RESEARCH REPORT

Finding your voice: A critical investigation, using approaches drawn from action research, into the use of dialogue and discussion to support A-Level students' production of sophisticated academic writing.

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Abstract

Background and purpose

A-Level Literature students' constant use of structured scaffolding techniques had resulted in limited analysis and exploration in their academic writing.

Aims

This study investigates the use of dialogue and discussion to support A-Level Literature students' production of sophisticated academic writing.

Methodology

My investigation draws upon approaches from action research, using McNiff's (2016) 'action-reflection' model. This research consists of a two-phase enquiry, with the initial phase investigating students' experience of the teaching of academic writing throughout secondary school, and the second phase entailing the crafting of a lesson intervention to investigate the impact of dialogic teaching strategies in the teaching of academic writing. A qualitative methodology which is underpinned by a constructivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology adheres to the personalised nature of academic writing and dialogic strategies.

Findings

The 15 Year 12 Literature students involved in the study, recalled their experiences of the teaching of academic writing throughout secondary school as involving predominantly teacher-led lessons and an overwhelming use of structured scaffolds. This influenced students' attainment as they struggled to craft coherent arguments and explore their ideas, in addition to stifling their confidence and independence. Through the second phase of my action research investigation, promising evidence emerged that dialogue and discussion has the potential to transform students' attitude towards academic writing. 80% of students in the research group saw their grades increase or remain within the A-A* bracket as a result of the dialogic intervention. The intervention granted students the confidence and independence needed to explore texts critically and creatively through the means of academic writing, thus creating 'informed, personal responses' (AQA, 2021). These findings have been summarised in 'The Maximus Model of Academic Writing' (Model 2).

Conclusions, originality, value and implications

This study indicated the need to move away from structured scaffolds in the teaching of academic writing, particularly in the KS5 classroom. Dialogic strategies offer a promising alternative, by inviting detailed analysis and exploration by encouraging students to share their ideas and perspectives, while considering those of their peers. This approach allows for complex thought and personalised scaffolding, thus aiding in the development of written composition.

Keywords: dialogic education; discussion; academic writing; A-Level English Literature; independence

Introduction

This research report is based on my MEd Dissertation, which was conducted at the University of Cambridge in 2023.

Context

As an Early Career Teacher in a single-sex comprehensive secondary school, I noticed that structured scaffold methods were routinely used to aid students in their academic writing composition. These took the form of various acronyms, namely PEE (Point, Evidence, Explain) and WHW (What, How, Why). I found that the use of such scaffolding in A-Level Literature students' academic writing was greatly limiting their analysis and exploration of texts, and ultimately negatively impacting their grades. The AQA A-Level Literature specification and mark scheme, outline how this exam board strives to allow students to explore texts critically and creatively (2021). However, from my own experiences of teaching this A-Level specification to Year 12 students, there seems to be a disconnect between such key skills and the formulaic essays produced by structured scaffold techniques.

This study explored whether the removal of structured scaffolding and the introduction of dialogue and discussion would allow a mixed ability A-Level Literature class to produce sophisticated academic writing, while cultivating independence over their own learning.

Sophisticated academic writing is determined through the criteria outlined in the Maximus Model of Academic Writing (Model 2). These five key factors were drawn from the AQA A-Level specification and marking criteria, as well as relevant literature as outlined below. These factors include students' ability to write fluently and craft a coherent structure, maintain a consistent argument which responds to the debate outlined in the question, and fully explore and develop ideas about the text in their analysis. Furthermore, the term 'dialogic' is interpreted as a collaborative, fluid and ever evolving classroom dialogue which seeks to encourage students to confidently share their ideas and experiences, while maintaining an open and reflective attitude to that of others.

Motivation, focus and questions

Limitations of existing approaches

Bleiman (2019) and Gibbons (2018) explore the limitations inadvertently placed on students by scaffolding approaches, including PEE and PEETAL (Point, Evidence, Explanation, Technique, Analysis, Link). Both studies recorded students' writing becoming 'increasingly constrained and constricted' (Gibbons 2018, p.37) as well as 'limit[ed] [...] in length, scope and ideas' (Beliman, 2019). These observations fell in line with my own experiences, as the dependency on scaffold structures resulted in my students not being, 'able to make points that actually link [...] and they only ever talk about quotes in isolation' (Gibbons 2018, p.42).

