We think, we talk, we write. The three processes are as one. Consequently, says Ros Wilson, if we want to change the way children write, we need to change the way they talk...

If a kid can’t say it a kid can’t write it,” has been the Big Writing maxim for 13 years. It underpins everything we say and believe, because the way a child talks directly impacts on the way a child writes.

“The Yorkshire dialect is, in my opinion, very beautiful – but then I am a born and bred Tyke. Sadly (or maybe luckily) for me, I am also a chameleon, which means that my accent and/or dialect changes according to whom I am talking to. This can be deeply embarrassing as it means that, when conversing with a Scotsman, I rapidly develop a Gaelic burr and start ‘oaching’ and ‘ayeing’ with the best of them. However, it also means that, when conversing with folk that are higher up the food chain than me, I develop a plummy, ‘posh’ voice. I am not proud of this, it is outside of my control, but it does mean I have always been able to switch effortlessly between voices and registers in both speech and writing.

For far too long we, as educators, have perpetuated the myth that in order to raise standards in writing we need to raise standards in reading. I used to say this myself when I was head of English in a large middle school. We believed this because we ‘stole’ vocabulary and language structures from other writers when we were reading, but this is usually a sub-conscious process that requires the ability to retain new words and phrases at only one meeting, as most texts are only read once. The majority of the children we teach cannot do this. They have to use new words repeatedly in order to move them from short term memory to long term memory and to understand their meaning and how to use them correctly. This process of repetition is called ‘patterning’.

Prior to the development of the former national strategies, children were not specifically taught how to structure higher level sentences, rather they had pieces of writing waved at them and were told to ‘write like this’. I was taught in this way, but I was one of the lucky ones who had an active subconscious that loves words and stores them easily. This is a gift developed in the first years of life and is directly associated with the amount of talk parents or carers do with their baby day in and day out, maintaining a constant dialogue as though he or she can understand them and can participate in the dialogue. The intention of the national strategies in teaching sentence level work was good, but the approach of sentence analysis is flawed and does not empower the majority of children because it is a reverse process: a little like teaching long division and expecting children to work out long multiplication for themselves.

The new national curriculum is even more flawed with its rigid and formidable programme of formal grammar teaching. Michael Gove’s intentions are certainly well meaning. He seeks to empower the population to both talk and write in a correct grammatical form...
Consequently, if we want to change the way children write, we need to change the way they talk.

**Don't diss dialects**

Accents distort spelling and dialects distort grammar. In addition, bilingual children may bring structures from their first language to writing or speech that also distort grammar. All these are speaking issues, but the way we speak is often an intrinsic part of our persona and in many communities the children would not want to talk in a different accent or dialect from their families and friends.

How many of us smiled as the Year 11 pupil in *Educating Yorkshire* filled her speech (and thus her writing) with ‘innit’ at the end of every phrase? It is important, therefore, that teachers do not imply criticism when they address the way children speak, but rather nurture and value their first language. In Big Writing and Power Writing we tackle the issue by telling children that we are not trying to change the way they speak in their daily lives, but rather that they need another, second voice for writing. We make the learning of this voice fun by calling it our ‘posh’ voice, although of course talking ‘posh’ is just another accent known as Received Pronunciation and all we are really aspiring to is Standard English or correct grammatical structures.

I buy a large, ridiculous hat at a charity shop and tell the children, “When I pop this hat on, the duchess has arrived and we all have to talk posh.” This gives us a fun forum within which we can discuss the different ways people talk and the ways those who talk in Standard English structure their language. We practise doing this and the children are encouraged, over time, to ‘code switch’ between community speak and ‘posh’ voice with instant ease. Within lessons across the wider curriculum we regularly ask children, “How would you say that in ‘posh’ voice?” Plenaries and mini-plenaries are ideal for this, using key elements of the learning taking place as an opportunity to compose high level and correctly
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structured sentences. This is always done in a fun, light hearted way and the children love it. They soon learn, therefore, that they must switch into this new, ‘special’ voice whenever they are writing, unless the writing calls for an accent or dialect.

I learnt formal grammar at grammar school (hence the name) in the 1950s when I was 13, yet when Gove published his formidable lists of grammar to be taught to primary children, I found I had forgotten a great deal of it because we do not need it and do not use it in order to talk or write correctly. I have never thought to myself, “I think I will open this sentence with a fronted adverbial,” or “Should I use a modal verb here?” Furthermore, now I am revisiting formal grammar as an adult, in order to better help teachers, I find that it is a minefield and that most words can take on the role of more than one part of speech and in some sentences their function can be extremely ambiguous. My proposal would be that headteachers return the SPAG test to the powers that be unopened and also that every Member of Parliament should complete the test him or herself.

One positive in the new, seriously flawed and overloaded English curriculum for primary children is the frequent reference to children’s need to constantly acquire a wider vocabulary. This is gratifying for someone who has spent 20 years telling teachers they need to teach children ‘WOW’ words, while facing frequent criticism from some who should know better. I didn’t have many books as a child because, as a member of a single parent family before the days of widow’s pensions or social security, money was scarce. However, I did have two much loved volumes that I read repeatedly as a primary aged child: The Jungle Book by Rudyard Kipling and The Wind in the Willows by Kenneth Graham. Both of these books are written in a voice that is a mix of Level 5 and Level 6 and, thus, I was seeped in higher level structures and vocabulary. Many children’s novels are dummed down today, patronising children and failing to advance their acquisition of higher level structures or vocabulary. As a profession, we must remember that it is teachers that make the difference in most children’s lives and, in many cases, if we don’t do it, no one will.

“A yeooop sithee, is’t laikin’ art?” is Yorkshire dialect for, “Hello, are you coming out to play?” If I were unable to convert it into that second, standard form I would be unable to write it in that form. No amount of cramming of formal grammar, learnt through decontextualised grammar exercises, would correct that. All I need to be able to do is code switch between my beloved Yorkshire and the standard form. “Thar knows I’s reet dun’t thar?”

New editions of the popular Big Writing handbooks are available through Oxford University Press, which has teamed up with Andrell Education to bring all schools easy access to this proven and effective methodology. Ros Wilson is also the series editor of Oxford University Press’ new writing programme, Big Writing Adventures.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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