

Using Interactive Fiction to Stimulate Metalinguistic Talk in the English Classroom

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Abstract

Interactive Fiction (IF)—a digital form of non-linear narrative writing—requires readers to respond, to make choices that shape their reading experience. I argue that such choices can be put to use in the classroom, helping teachers to facilitate metalinguistic talk. In this article, I offer a clear conceptualisation of metalinguistic talk, drawing upon existing research to create a useful framework comprised of four characteristics. Using this framework, and with reference to interview data and field notes, I analyse and consider two transcripts of classroom talk in order to explore the extent to which a particular work of IF enabled me to facilitate metalinguistic talk with a class of 16–17-year-old English Literature students. The lesson in question formed part of an action research project exploring the possibilities for IF in the secondary school English classroom. I argue that the choices contained within *A Great Gatsby*, a work of IF which I designed via a process of critical-creative textual intervention and using Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* as my source material, can help to scaffold metalinguistic talk—conversations *about* language.

Key words: action research, critical-creativity, interactive fiction, metalinguistic talk, textual intervention

Introduction

In this article, I examine the relationship between Interactive Fiction (IF) and classroom talk, looking at data collected during a small-scale, longitudinal action research project which explores the possibilities for IF in the secondary school English classroom. Drawing upon a work of IF that I designed for use in the classroom, recordings of classroom talk from a lesson that I delivered to a group of year 12 English Literature students (16–17-year-olds), field notes, and interviews with colleagues at the school where I work, I here argue that critical-creative works of IF can be useful resources for the scaffolding of metalinguistic talk.

First, I provide readers with a vignette that portrays what teaching and learning with such a work of IF can look like. I then provide some theoretical framing, outlining how I used Textual Intervention (Pope, 1995) to produce critical-creative works of IF for use in the classroom and clarifying how I conceptualise the term *metalinguistic talk*. After outlining the methods and ethical processes followed, I analyse and discuss two transcripts of classroom talk, referencing my field notes and interview data. Finally, I conclude by highlighting the implications of my work for teachers and researchers, responding to the following research question: what can I learn from the experience of reading and discussing my work of IF—*A Great Gatsby*—with a class of 16–17-year-old English Literature students?

What is it like to teach and to learn with IF?

June 2021

Joy¹ is at school, in an English lesson. She sits in the second row of a glass-walled, first floor classroom, facing forwards. The windows in here do not open, but the air conditioning unit hums, rhythmically pumping out eddies of air. The gusts worry the pages of her exercise book.

Joy is beginning her coursework journey; in less than a year's time, she will have to submit an essay in which she answers a question of her own choosing, analysing and comparing two works of fiction. One of those works will be *The Great Gatsby* (Fitzgerald, 2000), and her teacher—me, Mr Holdstock (SH)—is intending for Joy and her classmates to begin thinking about the language of this novel in today's lesson.

However, Joy and her classmates do not begin by opening the novel and reading. In fact, Joy's copy of *The Great Gatsby* has not even arrived yet.

Today, Mr. Holdstock projects something that he has written onto the screen at the front of the room: *A Great*

¹All student names have been replaced by pseudonyms.

Gatsby (from here on referred to as AGG) (Holdstock, 2021). This work of IF presents the class with a series of choices, asking them to ‘experiment’ with the novel’s title and opening sentence. Mr Holdstock asks them what choices *they* would have made had they been writing the novel themselves.

A passage appears on the screen (Figure 1).

Joy thinks. What would she choose? And why? She does not want to make exactly the same choice as Fitzgerald. After all, *she* is not *him*!

‘Joy, what you saying?’ asks Mr Holdstock.

‘Um. Because we’ve already had “In my younger years,” I would have gone with “In his,” because I feel like it could, um, basically reinforce a certain contrast that could be ex- explained later on or within the introduction’.

Mr. Holdstock does not quite catch her meaning. ‘So, it could be explained later on. Could you clarify that for me? What do you mean?’

