Literacy based metacognition: How does explicit teaching of reflection/writing analysis, impact upon the progress of children's writing in KS2?

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Abstract

Metacognition is an essential part of writing instruction: with a metacognitive focus, pupils not only activate their prior knowledge by knowing more and remembering more, they also learn to recognise and apply new and prior strategies for their personal writing process. Their ability to reflect on their individual strengths and weaknesses is improved to the point where they can clarify success and identify their own next steps. Furthermore, they improve their ability to articulate the differences and requirements between written genres.

Introduction

Working to constantly enhance the impact of the Viridis Federation's high ambition in regards to deeper understanding and metacognition, this project was launched with the intention of further empowering Upper KS2 writers with the skills – which, when used effectively – would enable them to not only analyse and reflect upon their own written work, but subsequently suggest impactful and precise methods for improvement. As such the aims were to ensure children were confident and familiar with the requirements of each genre, to teach the skills of purposeful reading, editing, analysis, self-correction and constructive critique in pre genre assessment writing (cold tasks), to reflect upon and set realistic targets for improvement and to meet self-appointed target successfully in the end of genre assessment writing (hot write).

Research Process

During a writing unit of two to three weeks, a lesson was devoted to the skills of metacognition, reflection and writing analysis – generally this took place directly after a pre unit assessment write, so as to directly reflect upon the core requirements of a particular genre. Children were taught skills, which enhanced their ability to be reflective of their own recent writing, through identifying strengths and weaknesses relative to the particular unit. Impact was subsequently measured through assessing the children's ability to identify their own relevant next steps (addition of a children's green pen 'next step' target next to teacher feedback) and enable more reflective evaluation. End of genre assessment writing was then scrutinised against children pre genre teaching assessment to see what extent the children were able to meet their own personal targets after attempting those assigned by the teacher. Data was collected in Year groups 4, 5 and 6, with one class acting as the control group.

Results

Due to the extensive nature of the evidence gathered, the results section will serve to highlight three specific examples of successful impact of the project, evidencing a variety of genre types. Subsequent to this, there will be a more general summary of overall success.

Example A: Year 4 (Explanation Text)

In this particular Cold Write example of an explanation text, the child attempted to write an explanation of how they travelled to school each morning. Subsequent analysis of the written piece and careful editing allowed this child to independently reflect upon the repetitive and monotonous nature of sentence openers. As a result, the child set a target of utilising a more varied method of opening sentences with a range of fronted adverbials and a greater range of time connectives. It is interesting to see an attempt to moderate this within the piece itself, showing an early awareness of the improvements which could be made to the writing.