Additionally, Green (2007) found that the approaches used in secondary English classrooms were overtly 'teacher led' (p.122). Even before the widespread introduction of PEE, teachers were adopting classroom strategies that were 'highly structured and guided' (p.122). This seemed to hinder students' creative expression, as well as their ability to 'develop individual and personal responses to texts' (2007, p.127). Therefore, questions must be raised about the effectiveness of structured scaffolding methods and restrictive teacher-led approaches, as they do not seem to allow the opportunities for creative thought and exploration which the A-Level specification demands.

Evidence that classroom talk could support the development of writing

Academic writing can be viewed as a form of critical dialogue. Therefore, my interest in students' academic writing proficiency leads to an interest in other forms of knowledge generation and collaborative meaning-making, including the investigation of dialogue and discussion in the English classroom.

Kerr (2006) investigated how teachers could help their students bridge the gap between 'interactive, implicit modes of speech to the more abstract, explicit mode of writing' (2006, p.6). This draws on Vygotsky's ideas about 'literate speech' (p.6), which encapsulates that the teaching of writing must be '"relevant to life", meaningful for children and taught naturally rather than mechanically' (Thompson, 2012, p.89). Kerr (2006) outlines how students can create a 'deliberate structuring of a web of meaning' (2006, p.6) in their writing, through 'discussions between students in the classroom' (p.6). Bleiman (2019) and Kerr (2006) highlight the importance of keeping 'the process of finding words in the child's control' (Kerr, 2006, p.7). This emphasis on student autonomy, which dialogic practices cultivates, allows students to grow in confidence when they are engaging in debates, verbally and in writing.

Ethos and principles of dialogic teaching

Bakhtin (1986), states that 'if an answer does not give rise to a new question from itself, it falls out of the dialogue' (p.168). Alexander (2020) uses this to outline his Dialogic Teaching approach, which involves 'harness[ing] the power of dialogue [...] to stimulate and extend students' thinking, learning, knowing and understanding, and to enable them to discuss, reason and argue.' (2020, p.128).
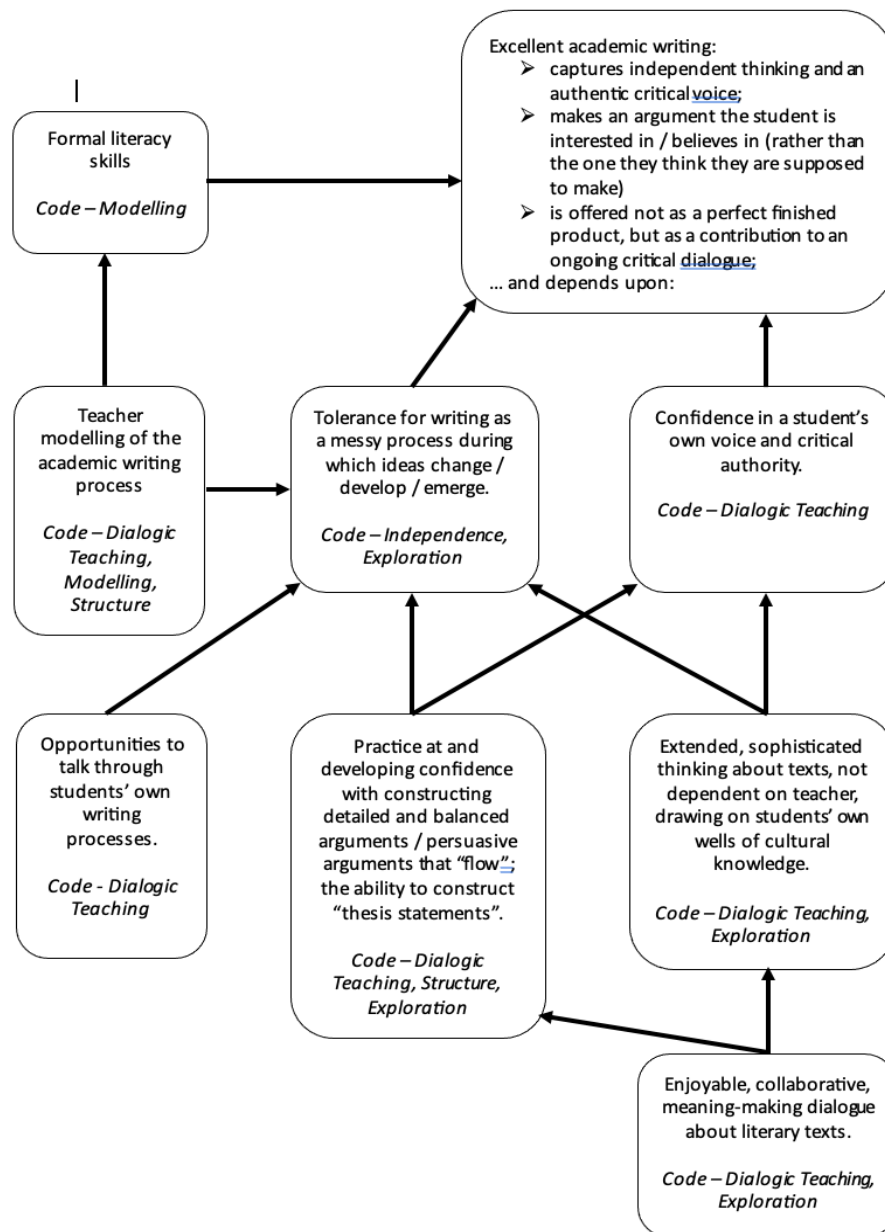
Dialogic teaching presents students as active participants in their own learning. Alexander's approach fostered student independence and an 'increasing sense of responsibility for what and how they learn' (p.129), which produced positive results under evaluation by the Education Endowment Fund. Pupils who had received dialogic intervention informed by his principles 'made, on average, two months' more progress in English [...] than a similar group of pupils who did not receive the intervention' (Wegerif, 2019, p.16). Although this was only conducted with Year 10 pupils, the positive results of this large-scale study (2000 pupils) invited further investigation with secondary students.