Joy elaborates. ‘Um, ‘cos I feel like with the title itself: I mean *The Great Gatsby*, it could be like, just, I dunno how to explain it, but it’s like, you’re presenting the idea of him going into that, like the superior status that the title suggests’.

Joy has made a connection; it makes sense to talk about a ‘Great’ character in the third person, and the title of the novel she is beginning to study is *The Great Gatsby*. Who would refer to themselves as great, let alone ‘The Great ...’? She has not read the novel yet, so she does not know who Nick Carraway is, but she has begun to think about narrative perspective, and by making and evaluating a creative choice, she has begun to think about the way language choices are connected to one another.

Theoretical framing

‘The best way to understand how a text works, I argue, is to change it: to play around with it, to intervene in it in

some way (large or small), and then try to account for the exact effect of what you have done’. (Pope, 1995, p. 1)

Pope argues that creative, playful adaptation of a text can be helpful, particularly when combined with critical commentary; by making changes and weighing the implications, we adopt a ‘critical-creative’ approach to literary study, an approach that bridges imaginative and analytical ways of working with language (Pope, 2012). In the above vignette therefore, Joy engaged in a critical-creative process: she attempted to adapt a text and to consider the semantic implications.

In creating AGG, I was inspired by Pope to write a work of IF that I hoped would be capable of ‘decentring’ (Pope, 1995, p. 14) a classic work of literature: *The Great Gatsby*. I imagined that the work of IF I created might motivate my students to become more playful and creative (Pope, 2003) in their critical explorations of Fitzgerald’s work, and in their reading more generally. For example, I wanted my students to consider what meanings could have arisen, had Fitzgerald chosen to write from a different perspective.

This was a novel challenge; instead of designing a set of slides (as teachers often do) or crafting a narrative (as a writer of fiction), I set out to perform a creative form of pedagogical criticism, working at the ‘critical-creative interface’ and producing potential ‘counter-text[s]’ (Pope, 2003, p. 105) that my students could explore. The text I designed demands that student-readers make language choices themselves, considering their significance. As such, it can be said to reflect the influence that stylistics has had upon my pedagogical thinking; I want my students to consider *how* a text operates, rather than learn *what* it does (Giovannelli, 2010, p. 216); I hope to enable them to perform “‘slow-motion,” phrase-by-phrase analysis’ of how a text can shape a reader’s understanding (Tyson, 2006, p. 175); I want my students to formulate personal responses that are ‘conditioned with an

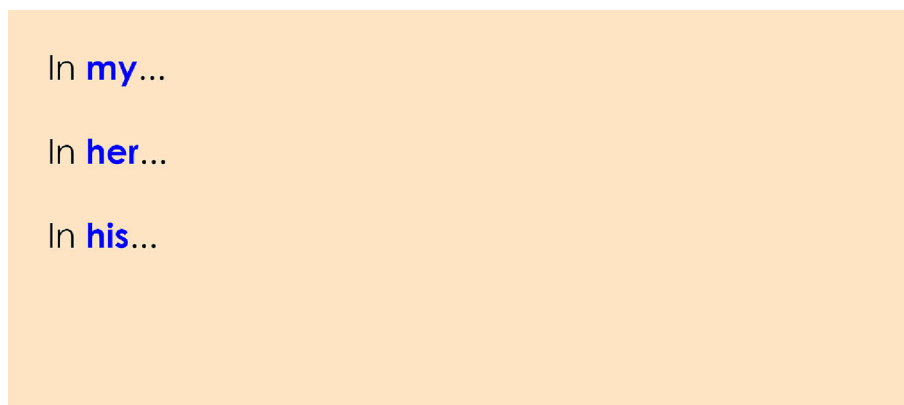


Figure 1: A passage taken from *A Great Gatsby* (Holdstock, 2021).

understanding of how language works' (Cushing, 2018, p. 273).