The subsequent hot write shows a controlled and conscious effort to improve sentence openers and avoid repetition. A range of effective opening time connectives are utilised, improving both the flow and formality of the piece. 'Then' has not been repeated ad nauseam. An attempt to use commas to demark fronted adverbials has been made.
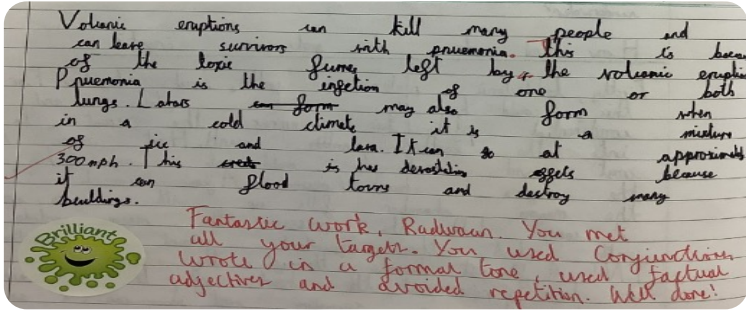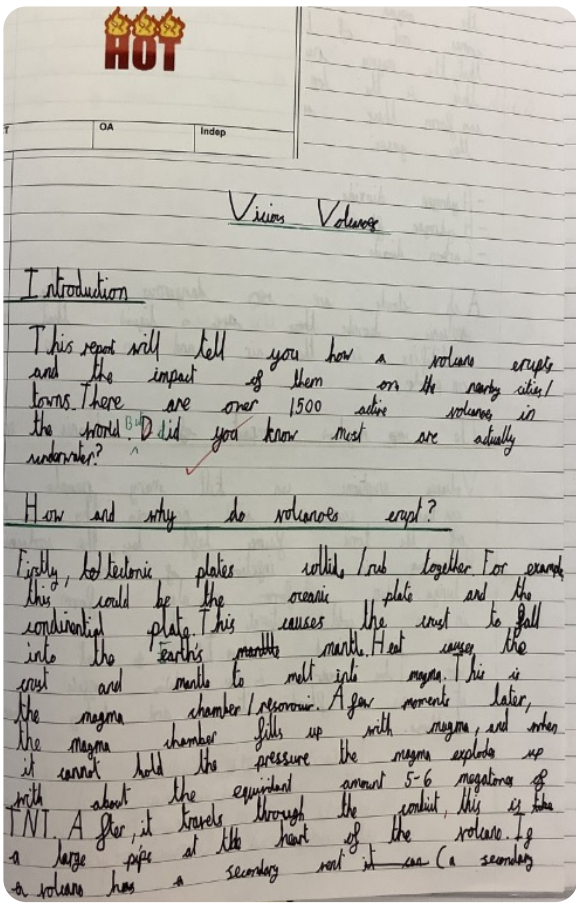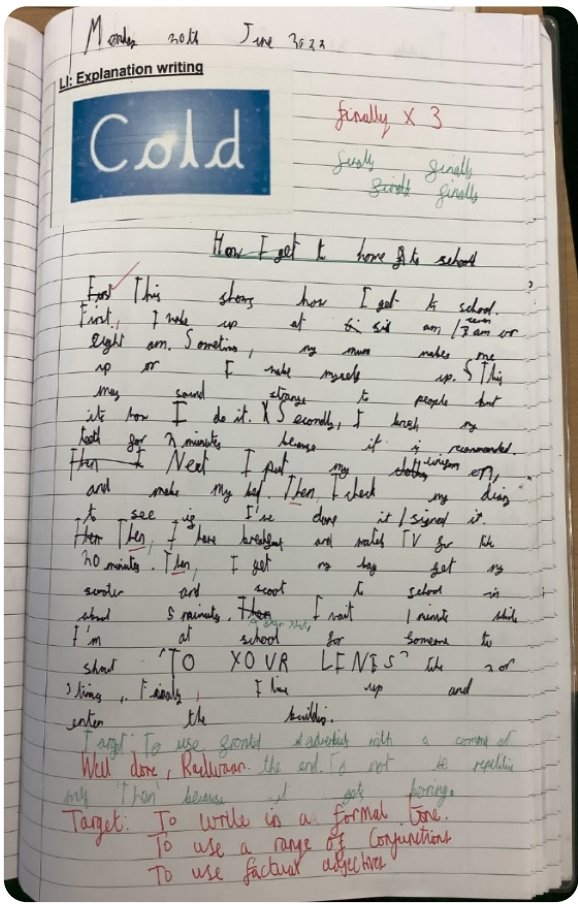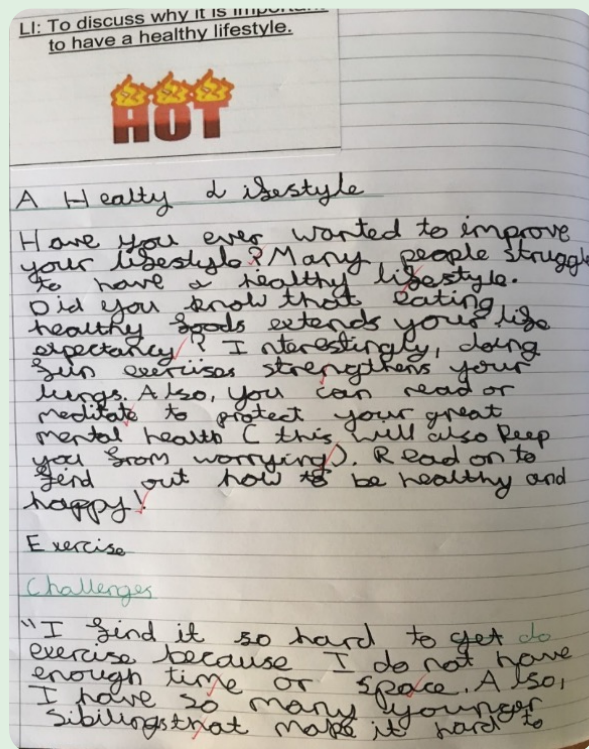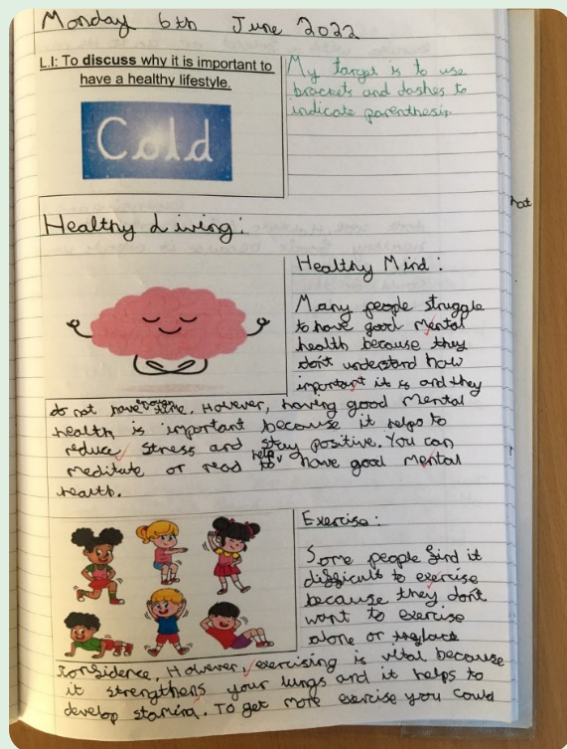
Example B: Year 5 (Discussion Text)

