Talking for meaning: the dialogic engagement of teachers and children in a small group reading context

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Abstract

This paper reports a UK study which investigated the instruction of comprehension strategies for elementary children in small group discussions about short animated films. The qualitative analysis of three lessons is reported to illustrate the differing approaches that the teachers took, showing how they initiate discussions and follow up responses from the children. We examine how children’s ideas are elicited, selected for further discussion, developed and evaluated by the teachers. Findings highlight operating principles for how teachers conceptualise and realise reading comprehension instruction and how these relate to the use of key language, focusing on whether this produces a ‘performance’ of dialogue or genuine dialogic engagement.

Highlights

- Operating principles for comprehension instruction inform teachers’ language use and dialogic interaction
- Talk prompts can support children to frame high level, accountable thinking.
- Dialogue can be a ‘performance’ or indicate genuine engagement with texts

Key words: comprehension; reading; dialogue; accountable talk, dialogic teaching

Introduction

The research reported in this paper set out to investigate the effect of using small-group discussions about short, animated films to teach reading comprehension. The quantitative results of this pilot study in terms of outcome have been reported elsewhere (Maine & Shields, 2015) showing that there was a significant increase in children’s comprehension as measured in a standardised test. The project was a ten-week programme where six teachers worked with small groups of Key Stage 2 children (7-11 year olds), using films as a non-written text source for teaching narrative comprehension strategies (Maine 2015b). In the project, teachers modelled specific Talk Prompts that aimed to enable the children’s high-level comprehension, reasoning and creative thinking.

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The focus of this case study is to explore the project sessions in depth, as whilst the quantitative data indicates improvement, they do not illustrate what was actually happening in the sessions. They do not show, for example, the fidelity of implementation and the epistemic status of the language that the teachers used, nor the uptake of the language by the children and whether in fact this resulted in what Murphy and colleagues (2009, p. 741) define as ‘high-level comprehension’, that is, ‘critical and reflective thinking about the text’. In this paper, data from three lessons in the programme are analysed close-up, focusing on the language of inference, reasoning and creative thinking, and how this indicated the teaching and learning that was happening. The lessons were led by different teachers yet focused on the same filmic text, particular strategies for comprehension and related language. In addition to mapping the use of the key language highlighted by the programme, particular attention is paid to the language exchanges, patterns of turns and chains of interaction and thinking (Bloome, Power Carter, Morton Christian, Otto, & Shuart-Faris, 2005; Maine, 2015a; Nystrand, 2006; Wells, 1999; Wolf, Crosson, & Resnick, 2006) and how they illuminate the discourse dynamic of these dialogic, reading discussions and evidence high-level comprehension.

**The socio-cultural activity of reading comprehension instruction**

This is a socio-cultural study, highlighting the situatedness of reading events (Rosenblatt, 1994), and recognising therefore, that different readers will bring different interpretations to bear when they talk together to make meaning from text (Maine, 2015a). Central to a socio-cultural perspective on reading and reading comprehension instruction is the importance of multiple potential interpretations, with readers, activity and text all impacting on meanings that are made (Snow, 2002). Where multiple readers are involved together, then meanings are negotiated and shared (Maine, 2013) with readers accountable to each other in the justification of their interpretations, which are in turn accountable to the text. Rosenblatt’s transactional theory (1994) which emphasises the situatedness of each new reading fits well into a socio-cultural paradigm, and for Damico, Campano and Harste (2009, p. 175) ‘a proliferation of meanings, rather than single or fixed meanings, could become a standard approach to literacy interpretation or textual response’. This is important as it places emphasis on the process of reading comprehension as hypothesising meaning-making rather than the product of correct answers (Aukerman, 2013). Hassett (2010) too, highlights the importance of multiple readings, particularly in relation to visual texts arguing for a multi-perspective approach. Mercer and Howe (2012, p. 13) emphasise ‘the relationship between social activity and individual thinking [as] a vital, distinctive characteristic of human cognition’, which takes the argument further. Not only should we pursue multiple accountable interpretations, but the collaboration of creating meanings and connections (Bloome et al., 2005) together, is an essential to
the development of thinking. As Duffy and colleagues (2010, p. 61) argue, ‘in sum, socio-cultural and situative influences have caused us to think about comprehension not only in terms of a text and reader interaction, but also in term of how the social context influences the meaning to be generated’.

Of course, in a reading instruction event, the socio-cultural context also includes the teachers themselves, who additionally bring individual knowledge and experience, but also teaching orientations that are based on their values and underpinning beliefs. Aukerman (2013) argues that the approaches that teachers take to engaging the children in discussions about text are therefore influenced by their ‘pedagogical orientations’ (A2). In line with this argument, our study highlights how teachers’ language can be seen as an indicator of the goals and values which implicitly inform their conceptualisation and realisation of reading comprehension instruction. Importantly it illuminates how these may influence the children’s comprehension strategy building.

Recognising and respecting that different readers might bring different perspectives to the reading event favours a dialogic approach to reading discussions, where teachers enable and value alternative viewpoints. This approach leads the children to challenge and critique their own interpretation through dialogic interaction (Alexander, 2008; Nystrand, 1997) rather than seek solely ‘correct’ answers or ‘authoritative’ readings (Aukerman, 2013; Dombey, 2010; Murphy et al., 2009; Soter et al., 2008; Swain, 2010). A small group reading context offers the ideal dialogic ‘situation’ for reading as it allows for extended probing, elaboration and jointly constructed meanings.