By embracing a critical-creative approach to the study of literature, I reveal my aversion to the way that, as Goodwyn concludes, 'creative and personal responses to literature' have become marginalised by increasingly 'narrow assessment objectives' within the context of English secondary schools (Goodwyn, 2012, p. 224). In producing *AGG*, a text that concludes with a creative call to action, I sought to resist the hegemony of the cultural heritage model of English as a subject (Goodwyn, 2016), a model which situates literature as something to be appreciated but which pays less attention to the way literature can stimulate forms of critical and creative play. Most importantly however, I wanted to intrigue my students, to motivate them to read the novel and to form their own responses. After all, they were about to begin a coursework project that would require them to work in a very independent fashion.

In creating *AGG*, and informed by the way in which works produced using Twine (Klimas, 2016) position the reader as an active choice-maker, I drew upon Rosenblatt's Reader-Response theory and Halliday's conceptualisation of language: Halliday asserts that a 'language is a resource for making meaning, and meaning resides in systemic patterns of choice' (Halliday, 2004, p. 23), going on to state that when we analyse a text, 'we show what meaningful choices have been made, each one seen in the context of what might have been meant but was not' (p. 24). In Figure 1, I draw to my students' attention the fact that Fitzgerald *chose* to begin the novel writing in the first person and nudge them towards considering the significance of this decision. Also, by obliging my students to *choose*, I position them as readers who must actively respond to the text, making something of it (Rosenblatt, 2005a). In performing this meaning-making, they simultaneously become writers themselves; the reader becomes a creative re-writer (Pope, 2003, p. 106), making the creative process of reading more salient and blurring the lines between reading and writing. As such, *AGG* does not position reading and writing as discrete or autonomous skills (Fleming and Stevens, 2010; Ivanič, 2010) or as vehicles for 'mechanistic outcomes' (Goodwyn, 2012, p. 234); rather, reading and writing become part of a critical-creative, metalinguistic learning experience. In facilitating a discussion of a series of linguistic choices, I hoped to demonstrate to my students that a text can be both produced and received in a diverse range of ways. This is because, for me, reading is dialogic; every 'word is a two-sided act' (Voloshinov, 1973, pp. 86–87), involving choice on the part of the reader *and* the writer. Every 'word wants to be heard, understood, responded to, and again to respond to the response, and so forth ad infinitum. It enters into a dialogue that does not have a

semantic end' (Bakhtin, 2010). Similarly, from a critical-creative perspective, critical reading and creative writing are very much intertwined, for 'without the critical faculty, there is no artistic creation' (Wilde, 2014).

I am not alone in foregrounding choice in the English classroom; Myhill, drawing on Halliday, argues that 'meaning-making is not simply about the lexical meaning of words, as explained in a dictionary, but about the way word choices and relationships, syntax and grammatical choices also shape meaning' (Myhill, 2021, p. 268). She has developed a 'grammar as choice pedagogy' that has informed my approach to teaching and learning in the English classroom (ibid. p. 272). She argues that teaching practice should reflect this choice-based conceptualisation of grammar and meaning-making, advocating for 'functionally oriented grammar teaching' (Myhill, 2021, p. 274). Elsewhere, Myhill et al. begin to explore the role that classroom dialogue plays in 'developing [student] writers' metalinguistic understanding of how linguistic choices shape meaning in written texts' (Myhill et al., 2019). Where writing is concerned, they suggest that 'showing learners the possibilities of different grammatical choices can enable them to have more conscious control of how their writing communicates their intended message' (Myhill et al., 2020). In this paper, I build on their work by interrogating the degree to which a work of IF could be used as a means of stimulating and structuring what they call 'metalinguistic dialogic talk' (Myhill et al., 2019, p. 5). In so doing, I also seek to consider the role that a digitally facilitated form of textual intervention can play in enabling a metalinguistic engagement with language.