Constructing knowledge in the context of English Literature could be interpreted as the analysis and exploration of a text. The addition of dialogue can generate a broad exploration before honing ideas into carefully constructed and defended arguments. The position of the teacher in this dialogic context seems to be to guide and offer personalised feedback while ensuring discussions are student-led. Beattie (2007) also discussed the importance of teachers as writers to 'serve as role models' (2007, p.168), with emphasis placed on 'the act of talking about writing' (p.168). This process of articulating the thought processes behind writing is not a new concept in the literature, but Beattie's emphasis on students sharing 'their approaches' with the teacher (p.169), rather than the teacher dominating the conversation is highly valuable.

How speech unlocks ideas and students' written voices

Dialogue and discussion can be pivotal to writing composition through the sharing of ideas and perspectives which informs the meanings interpreted from texts. The value of sharing personal responses is captured by Maine (2013) through her small-scale study, which recognised that 'the reader brings with them their own experiences, expectations and motivations, which affect the meaning that is constructed' (2013, p.151). This highlights the value of engaging in 'exploratory talk' (p.151) as the collaborative sharing and formation of ideas can enlighten students' responses to texts. Furthermore, Brady (2013) and Faull (2007) both conducted studies which encouraged students to take ownership of their ideas, either using the 'first person' to explore and legitimise personal views of literary texts (Brady, 2013), or intervention sessions based around class and group discussion (Faull, 2007). Both dialogic interventions proved promising results regarding an improvement in students' analytical writing.

Summary of Key Findings from Literature Review (Model 1):

Excellent academic writing:
- captures independent thinking and an authentic critical voice;
- makes an argument the student is interested in / believes in (rather than the one they think they are supposed to make)
- is offered not as a perfect finished product, but as a contribution to an ongoing critical dialogue;

… and depends upon:

Formal literacy skills

Code – Modelling

Teacher modelling of the academic writing process

Code – Dialogic Teaching, Modelling, Structure

Tolerance for writing as a messy process during which ideas change / develop / emerge.

Code – Independence, Exploration

Confidence in a student's own voice and critical authority.

Code – Dialogic Teaching

Opportunities to talk through students' own writing processes.

Code - Dialogic Teaching

Practice at and developing confidence with constructing detailed and balanced arguments / persuasive arguments that "flow"; the ability to construct "thesis statements".

Code – Dialogic Teaching, Structure, Exploration

Extended, sophisticated thinking about texts, not dependent on teacher, drawing on students' own wells of cultural knowledge.

Code – Dialogic Teaching, Exploration

Enjoyable, collaborative, meaning-making dialogue about literary texts.