A small group dialogic approach to reading instruction

There have been several recent studies concerned with the effectiveness of teaching reading comprehension in the small group context, particularly considering the teacher and student interactions that make these groupings effective for the development of high order thinking (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003; Murphy et al., 2009; Nystrand, 2006; Soter et al., 2008; Spörer, Brunstein, & Kieschke, 2009; Swain, 2010). Soter and colleagues (2008) studied nine different small group discussion approaches to teaching reading comprehension. Their study grouped the nine contexts related to the goals of the activity and whether these had efferent, expressive or critical-analytic stances. They found that effective discussions featured authentic or open-ended questioning and uptake (by students and teachers), structure and focus, and opportunities for extended contributions. They noted that some modelling and scaffolding was necessary on the part of the teachers to prompt ‘elaborated forms of individual reasoning’ (p389) and that discussions were most productive when ‘structured and focused yet not dominated by the teacher’ (ibid). By considering reading comprehension instruction as a socio-cultural event, we centralise the agency of the participants involved. Taking this view, we argue that even if the goals of
a reading context appear to be set to a particular ‘stance’ as argued by the authors above, it is the underlying values and expectations by which teachers conceptualise the goals of the reading instruction event that impact on the degree of control they allow students to have in shaping the discussion towards either jointly constructed, or authoritative meanings. These implicit orientations are of particular interest in this study, as we argue that they have the potential to alter the opportunities for children’s engagement in authentic discussion. If children are not enabled to fully realise their own interpretations, due to the teacher’s goal of prioritising an authoritative perspective, or by concentrating on the process rather than substance of thinking, their ability to transfer strategies to new contexts may be limited.

Genuine dialogic engagement, therefore, presents a challenge for teachers. On the one hand, welcoming multiple perspectives and valuing them is paramount, ensuring that children have legitimate voice that is not merely overshadowed by the teacher’s supposed authoritative access to the ‘right’ answer. On the other hand, this might seem to suggest that all interpretations are equally valid, which may be misleading for children trying to evaluate responses. Wolf, Crossan and Resnick (2006) investigated the accountability of the talk of teachers and students in a reading lesson, analysing ‘rigorous thinking’ (asking for and giving explanation) linking of ideas (both student and teacher), and pressing for evidence from the text to justify thinking. They concluded that the ‘teacher’s strategy to keep probing the students’ ideas was an effective way to encourage elaboration’ (p18). It also enables children to develop and evaluate arguments that are accountable to the text. However, in their study, Wolf and colleagues (2006) also found evidence of superficiality in teacher questioning and linking which did not lead to high-level thinking, even when teachers were being explicit about the talk moves for accountable talk. Aukerman (2007, p. 62) argues that there is little guidance for ‘how explicitly teachers should guide students toward ways of reading associated with more cultural capital’. She proposes, ‘what is required is the willingness to let go of authoritative discourse precisely where that seems most risky- in the face of answers and interpretive techniques that fly in the face of everything we have learned to assume must be true’ (p92-93). With this comes responsibility on the part of students and teachers to convince other readers of the validity of their interpretations, building meanings together to ‘inter-think’ (Littleton & Mercer, 2013) and ‘ensure that these meanings are answerable to the text’ (Dombey, 2010, p. 111). Accountable talk (Wolf et al., 2006) enables children to interrogate the credibility of their inferences through referring the text itself, or through making connection or other knowledge of the world. Gillies (2014, p. 64) argues that ‘teachers promote cognitive growth in children when they use language that challenges their understanding, confronts discrepancies in their thinking, and requires them to provide reasons for solutions.’ Implicit in these criteria for effective engagement is the concept of dialogic interaction and teaching (Alexander, 2008; Nystrand, 1997) where teachers work to create an ethos of genuine learning where children’s voice is heard and respected and where interchanges move beyond simple patterns of teacher questioning and feedback.
The language of high-level comprehension

Further to exploring the conditions of dialogic engagement in a small group reading situation, several authors have conducted studies to explore the language of accountable talk, reasoning and creative thinking (Anderson et al., 2001; Maine, 2015a; Mercer et al., 1999; Ruthven, Hofmann & Mercer, 2011; Soter et al., 2008; Wells, 1999). The language indicators identified by Soter and colleagues (2008, p. 388) were organised into three groups to establish the difference between those promoting hypothesis (maybe, would, could, might possibly, if); positioning (I agree, I think) and analysing/generalising (because, how, why). In a previous study Maine (2015a) explored the difference between language indicators which were more aligned to critical thinking, defined by Ennis (1987, p. 10) as ‘reasonable reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do’; and creative thinking defined as ‘possibility thinking’ by Craft (2000). This distinction enabled consideration of when children were inferring beyond the frame of the text, or ‘story world’ (Anderson et al., 2001) to explore their hypotheses, and when they were drawing on evidence from within the text. The above studies have typically focused on the language that children use, rather than the language that teachers model and use to follow up ideas, as we additionally consider here. By filling this gap in the research, we aim to consider dialogic interactions more fully as indicators of the approaches that teachers take and how children’s thinking and comprehension might be affected.