In order to facilitate an exploration of the relationship between IF and metalinguistic talk, and drawing upon research conducted by Myhill, Newman, Watson and others, I here present a list of four characteristics which clarify the way in which I conceptualise metalinguistic talk:

- 1 **Metalinguistic talk (MT) is functionally oriented;** it explicitly considers language as a resource for the making of meaning (Myhill and Newman, 2016) and draws attention to the relationship between linguistic choice and meaning (Myhill et al., 2020).
- 2 **MT considers texts dialogically;** it recognises that meaning is not static but exists in the transactions which take place between the author, text, reader and contexts in question (Jesson et al., 2016). Therefore, MT explores the interplay between authorial choice and reader response. In approaching texts dialogically, high quality MT also becomes dialogic by stimulating cognitive activity, engaging multiple perspectives and resulting in the inter-animation of ideas. This does not necessarily exclude teacherly,

authoritative knowledge and input, which can form part of a dialogue, offering a perspective that can serve to develop the ideas being collaboratively formed (Myhill et al., 2020).

- 3 **MT gives voice to metalinguistic understanding;** it provides students with opportunities to recognise, make, verbalise, explain, justify and discuss linguistic choices (Myhill et al., 2019; Myhill and Newman, 2016; Myhill et al., 2020). Therefore, MT *can* feature metalanguage. Metalanguage, the language used to talk about language, can help participants to be more precise about the features and effects under discussion. However, it *is* possible to express metalinguistic understanding without the use of metalinguistic terms (Myhill et al., 2019).
- 4 **MT provides teachers with opportunities to assess, guide and model the expression of metalinguistic understanding** (Watson et al., 2021).

Methods

I began conducting action research into the possibilities for IF in the secondary school English classroom in response to a living contradiction (Whitehead, 2019; Whitehead and McNiff, 2006) between my conceptualisation of reading and writing and my day-to-day teaching practice; although I understood reading and writing to be intertwined, dialogic processes, I found that my students were forming very few personal responses to texts. They were frequently unenthused by the works to which I introduced them, and some of them contributed little to class discussions. My lessons therefore felt somewhat monologic because they were not incorporating a diverse range of voices and responses. In part, I believe that this contradiction was caused by the performative nature of the educational climate within which I work, a climate in which measurable results are more highly valued than beliefs and personal values (Ball, 2010). As action research places the practitioner's values—their 'living standards of judgement' (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006, p. 82)—at the heart of data analysis and interpretation, I felt that it was an appropriate methodological response to my problematic situation.

Hypertext works of IF created using Twine position readers as active participants. Therefore, in the hope that bringing IF into the classroom might teach me something about how to develop a greater degree of active participation on the part of my students during my lessons, I entered into an iterative cycle of planning, teaching and reflecting, producing works of IF for use in various English lessons, teaching lessons using said works, reflecting on the teaching experience, and consequently refining my approach and my

'living theories' (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006, p. 19) of teaching and learning.

In this paper, I consider one critical-creative work of IF (AGG) and the way it was used in a single year 12 English Literature lesson with a class of 16-17-year-olds. I refer to AGG as a critical-creative work of IF as it was created via a process of Textual Intervention and because it was written with a view to facilitating both creative and analytical forms of textual engagement. To gather data, I took field notes, recorded the lesson in question using an audio recording device and interviewed two colleagues who I had invited to observe the lesson. In this paper, I focus in particular on the section of the lesson during which the class read, discussed and responded to AGG.

Having reflected on the lesson experience, I returned to the data and selected evidence that I felt related to my 'living standards of judgment' (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006, p. 82). These standards are 'living' in the sense that they are open to development; I am constantly seeking to make sense of my own practice. My standards are rooted in Bakhtinian dialogism, reader-response theory and a belief that creativity has an important role to play in the English classroom (McCallum, 2017). As such, I focus my attention on the quality of the interactions and textual responses that emerged during the lesson and the factors that shaped said interactions. More specifically, I adopt a material-dialogic stance (Hetherington and Wegerif, 2018), selecting evidence that sheds light on the quality of interactions not only between myself and my students, but also between students, teachers and material, technological resources—specifically, the work of IF that I brought into the classroom. Conducting thematic analysis of the evidence I selected, I identified several themes (Metalinguistic Talk, Textual Cohesion, Teacher Withdrawal and Critical-Creative Play). However, in this article, I focus on one theme in particular, so as to offer more in-depth analysis: Metalinguistic Talk.