Code – Dialogic Teaching, Exploration

Investigation Outline

This investigation was born out of a desire to allow students to acquire independence and autonomy over their exploration of literature and crafting of academic writing. I recognise the experiences and perspectives individual students bring to their interpretation of a text, which can enrich written analysis. I proposed an action research approach which will use dialogue and discussion to allow my Year 12 Literature students to take ownership of their learning and writing. My aspiration for this investigation is to transform my own practice and students' learning, as well act as a catalyst for a wider use of dialogic practices in the classroom, through the creation of my lesson sequence artefact (Appendix 1).

The lack of research investigating the use of dialogue and discussion in the A-Level English classroom has led to the creation of my action research enquiry. To address the specific needs of my Year 12 Literature class, I have devised the following research questions to outline my investigation:

1. How have my Year 12 A-Level Literature students experienced the teaching of academic writing?
   - How have these students' experiences of the teaching of academic writing shaped the academic writing they produce at A-Level?
2. Are there any indications that dialogue and discussion support students to produce more sophisticated academic writing?

Inquiry plan and activities

Methodology

This qualitative methodology is underpinned by a constructivist ontology and an interpretivist epistemology (Scott and Usher, 1996, p. 13). The act of writing is highly subjective. Each student's unique perspective of the world should be valued through the act of writing and harnessed into creating a unique stance when critically evaluating essay questions. Morrison highlights that, 'for an interpretivist, there cannot be an objective reality which exists irrespective of the meanings human beings bring to it' (2012, p.23). Therefore, my research attempts to 'emphasise the importance of children's perspectives, as research 'with' and 'for' rather than 'on' children' (p.23).

Action Research and Data Collection Methods

My investigation draws upon approaches from action research, using McNiff's (2016) 'action-reflection' (p.28) model, which encourages researchers to: 'observe – reflect – act – evaluate – modify – move in new directions' (p.28). This research consisted of a two-phase research enquiry, with the initial phase involving a 'deep dive' into the 'observe and reflect' part of the action research cycle (Table 1), in response to Research Question One and sub-question. Data was gathered from my Year 12 Literature class in the form of a homework essay, group interviews with the students and an observation of this class being A-Level Literature taught by their co-teacher. The accumulation of the evidence from the initial phase allowed me to build on existing good practice as well as identify areas for further development, which formed the foundations of the development of my artefact, which responded to my second Research Question. To measure the impact of this intervention, I asked students to reflect on each lesson in their reflection journals, in addition to culminating the lesson sequence with an timed assessment which was marked and compared to the initial homework essay.

Table 1: Outline of action research design			
Phase	Mapping to McNiff (2016)	Research Question	Data Collection Methods
1	'Observe and Reflect'	How have my Year 12 A-Level Literature students experienced the teaching of academic writing?	Student work (homework essay) Observing them with co-teacher
		How have these students' experiences of the teaching of academic writing shaped the academic writing they produce at A-Level?	Observation data Interviews
2	'Act and Evaluate'	Are there any indications that dialogue and discussion support students to produce more sophisticated academic writing?	Students' reflective journals during lesson sequence Student work (assessment)

Data Analysis

The data gathered through the observations, interviews and reflection journals methods were analysed via thematic coding. I developed a 'coding framework' by combing through the literature and identifying 'thematic patterns' (Wilson, 2012, p.165-166), (Table 2). Five key themes and various sub-themes emerged, which placed the focus on 'the codes themselves and their theoretical connotations' (p.166). This allowed me to view how the key themes are interconnected in relation to my research questions, and how the lesson sequence altered the relationship of these themes within students' learning experiences.

Ethical considerations and relationships

Prior to the data collection portion of my research, I completed an ethics checklist to consider potential ethical issues which may arise as a consequence of my research. I also read and followed the British Educational Research Association (BERA) *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research.*

Students in my Year 12 A-Level Literature class were asked to opt-in to the study and their parents were informed as per the school's policy. I ensured that all research participants understood the purpose behind the investigation and that their responses to interviews, lesson contributions, written work and reflective journals would be kept anonymous. Consent was also gained from the teacher I have observed. I ensured my gatekeepers within the English Department, were aware of my research intentions and data collection methods. All participants were aware that they were able to raise any issues or concerns with these gatekeepers as well as myself.