High-level comprehension (Murphy et al 2009) is supported by the generation of inferences that require readers to move beyond the literal, and draw on their prior knowledge, making connections to their existing mental model of the world (Wells, 2009) to make sense of the text at hand. At a whole-text level this means making domain-specific, inter-textual and personal connections between what is known and what is presented (Anderson & Pearson, 1984; Dole, Duffy, Roehler, & Pearson, 1991; Tarchi, 2015) and readers accessing narrative text use a number of strategies to support their inference generation and meaning-making. Palincsar suggests that ‘strategies are planful approaches that learners bring to organising and monitoring their activity as readers’ (2003, p. 100), highlighting the agency of the reader in the creation of meaning, as in order to make inferences and connections readers must actively seek to understand. She refers to her earlier work with Brown which developed a reciprocal approach to the instruction of reading comprehension (Palincsar & Brown, 1984) and highlighted summarising, questioning, clarifying and predicting as important strategies to teach children. Other authors have added to this list of strategies to include actively making connections, constructing mental images, determining the importance of information, rereading and looking back, empathising and engaging, hypothesising and extending the story world (Block & Duffy, 2008; Dole et al., 1991; Keene & Zimmermann, 2007; Maine, 2015a; Maine & Waller, 2011; Pressley, 2006). These strategies can allow readers to interrogate the text, to monitor their own
understanding of it, and to reason about the accuracy of their interpretations and those of others, determining the accountability of their interpretations (Wolf et al., 2006).

Nystrand (2006, p. 397) reports the success of teaching approaches which encourage ‘elaborative interrogations requiring students to relate and elaborate connections between text read and their own experience and prior knowledge’ and Palinscar (2003) is clear that in order for children to take up these strategies, they must be explicitly taught and modelled by teachers, a point additionally highlighted by Pressley (2006). Both authors agree that comprehension strategies should not be taught in isolation, but rather through authentic discussion and response to text. Therefore, in order to support the teachers in our project to promote high-level comprehension and accountable meaning-making, language indicators which were highlighted by studies of accountable talk were matched broadly to different comprehension strategies and promoted as Talk Prompts (TABLE 1).

Table 1 Talk Prompts connected to different strategies for comprehension

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comprehension Strategy (with key identifiers for children)</th>
<th>Talk Prompts to model and encourage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Main points</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summarising (determining importance)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The most important parts were...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The key things that happened were...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>First, then, next...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The main point was...</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The film is about...</td>
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<tr>
<td>I wonder...</td>
<td>I wonder if, why, what...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioning (exploring, hypothesising, imagining, possibility thinking)</td>
<td>Why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What is it all about?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maybe...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Possibly...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perhaps...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Could...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spotting puzzles</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarifying (self-monitoring, reflecting)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It confused me when...</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I’m not sure why...</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I didn’t understand when...</td>
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<tr>
<td>What do you think?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reasoning (inductive and deductive inference, synthesising, critical thinking, predicting)</td>
<td>I think... because...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It means...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I think what will happen is...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>because</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>If... then</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It reminds me of..</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecting (accessing domain-specific knowledge, world knowledge or inter-textual references)</td>
<td>It reminds me of...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It made me think about...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I noticed that...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step into the story</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaging (emotional and sensory responses, visualising, empathising)</td>
<td>If it was me I would have...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I think he/she felt...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It’s scary/ exciting/ funny when...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It made me feel...</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I could imagine...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I understand how he/she feels</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I would too...</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
The prompts were provided as a card resource for the children so that they were easily accessible, with the aim of supporting the framing of their responses to the filmic texts (Maine 2015b). For the teachers there was an emphasis on modelling the language rather than using it as the basis for questioning, to try to develop a more dialogic collaboration. In other words, the Talk Prompts were intended to enable thinking rather than constrain it, scaffolding children’s use of different comprehension strategies to make meaning. As a result, many of the phrases were those that could be associated with hypotheses (Maine, 2014, 2015a; Soter et al., 2008) and reasoning (Mercer et al., 1999; Wolf et al., 2006). The small-group reading context in this study thereby incorporated what is known about the indicators of high level thinking, with the desirability of explicitly teaching comprehension strategies in authentic contexts. The Talk Prompts can be seen to fill the gap between extending language to support dialogic interaction and this explicit instruction.

**Methodology**

This paper presents a close-up analysis of teachers’ interactions with small groups from three lessons involving three different teachers (we will call them Kim, Ali and Liz). All these lessons are from the same point in the programme, so the film that was shared was the same, and the programme plan highlighted the same teaching focus. The teacher’s role was to encourage the children to draw on several different strategies, using the Talk Prompts to frame their responses and support their thinking. Our initial analysis suggested that these three lessons illustrate different ways that teachers conceptualise and realise reading comprehension instruction in small groups, so they were selected for the close-up detailed analysis of the interaction. Therefore, the lessons offer a valuable context, or rather multiple contexts, for analysing the use of the Talk Prompts and the ways in which they can extend and/or challenge children’s comprehension and interpretation of text in real classroom settings. They also offer a unique opportunity to observe different teachers engaging in the cultural activity of reading comprehension instruction.

There were two main intentions in the qualitative analysis of the data and these are expressed as two research questions:

**RQ1:** How do the teachers use the Talk Prompts to extend and/or challenge children’s comprehension and interpretation in their different instructional contexts?

**RQ2:** How do the teachers respond to children’s use of the Talk Prompts to further high-level comprehension and elaboration?

