice shaping, guiding the development of the story the student knew but found difficult to write down.

Of the fifty teacher-student interactions I studied, about 65% showed smooth communication. For the remaining 35%, communication was awkward and interruptive. Though the teacher and student were working hard to communicate, they worked at cross purposes. The teacher wants details put into words. The student expects the teacher to use her own background knowledge, to fill in her own details. Far from weaving a single conversation, they each might as well have been talking to themselves. As I was to say in the paper I

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher prompts</th>
<th>Student responses</th>
<th>Written composition</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) sixty eight?</td>
<td>1) it was uh 68?</td>
<td>1) One morning in July of 1968</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) do you have a day in mind?</td>
<td>2)</td>
<td>2) a thought came to mind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) can you remember day you first sat behind the wheel?</td>
<td>3)</td>
<td>3) what it was like behind the wheel of a car</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) how old were you?</td>
<td>4)</td>
<td>4) I was about 15 years old at the time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) Impala?</td>
<td>5)</td>
<td>5) I got into our 1968 Impala. It was big with four door and painted lime green in side and out.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5) what color?</td>
<td>6)</td>
<td>6) I make sure the car was in park.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5) how many doors?</td>
<td>7)</td>
<td>7) I looked over my left shoulder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) two door? four door?</td>
<td>8)</td>
<td>8) I got the car away from the carb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) *four door</td>
<td>9)</td>
<td>9) I looked in the rear view mirror to see a car coming over my left shoulder</td>
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<tr>
<td>6) what happened?</td>
<td>10)</td>
<td>10) I hit the brakes, me and my father almost went through the front window</td>
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Chart 1
finally wrote, "patterns of communication differed across student-teacher pairs."

How many hours had that simple generalization cost? Months of planning, so that I could be relatively certain that the teacher-student exchanges were comparable. Two summers listening to the tapes until I could hear almost imperceptible clashes between them, or recognize sudden shifts from misunderstanding to appreciation. Two more years rechecking my system. Thousands of details had been smoothed out, and once the wrinkles were gone, patterns that had always been there could be seen. But real questions remained: did the patterns affect what students wrote? What strategies did teachers use to help students create links between spoken and written language?

Finding out More: Talk and Writing
Once these patterns of communication became clear, it was possible to examine the connections between talk and writing. First I considered how students who communicated smoothly with teachers actually used their conversations when they wrote. A chart displaying teacher's questions, student's responses, and relevant passages from the students' compositions showed me just how they lifted words, phrases, and organization almost directly from the tutorial. Some of them changed talk into writing. The chart on the opposite page reproduces some relevant exchanges between Amele and Jean. (See Chart 1.)

For example, as exchange 3 shows, the teacher asks about "the first day you sat behind the wheel" and the student writes "what it was like behind the wheel of a car." In exchange 5, the student's answers to the teacher's questions about the car appear word for word in the written composition. Others did not manage to use the talk as a bridge to writing. A similar chart for a

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) can you remember a specific time like when he took her with him to a party?</td>
<td>1) no I can't remember all that</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2) let's see if you can find a particular story like that.</td>
<td>2) I know one he **did take her</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) did **not?</td>
<td>3) yeah</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) he had told her that he was goin to take her with him</td>
<td>4) one day when my dother was two years old her father who was Ulyes Gaines told her he was goin to take her over to his friend house.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) a lady lived across the street from me that kep her all the time</td>
<td>5) he told her to go across the st to the babysitter house</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6) he tol her to go across the street and get her **coat</td>
<td>6) to get her coat</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7) and uh she went there he &quot;let her</td>
<td>7) he drive off</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9) what happened?</td>
<td>9) when I came home from work she jus tol me that ... he had **let her</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10) so that's how she was always one step ahead of everyone</td>
<td></td>
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Chart 2

A student named Lydia revealed that the teacher-student talk had done little good. (See Chart 2.)

Had Jean and Lydia not been so similar — about the same age, from the same ethnic group and class, about the same level of reading and writing achievement — the significance of smooth talk between teacher and student might not have been so striking.

While charts for each interaction would have been descriptively valuable, I wanted a more tangible measure of this relation between teacher-student communication patterns and the students' written compositions. On advice from a statistics expert, I asked a team of English teachers to score the students' written compositions. Using a 6-point scoring scale, three experienced English teachers who were not familiar with the study read each composition; they assigned scores ranging from 2 (the lowest score) to 12 (the highest). I taught myself to use a statistical computer program, and after yet one more summer, I could say that statistical analysis showed compositions written following smooth communications with teachers received scores twice as
high as those written after awkward communications. For example, on the average, compositions of students like Jean were assigned 9.5 points, and compositions of students like Lydia, 4.6. In short, on an exit exam scored holistically, Jean's score would have enabled her to enter a higher level English class, while Lydia's would have kept her in remedial classes.

While I studied computer printouts and watched my yard go to weeds and my children grow up, I heard voices: Mark, Kelly, Jean, Lydia, Gloria, my own, other teachers. At last, I had an almost panoramic view of what I had always wanted to know but hadn’t been able to put into words. When teachers were successful, how did they help transform talk into writing?

Spinning Talk into Writing: Some Strategies.
My study had come to this: that some teachers, sometimes, promote the development of literacy through talk. Some general ideas discovered by previous researchers held, such as the notion that teachers were more helpful to some students than to others. Teachers were more successful with students who were already skilled at producing the kinds of message-centered talk schools expect, and less successful with those who used community-based styles in the classroom. But there were moments in which teachers helped to convert "high involvement" language, with its richness of nonverbal information, into written expression. In these instances, teachers were accomplishing what previous research had never noticed. These moments — not quantifiable, often subtle, and invariably tinged for me with magic — were my strongest confirmation for the notion that teachers can directly promote literacy through talk.