Upon careful reflection of my research intentions, I came to realise that there will be some ethical questions that I am unable to solve. Some students might be uncomfortable with me reflecting on my own practice through this research. These students might become wary upon the realisation that their teacher is looking to improve their practice and therefore possess shortcomings as a professional. As they may have felt that my knowledge in this field was absolute. Furthermore, this research might give the impression that the writing strategies that have already been taught are not 'good enough'. This might be anxiety provoking for the students, especially since I will not be

'replacing like for like', as I have sought to adopt dialogic teaching strategies and cultivate critical independence. Consequently, I have sought to remain aware of my students' emotional needs and ensure extra support for students within the school pastoral system if needed.

As a teacher and researcher, I had to remain aware that there was a potential for bias in my data collection. I tried to mitigate my own bias by anonymising all reflection journals and written work, as well as ensuring that all marking of academic writing was moderated. Although, it must be acknowledged that it is impossible to eliminate any influence in students' responses that may exist when they are aware that their teacher will be receiving their feedback directly. Student bias was attempted to be mitigated against how work would be anonymised and using group interviews. This interview format was selected to ensure students were comfortable and confident, as was the location of the interviews in the familiar environment of our regular classroom.

Additionally, observing colleagues (especially whilst I am in my first year of teaching) and critiquing well established pedagogy, may be unsettling to some as they may perceive my investigation as bringing extra levels of scrutiny to their practice. I therefore strove to ensure that all observations were conducted in a positive and transparent manner.

Findings

Phase 1

How have my Year 12 A-Level Literature students experienced the teaching of academic writing?

The teaching of academic writing from years 7-11

In the group interviews, students were asked to reflect on how they have been taught about essay writing since starting secondary school. All students only focused on the use of structured scaffolds and described a wide variety of acronyms. Several students noted how they felt that these scaffolds were 'restrictive' as they could not 'analyse as far'. Some students desired 'a bit more freedom', so used their 'own' structures.

The teaching of academic writing at A-Level

During the Year 12 A-Level Literature lesson observation, the teacher used a variety of strategies in her teaching of academic writing which fell in line with the themes I identified as characteristic of the most effective teaching of critical writing (Table 3). At the core of the learning objectives for this lesson was the desire to equip students with an independent and reflective attitude through which they can hone their academic writing skills. However, there is an element of very structured teaching with emphasis on technique rather than creativity, with the closed questioning used by the teacher in the observation, in line with research findings cited above (Beattie, 2007; Green, 2007). There was a deliberate, yet brief, use of discussion and open questions to help students cultivate ideas and encourage reflection of their writing. There were no explicit opportunities or strategies for the exploration and development of ideas, due to the very structured and technical nature of the lesson.

How have these students' experiences of the teaching of academic writing shaped the academic writing they produce at A-Level?

Teacher perceptions of students' academic writing at A-Level

Marking of the students' homework essay uncovered that an extremely small number of students were able to craft a thesis statement which was coherent and outlined their argument. Some students did not even attempt a thesis statement which generated essays that lacked a clear structure. Overwhelmingly, students began to express interesting ideas, but were unable to fully develop them, due to a lack of evidence or analysis. This was mirrored by the feedback the students received in the lesson I observed, as the teacher highlighted that many students wrote in a way that 'felt vague and didn't really link to the question'. Therefore, I knew that each lesson had to focus on the crafting of thesis statements, the development and exploration of ideas and finally the overall structure and cohesion of their essays. Additionally, students' grades were noted in order to compare them to the grades obtained at the end of the lesson sequence.

Students' perception of their academic writing at A-Level

The challenge students described with crafting a coherent structure is interesting, given that in the interviews, it seemed that the structural aspect of analytical writing was explicitly taught throughout KS3 and KS4. All students stated that they had to rethink their approach to essay writing upon beginning A-Level, as the structured scaffold approaches 'didn't feel as strong and sophisticated' as the quality they were expected to produce at A-Level.

Phase Two

This evaluates the effects of the lesson sequence I designed and delivered to this A-Level Literature class, which culminated in a timed assessment. The first lesson was created with the objective of creating a dialogic environment and instilling a sense of autonomy students' own learning. The following three lessons focused on addressing the areas of development students had raised in their interviews and I had identified in their homework essay. This included, the development of a thesis statement, fully exploring and developing ideas in writing, and the overall structure and coherence. The sequence culminated in an assessment. The final essay was analysed in the same manner as the homework essay to allow the comparison of my findings.

Are there any indications that dialogue and discussion support students to produce more sophisticated academic writing?