Initially, the frequency of Talk Prompts use was considered, noting their adoption by children and the degree to which teachers modelled the language or made its use explicit rather than reframing it into comprehension questions. Secondly, the interchanges and content of the turns were considered...
to analyse uptake of ideas and evidence of inference and understanding. For the teacher turns, this meant looking in depth at their responses to children’s ideas, to see where they had explored or challenged them, but also to evaluate places where misunderstandings, or incoherent perspectives were not challenged. Additionally their use of the prompts was analysed to see if they were prioritising the language itself, or the high level thinking that it was supposed to promote. The teachers’ approaches to questioning the children further, either by seeking ‘correct’ interpretations or by challenging the children to justify and make ‘accountable’ their own reasoning, were noted.

For the children’s comments, the ideas that were expressed using the Talk Prompts were analysed to evaluate whether their use led to limited reasoning, or alternatively, elaborative inferences and accountable interpretations, defined by Murphy and colleagues (2009) as high-level comprehension. Equally noted were instances where this high-level thinking was evident, but the children did not include any of the key language highlighted as by the programme. A scheme was devised which highlighted these features of the dialogue (TABLE 2) and the two authors independently coded the data and then subsequently discussed the results in detail, drawing out turns and sequences of turns where the research questions could be answered, and reflecting on incidences where teachers took very different approaches.

Table 2: Coding scheme for analysing dialogue in small group reading comprehension

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Instruction for coder</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher modelling the Talk Prompts either through offering their own view or by re-voicing a child’s answer</td>
<td>TM</td>
<td>Where the teacher models explicitly, eg ‘I wonder if…..’ or ‘That reminds me of’ or re-voices, ‘so, you wonder...’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher reframing the Talk Prompts into questions</td>
<td>TQ</td>
<td>Where the teacher reforms the specific language into a question eg, ‘what does it remind you of?’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher explaining the use of the Talk Prompts or linking their explicit use to comprehension strategies</td>
<td>TEx</td>
<td>Where teacher explains when to use the language eg, ‘When you have a puzzle you can say ‘that reminds me of’....’ Or... ‘Remember how we can use I wonder or Maybe to ask questions...’ or Teacher makes explicit the link between the children’s language and how it has enabled them comprehend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher follow up through probing or authentically engaging in discussion and extending ideas or by challenging an interpretation</td>
<td>TF</td>
<td>When teacher uses Qs to draw more information about an idea, or engages in a ‘genuine’ discussion seeming to draw on children’s understanding to help her, eg ‘oh hang on, I see what you mean, I was confused by that too....’ or Teacher explicitly challenges an idea. This may be done subtly to lead the child to recognise that they cannot defend their suggestion. ‘but does that make sense...?’ ‘show me the evidence in the text’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Teacher does not extend or probe further – not recognising or evaluating the high-level comprehension that is happening or Teacher misses an opportunity to correct or challenge an idea and moves on to next child or praises the use of language but does not evaluate the idea

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Child uses the talk prompts for high-level comp</td>
<td>CTP</td>
<td>When they use the talk prompts to frame a comment signalling high-level comp, eg ‘I wonder if he made the right decision when...’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child uses prompts but this results in limited high-level comprehension and prompts are used artificially or awkwardly</td>
<td>CL</td>
<td>Turns where the use of the language is artificial and restricts thinking (these will be turns that are indicated by non-relevant, or non-coherent ideas)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child engages in high level comprehension without the use of the talk prompts</td>
<td>CHC</td>
<td>Turns where the content indicates an accountable interpretation or reasoning, but this is expressed without direct use of the talk prompts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results from the coding were used as further stimulus for analysis, with differences between the two researchers highlighting the socio-cultural ‘reading’ that was taking place as we ourselves comprehended the text of the transcripts. As for inter-observer reliability, coding separately led to more than 80% agreement, with more than 90% agreement after discussion and collaboration. Additionally the transcripts were analysed to record the frequency with which the children and teachers used the key language of the Talk Prompts. For the teachers it was recorded when these were used to form questions, and when the language was modelled, either through repeating phrases back to children or introducing new ideas.

The Session and the Text

The examples are drawn from the sixth session in the programme, at which point the children had practised using different Talk Prompts for a range of different strategies (TABLE 1). The lesson plan guidance was that teachers should lead the children to summarise the main points of the narrative, then raise questions about it, drawing out their uncertainties and connections they could make to other texts. The guidance suggested that teachers should support children to recognise how the answers to different questions might be found in or beyond the text, and how some questions might not have definite answers at all, but might add to their understanding of the story.

The short animated film that was used as the text source for the session was *Once in a Lifetime* (Gulledge, 2011). The film can be freely accessed through vimeo.com, and was uploaded there by its director. In order for readers of this paper to understand the comments made by the teachers and children, it is important to give a summary of the film. However, by presenting an ‘authoritative’
interpretation, there is a risk that contradicts comments made above about valid interpretations, so viewing the two-minute film is desirable if possible. The interpretations made here are accountable to the text itself drawing on evidence that is seen or heard on screen. After the title has been displayed, the film opens with a shot of a man on an airship (a blimp-type balloon with a wooden ship beneath) which appears not to be moving in the sky. He pulls a rope attached to a box-like object at the rear of the ship and it falls off, he claps his hand to his head and frowns. Taking out his telescope he sees a group of turtles flying in the air towards him. As they pass the ship, the man runs to the front of the ship, picks up a rope and lassoes one of the turtles. His ship starts to move, pulled by the turtle. However, the rope snaps and the boat is stranded again as the turtles move further away. The man looks round to see one last turtle that is flying further behind the rest of the group. He looks to the group, who are now even further away, looks at the turtle and looks at his ship, then leaps over the side of the ship onto the turtle’s back as it passes underneath. They fly into the distance leaving the ship behind. The film lasts two minutes and there is no dialogue, however there is an orchestral musical score. The small groups of children watched the film in its entirety with their teacher then started their discussion.