This particular initial piece, has displayed a good attempt by the child to discuss relevant facts and information regarding healthy living.

Nevertheless, the child – subsequent to a discussion of desired attributes and prior to adult marking – has reflected upon a lack of technical features that could provide a relevant and useful method by which to provide additional information. As a result, this child set themselves a target of utilising parentheses by which to provide additional facts.

The subsequent hot write maintains its factual tone whilst showing a greater range of technical devices – including the parentheses which the child desired to utilise in their Cold Write. This particular piece has three correctly utilised examples of brackets. There is also a lesson which proceeds the Hot Write which focuses on the correct use of parentheses, showing the teacher's awareness of particular common targets which were identified by the children themselves.

Example C: (Year 6 Discussion Text)

This Year 6 child has shown excellent use of relevant vocabulary and a range of relevant ideas – furthermore they have displayed an ability to use a variety of technical devices. Nevertheless, after a period analysing the piece, the child has noticed that 'Alaska' is overused; this repetition in this particular piece is arguably the only thing preventing the piece from reading as an 'above expected standard' piece. Having identified this weakness, the child was then challenged on a whiteboard to come up with alternative pronouns suitable to the piece.

The final piece shows a range of varied pronouns which solve the repetition of the initial Cold Write. Alternatives such as 'it', 'this environment', 'this state' and 'this land' show an inherent awareness in the child of the initial issue. The piece is now more sophisticated as a result

General trends showed children more able to meet their own next steps when reflecting upon narrative writing. Nevertheless, as demonstrated above, many were also able to successfully identify and improve their writing in the context of other genres. The vast majority (upwards of 70%) of Year 6 children were able to meet their own next step in narrative writing in addition to the target set by their teacher. This understandably fell proportionally in Years 5 and 4 where it is plausible that an understanding of the requirements of each genre were not as comprehensive.

Conclusion

The results of the project showed that a significant proportion of children from Y4 and a majority of children in Years 5 and 6, were capable of being self-reflective regarding their own writing when taught the skills to enable them to do so. The increased ownership and responsibility of setting own achievable targets showed a marked impact on the final writing outcome. This proved to be particularly successful with narrative pieces, where children showed an incredibly good understanding of the components of a well-written story, proving able to quite adeptly select next steps that would have significant positive impact on the age related attainment evidence and progress from starting points. In Year 6, the vast majority of pupils were able to include their personalised target in their hot writes in addition to responding to the next step target set by the teacher. Furthermore, even with non-fiction pieces, Year 6 pupils often proved capable of reflecting upon the tone and formality of their written work and adapting it as necessary if they deemed it did not adequately suit the purpose of the written task.

In summary, KS2 would benefit from explicit teaching of writing reflection/self-analysis and given partial ownership of their own subsequent writing targets where appropriate. As with developing deeper understanding through reasoning in numeracy, a reflective approach to writing allows children to better understand the purpose of their task and develop a more symbiotic and constantly evolving approach to their written work. When children are empowered with the tools to read their own writing with a critical view and consider themselves informed of the core requirements of the genre and any potential missing elements – many of which they already seek out in their own assessment – their writing will inevitably improve for the better. In order for this to be a self-sustaining model however, teacher subject knowledge in essential for underpinning, facilitation and making explicit links through scaffold to metacognition approaches.

References

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