Coherent Arguments / Thesis Statements

After lesson 2, students commented that they felt more confident about writing thesis statements. Most attributed this boost to the group discussions which allowed them to 'see how other people approached questions and how individual thought processes differ', which helped them 'add depth to [their] own statement[s]'. This chimes with findings reported by Atherton et al. (2013), through the benefits exploring literature with different people's unique insights. Another student commented that 'working with other people and bouncing ideas off of each other, as well as constructive criticism from my peers, was super helpful in figuring out how to better my statement'.

Articulating thinking

The paired writing activities that students undertook to collaboratively construct a thesis statement, proved to be beneficial. It allowed students to 'combine' ideas which also cultivated 'independence'. Through continued discussions and the need to constantly articulate the thought process behind their language choices, students took responsibility for their learning while gaining the benefit of peer work. A vital aspect of the paired writing activity was the act of articulating their thought process, which supported students in gaining an understanding of the question and the careful crafting of writing, as each word choice was under scrutiny from themselves and their pair.

Exploring ideas

When asked about to reflect on the impact of dialogue, students noted that 'discussion really helped inspire [their] thinking into more complex ideas' and develop greater 'confidence' when approaching essay questions, because 'the discussions helped [them] consider alternative perspectives [and] add more layers of meaning'.

Lower achieving students commented on the way group discussions 'helped [them] understand [essay] questions', as in their groups they identified 'key words within the question [which] helped [them] understand the aim of the essay'. Overall, they agreed that the discussions helped them 'think of alternative opinions and perspectives', and three students explicitly stated that they 'used ideas that were shared in discussion and wrote them in [their] essay[s]'.

Furthermore, all students commented that they found group planning useful, as they were able to 'combine [...] ideas and thoughts which allowed us to have a more detailed approach to the question'. This aided the meticulous crafting of argument and structure which arises from articulating their thinking during writing. One student noted that she '[felt] like [she had] gotten better at considering layers of meaning and incorporating critics' opinions because of the discussion activities.' While it is important to note that it is the students' perception that these skills have improved, the overwhelming boost in attainment recorded after the assessment essay (80% of students seeing an improvement in their grades or remaining within the A-A* bracket after the sequence) helps validate this statement. This skill was shown to have developed in the final reflection journal, as students described drawing on the 'ideas and perspectives' of others whilst writing an individual answer for an unseen essay question. This suggests that discussions are teaching transferrable skills and exposing students to new ways of thinking which they can carry with them when approaching different questions. This falls in line with Beattie's (2007) reflection that 'the act of talking about writing that allows us to make explicit the decisions we make as writers' (p.168), which also amplifies the role of the students' own authority as writers, as the power of talk is used to 'stimulate and extend children's thinking' (Alexander, 2020, p.128), rather than forcing them to conform to a set structure.

Editing and Reviewing

In their reflection journals after lesson 3, all students recorded feeling confident when sharing their ideas in their groups. Students highlighted that they began 'reflecting on one another's contributions', which is an essential component of a dialogic classroom. As the teacher, I made sure

to involve myself in the collaborative environment by articulating the thinking behind my own written examples of thesis statements and paragraphs, before opening the way for them to be critiqued and discussed by the class. Therefore, I was attempting to allow students to note the 'explicit decisions we make as writers' with myself serving as a 'role model' for this opportunity for feedback and articulation of the thought process behind my writing, as stated by Beattie (2007). One student commented that this modelling 'helped [them] to see an example and compare what [their] approach would have been'. However, after multiple lessons of peer modelling, this instance of teacher modelling was continually referred to as being 'useful', which raised interesting questions about authority in the classroom.

Student voice

All students expressed finding the paired writing useful, as it helped develop 'confidence' as well as 'independence' by 'develop[ing] each other's ideas and improv[ing] [their] sophistication and execution'. Each of the lessons in the sequence were designed to give students ample opportunities to foster independence over their own learning. In the first lesson, students were given a choice of questions to write an essay plan about, as Thompson (2012) expressed that 'teaching of writing has to be based on the interests of the child, be […] meaningful for children' (p.89). One student explained that this choice allowed them to address 'different perspectives of the play and […] themes [which] [she] had not focused on' before, thus helping to cultivate greater critical independence.