Ethical considerations

Before commencing this school-based research project, I gained ethical approval from my university. I sought consent to collect data from the relevant gatekeepers, namely my head of department and the principal of the school where I work. Where student-participants are concerned, I communicated with parents and guardians, providing them with information about the research project and offering them the opportunity to withdraw consent for their child to participate. I also gained the consent of teacher interviewees for interviews to be recorded and for the corresponding data to be used for research purposes. I manage all of the

data I collect as part of this project with the strictest confidentiality, unless a safeguarding issue arises, in which case I respect school policies. Finally, to protect the anonymity of research participants, I use pseudonyms throughout this article.

Analysis

The lesson upon which this paper was based saw me facilitate an IF-based discussion with a group of year 12 students who had no experience of IF in the A Level English classroom. Despite this, one of my colleagues who observed the lesson upon which this paper is based remarked that my 'students were having to really think about the choices that the writer had made in much more depth than they ordinarily would if they were given the whole passage'. They also remarked that students 'were definitely thinking about linguistic choices in a much more meaningful way than the kind of standard responses that we normally get, and it forces them to think about effect, which I really like, rather than just feature spotting'. These comments suggest that students were talking about language and meaning in a good degree of depth. In my fieldnotes, I noted that 'students did come up with interesting interpretations themselves through reference to the difference[s] that the choice[s] offered them'. To consider these claims and the metalinguistic quality of the talk that occurred, I shall now analyse two transcripts of classroom talk that was recorded during the lesson.

Transcript one

Consider the following transcript of classroom talk, in which the underlined words refer to hyperlinks contained within the passage that is visible in Figure 1.

SH: Um ... Joy, what you saying?

JOY: Um... Because we have already had "In my younger years," I would have gone with "In his," because I feel like it could um basically reinforce a certain contrast that could be explained later on or [inaudible] within the introduction.

SH: So, it could be explained later on. Could you clarify that for me? What do you mean?

JOY: Um 'cos I feel like with the title itself: I mean The Great Gatsby, it could be like, just, I dunno how to explain it, but it's like, you are presenting the idea of him going into that, like the superior status that the title suggests.

SH: Ah, so you think the I is the Gatsby there?

JOY: Yeah.

SH: Ok so you think it might, it might focus our attention on Gatsby. Interesting. Erm, do you agree, er Lily, do you agree we should go his?

Lily: Um ... Yeah, I mean, based on what she said, she makes a good point that like, you know, "In his" it could refer to the Gatsby so we are like kinda intrigued to find out more, you know, who is this Great Gatsby and why is he so like respected? so yeah ...

SH: Could you clarify for me: what is the difference between his and my, in terms of ... If we were writing a sentence that starts with "In his" and "In my," what's the difference?

Lily: Is it the perspective? Like-

SH: -yeah what is th-

Lily: Like the point of view, like, it changes from first to third.

SH: So ... And how might that change the novel?

Lily: it could turn ... Like, my is like more personal, like, kinda' like you know speaking from his experiences and like upbringing, whereas in his—you don't know who's really speaking or who is being ... It's not ... It changes the kind of personal tone to a more kind of just general one, I think.

SH: Interesting. So we've had two people saying his. Sarah, do you wanna come in with a counterargument, or do you want to back them up?

Sarah: Well gonna say "his" is more like ... to say why wouldn't you choose "my" like, even though "my" would be more personal, so like the reader might be able to like, what's it called, relate to what is being said. I said "his" because it kinda shows that maybe the person that's being spoken about has been like, very influential, like significant, that they have to get someone else to tell their story, so if it being from their perspective.