Findings
In this section we answer our research questions by using the coding scheme to analyse how teachers initiate discussions and follow up responses from the children, examining how children’s ideas are elicited, selected for further discussion, developed and evaluated by the teachers (cf. Ruthven & Hofmann, in press). We are interested in whether and how the teachers prompt students to interrogate their own and each other’s thinking and interpretation of the text; how they relate that thinking to the text itself; and how they link to their prior experiences and knowledge of the world in accountable ways. We closely examine the role of the Talk Prompts in supporting such processes.

RQ 1: How do the teachers use the Talk Prompts to extend and/or challenge children’s comprehension and interpretation in their different instructional contexts?

The first point to note when analysing the teacher turns within the group dialogue is that they all used the key language talk prompts with at least 47% of their turns including the prompts and in one case (Liz) 76%. Between 50 and 60% of all talk prompt occurrence by the three teachers was used in questioning rather than the modelling suggested in the programme guidance.

All three teachers were keen to include the ideas of the children and engage in more than ‘testing’ comprehension questions (Nystrand, 1997). However, the pattern of turns in the groups mostly meant that the teachers took alternative turns, with only a couple of instances where the children responded directly to each other for more than two turns. The programme session notes indicated
that by this point in the project, the children might be expected to take much more of a lead in the discussion, following the reciprocal teaching approach first espoused by Palincsar and Brown (1984). In fact, whilst the teachers were keen to explore ideas, they always retained control of the dialogue and its direction. Also, when looking closely at the turns that the teachers took it was evident that they had taken very different approaches to using the Talk Prompts as a means of extending the children’s comprehension and teaching specific strategies. These examples illustrate how differently the teachers conceptualise and realise comprehension instruction and can be seen as indicative of the individual operating principles that inform their approach, and whether these are goal, process or meaning oriented (cf. Aukerman, 2013).

For example, in this episode from Liz’s lesson, we argue that the interaction appears to be conducted with a goal of steering the children towards a ‘correct’ interpretation of the story without exploring multiple interpretations the children may have.

A1. Liz: **It confused me when** he jumped on the back of the turtle, I didn’t quite understand **why** he did that. I can understand **why** he towed... wanted to use the turtle to help pull the airship along. **But** actually it was going anyway.
A2. G: **I think maybe** he had run out of rope, or with the other bit of rope, he thought it would snap again, **so** he like jumped.
A3. Liz: **So** he jumped. But I don’t understand **why** he needed the turtle to pull the ship along, **because** it was going anyway.
A4. A: No he was stuck. He pulled this rope and the piece of wood snapped off and I think it made it move.
A5. Liz: Oh I see. So you spotted...
A6. G: **I think it was like the sail... it was the sail.**
A7. B: Also it can be something that goes round.
A8. Liz: **So** something broke. Shall we go back and have a look. Let’s go back and see, **why** he needed something to pull him along. This is the bit I didn’t understand, but now you are pointing me in the right direction, you are taking me back to the film to explain **why** he needed pulling along. How can you tell?

Liz seems to prioritise a particular authoritative interpretation and as a result pays less attention to children’s alternative ideas (A6, A7). As a result, those ideas are not explored or developed, instead she steers children directly away from them towards the goal of a very specific focus and one ‘correct’ interpretation (A3, A8). Interestingly, the language of the Talk Prompts plays a central role in her actions. Liz’s approach focuses very much on the modelling of language (coded TM – Teacher Modelling): She models the language of ‘spotting puzzles’ and uses this to pick up misconceptions
that the children have, pretending she has also not understood a pivotal part of the film (A1, A3). She models returning to the text for to seek accountability for the ideas (A8).

Liz leads the group back to the text to highlight the very start of the film with the clear goal of using the Talk Prompt, ‘I didn’t understand’ (A8), to demonstrate how she can return to the text to resolve issues. The children participate by supporting her to explain the evidence and the discussion around this point continued for several more turns. So, whilst Liz is orientated towards the product of comprehension, she makes explicit how this could be achieved with reference to the text, and examines this in detail with the children, taking a stance as a co-learner to engage them more dialogically.

Kim’s operating principle seems to be geared more towards the explicit use of the comprehension strategies. Below, she draws the children’s attention to the strategy of ‘questioning’ that their responses suggested that they were using.

B1. Kim: Is there any... So these are the ‘I wonder’, or ‘Why’, or ‘Maybe’, or ‘Possibly’. So has anyone got... Right, do you want to... Can we start round this way, and go round, yeah?
B2. S: I wonder why... no, I wonder what the thing that fell off was.
B3. Kim: Oh. What do we think... How can... Did we know... did we clearly see what was there, that... to fall off? No. So were the clues in the film? Were there clues to help us in the film?