Other findings:

Independence

In keeping with my attempt to instill a culture of critical independence, I selected reflection journals as a data collection method. My original intention was for these journals to be an open ended and reflective writing process. I included a series of questions which students could use to generate ideas or structure their writing, but reiterated that students did not need to answer the questions like a questionnaire. However, I discovered that if you give students seven questions, they answer seven questions. This raised questions about the power dynamic in the classroom, and what it means to be a 'good student'. These students completed the task they saw in front of them without question. However, by not considering the wider purpose or value of the reflection journal, it generated questions about how they have been cultured as students, alongside the dialogic approach. As discussed in Research Question 1, these students are used to being guided through learning by the teacher. The dialogic approach aimed to create 'new' knowledge in the classroom and be 'student-led', but might have had a limited effect. Whilst students noted the benefit of this approach and were all able to engage in the critical thinking it demanded, they quickly revert to a much narrower, prescriptive approach to learning and writing when not *'allowed'* and *'told'* to embark on these discussions and collaborative activities, to voice their opinions in their own way. Therefore, this data collection method did not work as I expected it to, which worked as a finding itself.

Authority

Despite dialogic teaching emphasising students taking ownership of their own learning (Alexander, 2020), most students still seemed to view the teacher as possessing ultimate authority over the 'right answer' or the 'right' approach to writing. However, the lines between the teacher and the overarching authority of the exam board also seemed to be blurred, as every worry students voiced, linked back to their doubts about being able to meet the 'Assessment Objectives'. I attributed the value of my lesson sequence on the improvement of students' grades, rather than the quality of talk, learning and writing which was taking place. However, through this dialogic approach, students were encouraged to explore ideas, experiment with writing and become accustomed with sharing and obtaining feedback on work that is in the process of being completed. This attempted to eliminate the pressure of producing a 'perfect' final piece for assessment.

Implications for practice

This research has begun to expose the promising potential of dialogic strategies to aid in students' academic writing composition, as well as increasing their feelings of confidence and independence. These findings suggest that structured scaffolds techniques are inherently limiting and restrictive, to not only students' perceptive and explorative analysis, but to their overall development as students. Ultimately, the use of dialogic strategies also resulted in 12 out of 15 students experienced their grades increase or stay within the A*-A bracket, in their timed assessment essay completed after the lesson intervention, when compared to their homework essay. Due to this large improvement occurring over a relatively short amount of time, with the lesson sequence itself taking place over 3 weeks and dialogic principles beginning to be instilled for a period prior to that, the impact of dialogue and discussion can be interpreted as the overwhelming contribution of this improvement in students' grades, confidence and independence.

These findings have been summarised in the Maximus Model of Academic Writing (Model 2):
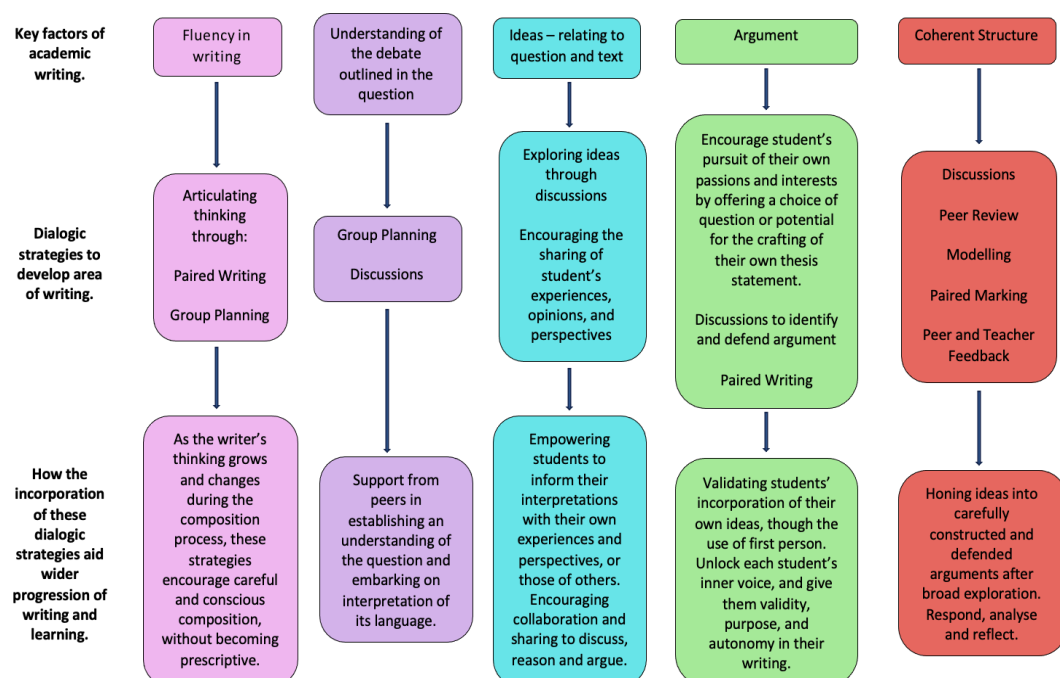
Reflective Evaluation of the Process and Next Steps