Here, when Joy refers to 'The Great Gatsby,' she makes a connection between Gatsby's unique status, as suggested by the novel's title, and her preference for rewriting the novel's opening sentence in the third person. This idea is later developed by Sarah, who comments on the way that the third person perspective could make the subject of the sentence seem 'significant' or 'influential'—a person whose story is worthy of being told by 'someone else'. Both Sarah and Joy assume that the agent of Fitzgerald's original sentence is Gatsby, a misconception which I refrain from correcting until later in the lesson. However, they also begin to make connections between the novel's title, the choices that Fitzgerald did and did not make, and one another's ideas. As a class, we become re-writers who are 'involved in the process of making differences and weighing preferences' (Pope, 2003, p. 106). AGG positions us in this way by suggesting different, divergent choices to us as we re-write Fitzgerald's sentence.

To further examine the metalinguistic quality of this transcript, I shall now consider it in the light of the four characteristics of Metalinguistic Talk (MT) that I outlined earlier.

1 Metalinguistic talk (MT) is functionally oriented.

Joy's initial choice is somewhat based upon a desire to produce a sentence that is different from Fitzgerald's

original, which was written in the first person. We see this when she says, 'Because we've already had "In my younger years," I would have gone with "In his.'" However, Lily and Sarah later make more explicit connections between the language choice in question and the potential semantic implications.

When Sarah says that 'even though "my" would be more personal,' she would still go for the option written in the third person, she makes a connection between a language choice and the meaning that she, along with others in the class, have cumulatively formed. She believes that, by using the third person, the reader's attention will be drawn towards the greatness, significance and influence of the character in question.

2 *MT considers texts dialogically.*

On the one hand, my students and I do not challenge one another in this transcript, offering contrasting interpretations of each of the options before us. This is perhaps unsurprising given the brevity of the passage in question. On the other hand, there is a consideration of multiple perspectives; the students recognise that the interactive text before us offers one option that will create a more 'personal' text written in the first person, and another option that will have a contrasting effect, foregrounding the 'influential' qualities of the character in question. As such, while we do not necessarily consider the whole *passage* dialogically, we do approach *language* dialogically, considering different potential effects that an individual language choice can trigger in the mind of an imagined reader.

In the transcript above, there is also a degree of inter-animation; three of my students and I participate, each of us contributing differently to our consideration of the text. While I invite students to offer their perspectives and prompt Lily to consider how we would describe the choice before us, Joy expresses an idea that Lily and Sarah each build upon cumulatively. For example, when Sarah uses the expression 'even though,' she indicates that she is considering an idea that Lily has shared—the idea that choosing 'my' would create a more personal tone. She goes on to state a preference for the 'In his' option, commenting on the way it makes the character seem influential, an idea that resonates with the comments of Joy and Lily, who have already used terms like 'superior status' and 'respected' to express a similar notion.

3 *MT gives voice to metalinguistic understanding.*

In this extract, Lily explicitly recognises that we have a choice to make, and she verbalises her thoughts with regards to this choice. In fact, during our discussion of the choice in question, all three of the students seek to make and justify a single language choice. The way that both Sarah and Joy use the subordinating conjunction 'because' in their answers highlights the fact that they

are making an attempt to justify their linguistic preferences. Moreover, the transcript shows that my students and I made false starts and used fillers in our utterances. This reflects the fact that we are cognitively considering ideas that we have not previously discussed—our developing ideas our expressed somewhat tentatively.

When prompted, Lily uses the terms 'perspective' and 'point of view,' both of which can here be considered useful metalinguistic terms; they enable her to articulate the nature of the choice under consideration. She also refers to 'first' and 'third' person narrative perspectives. This terminology is not used fluently by the students, and no individual student makes a connection between a metalinguistic term and a potential meaning within an individual utterance. However, the terminology is part of a discussion which draws upon both the prior knowledge of the students (their knowledge of metalinguistic terminology) and the passage before us.