In the above episode Kim refers to ‘clues’ (B3) drawing the children’s attention to looking back into the text for evidence to support their thinking. The difference between Liz’s and Kim’s approach here, is that Liz models the extraction of the ‘correct’ information, whereas Kim focuses on the strategy but does not show how it might be used effectively. The repeated focus on such strategies in this lesson enables a more generic approach to the process of comprehension. However, the consequence of this approach means that, while in the first lesson above (Liz) the children’s ideas were evaluated for their immediate correctness (though with little exploration of multiple interpretations), here the content and quality of the children’s ideas becomes secondary and Kim does not always challenge their accountability:

B4. Kim: So starting about what the most important part... Saba?
B5. S: The man... the most important part was the man was flying in the ship, with a balloon.
B7. S: But then the turtles came, which may be actually birds. And then he jumped on the turtle (but before he moved... around.

B8. Kim: Any more to add, because that was very good. You went from the beginning to the end in about four or five different points, so that was brilliant Saba. You did it really well. And you did some also extra thinking in there. So can I... Let’s see if we can go straight into our blue card.

Kim feeds back to Saba that she has appropriately used the strategy of identifying key parts in a story (B8), yet does not challenge the content of this summary. This happens at additional points in the session, so that the language features, and indeed strategies for comprehension are highlighted and linked (coded TEx - Teacher Explaining/linking prompts), yet the meanings and accountability of the text have not been challenged. We argue that as a result, the process of the meaning making is reduced to a ‘performance’ of dialogue, and Kim moves quickly onto the next part of her lesson where she has printed the Talk Prompts onto different coloured cards.

Finally, Ali’s approach is different again. Initially she also asks the children to summarise the film, but she emphasises the ‘correctness’ of the thus obtained summary, asking the other children if they feel satisfied with what had been offered. She asks, ‘Does anyone want to add anything to that? Or do you think he got the main points...?’ Like Liz, she prioritises the sense of a ‘correct’ answer, though she offers the children the opportunity to respond to this, seeking the other children’s views of whether it corresponds to their sense of the text. Beyond the text itself and the teacher’s authoritative interpretation of it, other children’s understandings of the text are, therefore, constructed as a source of accountability. Using the strategy of ‘finding puzzles’ and ‘what do you think’, Ali encourages the children to use the talk prompts to explore points that need clarification:

C1. N: I am not sure why the man went on top of the turtle.
C2. Ali: So you are not sure why the man went onto the turtle Natalie. So Lenny what do you think?
C3. L: I think he jumped onto the turtle because he was, erm. He wanted to get away he didn’t want to stay in the ship forever, because his engine must have broken. Or it didn’t work.
C4. Ali: Wendell what do you think the answer to Natalie’s puzzle?
C5. W: I think he jumped onto the back of the turtle because if he lost the engine and the rope he couldn’t go anywhere, but the turtles didn’t need an engine, and they could just go on. So why should he go with the turtles, to go to Spain and...
C6. Ali: Anybody else got a puzzle?
On line C1, Natalie highlights her lack of understanding. Instead of immediately guiding her to a source for a ‘correct’ interpretation, Ali asks several other children to solve Natalie’s problem (C2, C4), prioritising multiple meanings and interpretations as the goal, whilst including the language of the prompts.

Ali dialogically engages the children in responding to each other’s ideas, and they produce interpretations that have accountability to the text, and to each other as Wendell elaborates (C5) on Lenny’s initial solution (C3). However, she gives no feedback about the integrity of Wendell’s and Lenny’s responses, and arguably misses an opportunity to point out why they are accountable (coded TN - teacher does not extend). This accountability may not be apparent to Natalie, only that she now has an answer to her puzzle. Ali prioritises collective meaning and the children collaborate to find a solution, which is found satisfactory and then she moves on to the next part of the lesson.

The choice to move on (B8, C6), or not challenge or extend the children’s thinking (coded TN – teacher does not extend) proved an interesting feature of the lessons to analyse. It was most commonly seen when the teachers moved quickly from one idea onto the next part of the lesson, or superficially fed back that a comment was ‘good’ though in fact it may have not been accountable to the text nor indicative of high level inferences. As in the case of Kim, sometimes this lack of interrogation was due to the highlighting of the Talk Prompts with little regard for the quality of the thinking. The three examples above demonstrate the affordances of each teacher’s approach and operating principles for teaching comprehension beyond the programme guidance which only suggested that teachers should model the language of the Talk Prompts.

RQ2: How do the teachers respond to children’s use of the Talk Prompts to further high-level comprehension and elaboration?

Like the teachers in the lessons, there was clear evidence that the children used the language of the Talk Prompts to frame their responses to the texts. 52% of the total number of child turns within the three lessons included one or more of the prompts, with a particular focus on ‘I think’, ‘because’, ‘wonder’, ‘maybe’ and ‘why’. At a surface level, this might suggest that high-level comprehension and reasoning by the children was happening. However, the coding and close analysis of these lessons allowed us to interrogate this in detail and to examine the language and content of the children’s ideas, and also the teacher responses to their use of the Talk Prompts.

Where the language the children used supported high level comprehension (coded as CTP – Child use of prompt) it allowed them to make suggestions provisionally, and give reasoning for their responses. When directed to ask questions or to ‘wonder’ about the text, these tended to fall into three categories: responses which highlighted that they were struggling to comprehend the text; the
raising of questions that they already knew the answer to (evaluated as such because of their subsequent comments); and responses which genuinely moved an understanding of the text forward. These different types of question are well illustrated by an early sequence from Ali’s session (C7, C9, C11, C13), where she has invited them to ‘wonder’ (before the sequence above where they identify puzzles):

C7. O: I wonder why the boat was flying?
C8. Ali: Wondered why the boat was flying. Natalie.
C9. N: I wondered where the turtles are going to take the man?
C10. Ali: That’s a good one. Connor.
C11. C. I wonder if erm... at the end when the man jumped on the turtle, I wonder if they turtle come back to save him, or if he was just lucky.
C13 L: I wonder if the man, when the man jumped over onto the turtle, if he made the right decision, because he left everything on his ship.
C14 W: He couldn’t take everything with him.