Upon reflection, I believe my investigation showed 'neo-Piagetian influence by focusing on individual learning outcomes rather than on the process of learning together' (Mercer, 2019, p.47). I did not analyse the type of dialogue and discussion students were engaging in through my data collection methods, instead I mainly validated my artefact on the grades which emerged from their assessment. In further study, I would like to examine how the discussion students undertake influence their academic writing, by analysing the interactions and dialogue used in the classroom. For instance, whether students adopted 'cumulative talk […] [or] exploratory talk' (Mercer, 2019, p.56), as exploratory talk could inform creative and explorative discussion, leading to critically engaged academic writing.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Artefact

Lesson	Teaching strategies
1 Cultivating a dialogic environment and creative freedom.	Students were placed in small groups, with each group being issued a different *Othello* essay past paper question. Students are then given a set of 'discussion cards' upon which a variety of different sentence starters, questions and prompts are written. Students read and discussed their essay question, using the discussion cards to structure their conversations by reading the statement on a card to begin each point they made. To ensure each student participated, they were asked to keep hold of the cards they used in the discussion. After ten/fifteen minutes, students were mixed up and rotated around each table, so they were able to interact with each member of the class and discuss each essay question. In order to consolidate their ideas, the students selected one question, granting them the autonomy of choice and the ability to convey the ideas and perspectives they feel most passionate about into writing, and wrote an essay plan consisting of a thesis statement and the main points they would have included in an essay. This lesson allowed students to build confidence with speaking in front of their peers and consider other students' ideas as springboard for further thinking. This began to generate a sense of independence over students' own learning.
2 Understand essay questions and craft thesis statements.	Students were given an essay question which they discussed in small groups. The focus of the discussion centred around the question itself, what its specified focus was and how it could be investigated further. These discussion points were clarified by having prompt questions on the board. After the small group discussions, whole class feedback invited a larger discussion about the different layers of meaning associated with the overarching essay question and considered how the students could mould that question to suit their own interests and areas of confidence. Students were given an example of a thesis statements to consider and evaluate the effectiveness of. This example acted as a model, allowing students to verbally explore as well as seek clarification about this key feature of a high-quality essay if necessary. Students consolidated the ideas generated through the crafting of a thesis statement in pairs, to ensure they articulated and shared their ideas. They then presented their thesis to a different pair, whilst explaining the thought process behind it.
3 Fully develop and explore ideas about the literature in academic writing.	The lesson began with revision and further exploration (through discussion) of various critical interpretations of key themes in *Othello*. Students were then asked to return to the pairs in which they crafted the thesis statement in lesson two. Using the same question, and therefore the ideas raised in multiple discussions, student were encouraged to create an essay plan, carefully considering what points they wanted to tackle in each paragraph. The teacher circulated the class to ensure that the students' points were cohesive yet had the scope to be rich in analysis and exploration. Next, students were asked to write the first paragraph of their essay in pairs.

		Finally, students were asked to sit with a different pair to share the paragraphs they had crafted and evaluate how developed and perceptive the points raised were, using the criteria on the AQA mark scheme.
		This was followed by a redrafting of paragraphs, if required.
4 Structure and cohesion		Students were placed into small groups and were asked to consider a previously unseen essay question and craft a thesis statement, drawing on the skills previously learned.
		Following a whole class discussion of the question, the teacher modelled analysis of question and extract, using open questioning to generate further discussion about ideas which could be included and how best to structure them in an extended piece of writing.
		Students were then given a model essay for this question to read and award a mark to, using the A-Level mark scheme, in pairs.
		Students were then told to assess the essay as a whole, before considering the impact of structure in the awarding of a mark and the essay's achievement of the Assessment Objectives.
		Students were then invited to give whole class feedback on the essay's use of structure and how it impacted the given mark.
5 Assessment		The sequence culminated with an in-class, end of topic assessment. This was completed in timed conditions.
		The essays were collected for marking, in order to evaluate whether the previous lessons had improved their essay writing and allow the opportunity for individualized feedback.