4 *MT provides teachers with opportunities to assess, guide and model the expression of metalinguistic understanding.*

By prompting Lily to use metalinguistic terms in her description of the choice being considered, I guided her towards using such terms, but also towards taking a more comparative approach to her consideration of language; after identifying that the choice related to a question of perspective, she recognises that 'my is like more personal'. Moreover, this transcript exposed the metalinguistic thoughts of my students; I was able to assess the somewhat limited extent to which they could offer detailed justifications of their choices. During the discussion, I was also able to learn that the students had no prior knowledge of the text, as they didn't know who the narrator was. This was food for thought; although AGG appeared to be helping me facilitate MT, my students' responses obliged me to reconsider my decision to read AGG with the class before introducing the first chapter of Fitzgerald's original novel to them in its entirety.

Transcript two

Later in the same lesson, my students and I considered the passage that can be seen in Figure 2. In the section of the lesson that is transcribed below, we discuss the choice before us:

Bobby: Um ... "In his youngest and most vulnerable years," um ... Because ... The emphasis on the fact that he was at his most ... Errr... He was in his youngest and most vulnerable state shows that he must have been at a point in his life when he was very inexperienced and he must have seen some sort of damage in his life which led to his father giving him such advice [inaudible]. [...]

In his **young and vulnerable** years

In his **younger and more vulnerable** years

In his **vulnerable** years

In his **youngest and most vulnerable** years

Figure 2: A passage taken from *A Great Gatsby* (Holdstock, 2021).

Charis: What do you think Maya?

Maya: I agree with Bobby, um, 'In his youngest and most vulnerable years.' There's emphasis on the vulnerable, and it kind of shows that, the younger he is, the more vulnerable he is. Then like, when, um ... As he grew up he's become more, he's become less vulnerable, and he's become stronger which is why now he's referred to as being great. And yeah ...

Charis: Does anyone have a different opinion? [silence]

SH: No one? Ok interesting. Thank you, Charis—it seems like we've come to an agreement. Um, what we haven't talked about is what's the actual difference being highlighted here: Young and vulnerable, younger and more vulnerable, vulnerable, youngest and most vulnerable ... What's the ... What's the diff ... What are the differences here? Yeah—Sarah.

Sarah: You could say that the last sentence has a superlative, and then the second one has a comparative adjective. So that's ...

SH: Yeah.

Sarah: Both of those put more emphasis on the vulnerable, rather than the first, the first and the third.

SH: Right, so these two are putting more emphasis on the youth and the vulnerability, whereas these two ...

Sarah: They're just like, they're just saying like, not really emphasising much.

SH: Ok. What's the difference between this one and this one?

Sarah: That one just ... The third one just talks about his vulnerability, like he could have been born [inaudible] old age or middle age, but the first one says when he's young as well.

To examine the quality of talk during this episode, I shall again consider this transcript in the light of the four MT characteristics I have outlined.

1 Metalinguistic talk (MT) is functionally oriented.

In Bobby's first remark, he offers a preference ('youngest and most vulnerable') and highlights the way that this language choice might help the reader to infer why

the character's father gave them some advice. As such, Bobby considers the way the reader might make meaning from the language chosen by the producer of the text. Maya builds on this, adding that this decision would create a noteworthy contrast with the adjective 'great'. Again, Maya is considering the way language could be used to make meaning.

When Sarah remarks that 'Both of those put more emphasis on the vulnerable, rather than the first, the first and the third,' she explicitly comments on the impact that a particular language choice can have upon the meaning of the text. By stating which of the available options puts greater emphasis on 'the vulnerable,' she shows an awareness of this relationship before beginning to consider the different meanings that the available options could produce.

2 MT considers texts dialogically.

Again, in this discussion we do not challenge or contradict one another. However, the reasoning that Maya offers is different to the reasoning that Bobby offers. Moreover, Sarah's attention to the range of choices available provides a perspective that the other two students do not. As such we explore the meaning of texts in range of different ways, cumulatively articulating a fuller understanding of how the text can be used to make meaning.