In addition to considering the possible impact of the teacher intervention on the children’s understanding, it is interesting to consider the responses themselves. Both Osman (C7) and Natalie’s (C9) questions concern events ‘beyond the story world’ (Anderson et al., 2001; Maine, 2015a) yet do little to enhance their understanding (coded as CL – Child Limited comprehension), as they do not appear to be not borne of elaborative inferences which seek to interrogate motivation or identify plot drivers (Tennent, 2015). In contrast, Connor’s response (C11) offers an idea that the turtles had agency in the rescue of the pilot, though this a comment that is not accountable to the text, as it appears the last turtle has not turned back, but is merely lagging behind. It is Lenny (C13), however, who arguably asks the most profound question of all and one which is at the heart of the film (which after all has the title Once in a Lifetime). It is a comment that is followed up spontaneously by Wendell (C14), in which he offers reasoning without using the Talk Prompts (coded CHC - Child High-level Comprehension), yet is a ‘road not taken’ by Ali as she moves on quite quickly to the next section of the lesson (coded TN- Teacher does not extend). For the children, then, there is no difference between Osman’s query about why the boat is flying, and Lenny’s (with Wendell’s subsequent follow up) point about making a decision to leave everything behind. In this example, whilst the children’s Talk Prompts questions do allow degrees of high level thinking, this is not made explicit by the teacher.

Birhane, in Liz’s lesson, also poses a question about why the man jumped on to the turtle (A9) and Liz again assumes a role of an equally mystified co-learner as she models thinking through an answer to his question.
A9. B: Why he jumped onto the turtle?

A10. Liz: Why he jumped onto the turtle? Okay. Why do you think he jumped onto the turtle?

A11. B: I don’t know.

A12. Ge: To get moving.

A13 Liz: To get moving. Mm I wonder how he did that though, because then once he jumped onto the turtle he would have left his ship behind.

Liz models the language of questioning and reasoning ‘I wonder’ and ‘because’ (A13) and this can be seen as useful and necessary for comprehension instruction (Palincsar, 2003), but through doing so she closes down the discussion, giving the elaborated response that could be seen as the ‘correct’ interpretation, rather than leading Birhane to explore this thinking himself.

In Kim’s lesson, the children also raise questions about the text using the language of the Talk Prompts.

B9 G: I wonder why... no, I wonder what the thing that fell off was.

B10 Kim: Oh. What do we think... How can... Did we know... did we clearly see what was there, that... to fall off? No. So were the clues in the film? Were there clues to help us in the film?

B11 G: Might have been a rudder.

B12 Kim: Rudder. Why do you think a rudder?

B13 G: Because that steers the ship, and he only went straight when the turtle pulled him.

Whilst in other sequences in her lesson Kim does not always follow up the content of what the children say, she does try to lead them to the text for evidence. She refers to ‘clues’ (B10) and through extended questioning (coded as TF – Teacher Follow-up/extension) enables Gareth to give a reason for suggesting that the rudder had fallen from the ship at the start (B12).

Further to the divergence of asking creative questions (Maine, 2015a) the children also give reasoning for their answers. The children are able to make suggestions using ‘possibly’, ‘maybe’ or ‘might’ and they are also able to offer reasoning for why their suggestions are valid. In the sequence above, Gareth uses the talk prompt thoughtfully, as he reframes ‘I wonder why’ to ‘I wonder what’ (B9). However, that he is so quick to offer the possibility of the piece being a rudder suggests that he already knows the answer to his own question. That said, upon Kim’s probing, he is able to reason and provide evidence for his suggestion (B13).

Whilst there are instances where children’s use of the talk prompts seems to take their thinking into lines of enquiry which were not directly accountable to the text (coded CL – Child Limited comprehension), it is the teacher’s response which has an impact on whether their ideas are
challenged or not (TF or TN). In Kim’s lesson, whilst Saba seems to struggle to use the language coherently, extended questioning again by Kim allows her to gradually frame her response:

B14  S:  I wonder why... why the sea... giant sea turtle was, you know, cut-... how he cut off the rope. But I thought the little one like left behind was actually a baby one of them.
B15  Kim:  A baby turtle?
B16  S:  Because he looked smaller and slower than the rest of them.
B17  Kim:  Oh okay.
B18  S:  That’s why he jumped on it.
B19  Kim:  Is that why... why do you think he jumped on the smaller one that was left behind?
B20  S:  Because that was the only one that he could actually do... get on to get home. Well, to go where this... I think I know why he was on the boat. He was wondering where all the sea ocean animals go... I mean sea turtles go to, after they’ve had their babies.

Kim’s first response in this sequence (B15) is a clear reminder of how subtle the probes that teachers use to extend ideas can be. She does not ask ‘why’, so in a simple concordance exercise of coding, her response might not be isolated as one which is extending. However, Saba picks up the cue and explains herself carefully (B16). Answering the research questions highlighted the difficulty in looking at individual turns, and the desirability of looking at sequences of turns (Nystrand, 2006). Hence it was necessary to consider the both the teachers and children in each research question.