I would not argue that teachers are teaching written language on purpose in these examples. Rather, the tacit expectation that information should be presented in accord with written modes is below the level of conscious awareness. Teachers "instinctively" shape talk into written-like formulations. In these three strategies that I have experienced teachers use, we see the teacher's power to convey what she takes so for granted about literacy she doesn't even realize she knows it.

Putting non-verbal information into words. One strategy teachers use is that of suggesting words for nonverbal expressions. For example, in line 1 of the tutorial excerpt below, the student grinds her teeth together to describe the taste of herbs her father used to treat her fever. The teacher suggests in line 2 the word powdery, and the student accepts it in line 3, modifying the adverbial form so that it completes her "like a ... " sentence construction:

1. Student: it tasted like when they grind your teeth [rubs teeth together]
2. Teacher: powdery?
3. Student: like a powder.

Offering standard English pronunciations. A second strategy reshapes pronunciation to assist with spelling. In the excerpt below, the teacher discerns that the student refers to "AlkaSeltzer" when she says (to spell the word as the student first pronounced it) "urkasurka." Once the teacher grasps the student's idea, she repeats the word and then extends the student's thought.

Student: it had a urkasurka feeling
Teacher: like alka-seltzer, like bubbles, kinda relieved
Student: right, kinda relieved some of the pain.

Shaping a written narrative. While the first two strategies are helpful at the word and sentence level, the third is more subtle but more powerful. It suggests that, through talk, teachers can help students learn how to sequence information in written fashion. In this excerpt from the tutorial we have been following, the teacher asks the student to tell about one time when her father treated her with an herbal remedy. The student begins her story, but the teacher stops her. She says, "Why don't you just tell me about that?" She sounds like the student had not already begun to do just that. The student then repeats essentially the same information. The difference in these two versions is primarily that facts have been arranged in a different sequence.

Teacher: were you ever sick? and did he use [herbs] on you?
Student: Yes, I was once. I had this fever, I don't know what kind of fever it was, but it happen to me when I was seven years old.
Teacher: Why don't you just TELL me about that?
Student: When I was seven years old I fell sick with
a fever, and it was, uh, a fever they called a ro-matic fever.

In the first version, she tells the important facts first and adds background information last. In the repeated version, she presents background information first, and the key fact last. Her talk thus became more closely modeled on written narrative, which usually presents background information first (the "setting") and places key events later (introducing the "plot" or punch line).

As the following student composition shows, she made use of the teacher's implicit hints about how to write a story. She retains the description of the taste of the medicine her father prepared which she and the teacher had worked out. She spelled accurately the word that would have been unintelligible written as it was first pronounced. She structures her information so that background precedes the action:

I remember when I was six when old I took a Ronic fever. I was sick for five days.

My father took A OXHORNE and screwed it in water and HERBS. And he give it to me to Drink it taste like when you go to a Dr. and Have a leath Drill out it give me a ALKASELTZER felling and I stand sweating and I feel good and got out are the bed and started playing again.

Her composition is obviously one produced by a very new writer. Evaluators assigned this composition a score mid-way between Lydia's and Jean's. But scores don't tell the whole story. This student gained something of value from the tutorial. She learned how to change her talk into writing.

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This research has had many beginnings. It starts again each time I write about it. Some day a scholarly report of this study may cross your desk, cast in another voice that describes "Hypothesis," "Procedures," and "Results." But remember, as the article speaks in strange ways about these links between talk and writing, that it did not always sound that way. It started from meeting a personal contradiction: discovering that a bit of conventional wisdom I had taken for granted was not so—or at least not so as I had understood it. The research question divided and recombined. I could find patterns only by thinking small. But what I learned was not small, and it reverberates for me yet.

Much remains to be uncovered about how students and teachers talk to develop written language. If the unknown is to be discerned, teachers need to be involved in its discovery. Only teachers can see, day to day, how theory and research are played out—and contradicted—in the dalliness of the classroom.

To empower ourselves as researchers we need reports that describe ways individual researchers have examined their questions. Such reports remind us that research, like our classrooms, has many voices. While it has been conventional to remove subjectivity from research, behind the tidy reports are stories untold.

One of the stories hidden in the distant tone of many research articles is the thrill of the search. As a teacher, what I do each day is enlivened by what I see as a researcher. I am reminded of a news article I read about Barbara McClintock, who had for many years been doing genetic research on hybrid corn. Year after year, she had studied the effects which shifting a chromosomal bit had on the next generation. When someone asked her why she was not more excited about an award she had received, she said she was too busy with her latest experiment. The thrill, for her, was not in the recognition, but in following her own line of inquiry.

At the bottom of a question, whether about corn or classrooms, the thrill is the same. After all our fussing, a pattern appears. Its effects ramify. We "never knew, never expected, never thought that ..." Teachers can locate little understood problems, look at them long and hard, and describe patterns hidden to others.

Teachers are rarely "taught" to do research. Naturally, like all new learners, they contend with an unfamiliar process. These are some of the bones of research; in the messiness is the underlying structure.

As teachers discover these bones, formulating researchable questions, reading theory, collecting data, reporting what is learned and why it matters, as they flesh findings out according to the direction their question dictates, teacher research will be part of a growing enterprise of classroom study. New models for reporting what we have learned will develop and strengthen ties between theory and practice for all members of the educational community, for all learners.

References


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ethnic style and the transition to literacy. In D. Tannen (Ed.), *Coherence in spoken and written discourse* (pp. 3-19). Norwood, NJ: Ablex. (The third example discussed in this article is based on data collected by the present author.)