Conclusions

The findings demonstrate how the operating principles underlying reading comprehension instruction vary in substantial ways from one lesson to another, and influence the teachers’ use of key language. We argue that these lessons might be illustrative of different kinds of reading comprehension instruction in primary classrooms more widely (cf. Soter et al., 2008, Murphy et al., 2009), hence providing the opportunity to examine the use and consequences of using specific prompts for talk in a range of discursive classroom contexts. We also recognise that there are variations within lessons, and it is important to note that teacher responses are spontaneous and fluid, reflecting different operating principles even within one discussion.

The coding and analysis of the lessons led to the development of a conceptual two dimensional model of response and thinking (Figure 1). One dimension describes the language use of participants and the degree to which this frames their thinking (Anderson et al., 2001; Maine, 2015a; Mercer et al., 1999; Soter et al., 2008, Ruthven & Hofmann, in press). For the teachers this means using the Talk Prompt language to either model or question about the text (coded TM or TQ), or to explain the language and strategies that are promoted on a more meta-cognitive level, following-up, challenging and extending responses (TEx, TF). For the children, this is indicated by the embedded use of the language to frame thinking (CTP), or conversely, their awkward or artificial use of the language
where the communicated idea is incoherent or has limited accountability to the text (CL). The first dimension, then, relates to the critical use of the language and whether this is ‘formulaic’ (Wolf et al., 2006, p. 19) and, we propose, more about performance of dialogue, or if it reflects genuine dialogic engagement leading to high-level thinking. In other words, this is the ‘meaning’ dimension which allows for the analysis of the quality of thinking that is related to the use of key language. There are of course times when both teachers and children achieve high-level thinking, but the subtleties of the dialogue mean that they do not use key language, so it is important to note this model is focused on the moments when that language is used, to examine how this is so.

Figure 1 Model of Talk Prompt use and operating principles for comprehension

Other studies have reported the different goals of reading comprehension discussion approaches and whether these are more expressive, efferent or critical analytical (Soter et al., 2008). However, this study, where teachers were following the same programme, illustrates how an operating principle behind their use of the language alters the choice of response moves they make when trying to elicit high-level comprehension. This forms the second dimension of our proposed conceptual model. The examples from the three lessons illustrated that when the operating principle was one of ‘goal’ orientation and prioritised a preferred authoritative interpretation, the teacher modelled and used the language to elicit that one meaning. On the other hand, when the focus was
tightly on the process of using strategies and associated language, praise was given for use of the Talk Prompts, but with little regard for the accountability of the meaning to the text or its coherence. Children’s responses here were often re-voiced by the teacher, using talk prompt language, but with little or no guidance for the children to be able to evaluate the quality of the response. Finally, when the operating principle valued high-level critical thinking and accountable interpretations, the teacher not only led the children to use the language of reasoning to explain their ideas, but also probed further to lead the children to interrogative inference.

Using the model to analyse the different approaches that the teachers took, it can be seen that whilst the modelling and even explicit linking of language and strategies may take place (TM, TEx), this does not automatically lead to or prioritise high level comprehension but may do so superficially, leading to a performance of, rather than genuine, dialogic engagement. Equally, and importantly, the subtle ways that teachers were able to follow-up, probe and extend (TF), though rarely overtly challenge, children’s thinking, was not always evidenced by the key language indicators or Talk Prompts. Outside the model lie the opportunities for teachers to extend or challenge thinking that were not taken (TN), giving some indication of the operating principles guiding the teachers’ interactions.

This leads to a final point, and for this we must return to Natalie’s lack of understanding, when she was, ‘not sure why the man went on top of the turtle’ (C1). Using the prompt ‘I’m not sure why’ indicated a point that needed clarification (Palincsar & Brown, 1984) and might be seen as a self-monitoring move. Natalie seemed to realise that this moment is pivotal in the story, but was not sure why. When the other children offered their explanations (Lenny and Wendell, see above in lines C3 and C5), she was given an answer to her question, but no explanation for why these answers had value. Through collaborating in the group setting, she was presented with many alternative views, some of which were accountable and demonstrate high-levels of comprehension, but she was not given the tools to be able to evaluate these for herself. In this sense our paper contributes to and extends the emerging body of research in other subject areas seeking to take greater account of the development of children’s understanding of the ‘epistemic nuance’ of specific subject content (cf. Ruthven & Hofmann, 2013).

This issue is also true for the sequences where the teachers carefully tease out the ‘correct’ answer from the children either through extended questioning or assuming the role of a co-learner. Whilst the conversation might lead to an interesting collective account, and even demonstrate some admirable dialogic interaction, without the explicit linking of language, strategy and meaning, transferability and generalisation to new narratives is limited. On the other hand, an over-prioritisation of the language or comprehension strategy means that the meaning and quality of the thinking is trumped by a focus on the ‘performance’ of the dialogue. The model then offers an opportunity for teachers to reflect on their own language use and operating principles for teaching comprehension. It allows them to analyse their talk and potentially prepare carefully for dialogic...
discussions so that they model thinking, not just language, to support their children to engage with a variety of text modes through high-level, critical and reflective thinking. If the rationale for using non-written narratives is that they might provide cognitive space for thinking and high-level comprehension without the pressure of decoding, then this must be fully utilised and a balance struck between practising using key language to frame thinking, and producing ideas that have accountability to the text and other readers, regardless of narrative mode.

List of references