In this transcript, the three students involved engage in various forms of cognitive activity. Firstly, Bobby attempts to justify his choice. Later, Maya evaluates Bobby's contribution, saying that she agrees with him, and then builds on his argument by adding her own idea about the contrast between the words great and vulnerable. Finally, Sarah recalls linguistic terminology that she has learned previously and applies it to the choice before us, comparing the ways in which different adjectival forms might alter the reader's response. As such, the transcript shows how IF can be used to elicit multiple student perspectives and to

engage students in cognitive activity. Moreover, Maya's use of the word *agree* suggests that there is some inter-animation of ideas taking place.

3 MT gives voice to metalinguistic understanding.

In this transcript, Sarah demonstrates her ability to verbalise her understanding of the linguistic choice before her using appropriate terminology ('superlative' and 'comparative'). Moreover, while Bobby and Maya do not use such terms, they do verbalise their metalinguistic thinking by attempting to justify their preference regarding the language choice before us.

Much like in the first transcript that we looked at, the metalinguistic terminology is here used by students after they have been prompted by a question from me, their teacher. Students do not engage in feature spotting immediately, but rather seek to engage in metalinguistic decision making first. It is perhaps for this reason that my colleague remarked upon the way that students considered 'effect, [...] rather than just feature spotting'. Therefore, I suggest that IF can facilitate a different form of relationship between students and language than might otherwise be facilitated due to the way that it makes use of choice.

4 MT provides teachers with opportunities to assess, guide and model the expression of metalinguistic understanding.

In this transcript, I guide students towards using appropriate metalinguistic terminology through my questioning. The choice contained within the work of IF, combined with the question that I pose ("What are the differences here?"), guides students towards considering language choices comparatively. Moreover, my question comes in response to Bobby and Maya's remarks; having noticed that some students seem able to make a choice and justify it, I am then able to explore the extent to which another student is able to use appropriate terminology and to consider language comparatively, in terms of choice.

Why IF?

After the lesson, one of my colleagues posed the following question:

'But I suppose my overall, my largest question is, how does going through it in this sort of linear, choice-based, interactive, um, and therefore, forward-in-time, mode, benefit the students more than maybe, rewriting that passage three times, and just comparing it?'

This is an important question. In essence, what does AGG—a critical-creative work of IF—offer that alternative pedagogical approaches do not? How does the metalinguistic talk that is facilitated through the use of IF differ from talk that is facilitated in other ways?

Arguably, the class discussion that we had in response to the passage that is visible in Figure 3 suggests a possible response.

While discussing this passage, a student, Maya, made the following remark:

Maya: 'Um, I think pondering is better, because ... um, something about turning over in his mind ... Because it's no longer Gatsby talking about himself, it does not seem right that th-, the narrator knows what's going on inside Gatsby's mind, so I think pondering is better'.

Here, Maya bases her decision upon a language choice that the group has already made. By saying that 'it's no longer Gatsby talking about himself,' she refers to our earlier decision to rewrite the sentence in the third person. Maya bases her comments on the connection that she perceives to exist between the verb 'pondering,' the title of AGG and the previous choice we made about perspective. As such, she demonstrates the way in which the series of choices that AGG put before my students helped to draw her attention towards the potential connections between various different language choices. Peter makes a comparable remark:

In his youngest and most vulnerable years his father gave him some advice that he's been **turning over in his mind** ever since.

In his youngest and most vulnerable years his father gave him some advice that he's been **pondering** ever since.

Figure 3: A passage taken from *A Great Gatsby* (Holdstock, 2021).

Peter: For the turning over in my [his] mind, it seems like he's explaining his thought process. So it gives off a more like person ... like a personal sort of growth for him. So, therefore I would still think that like pondering would be a better word to use in this case, because it's a narrator speaking to like ...

Like Maya, Peter considers the semantic implications of the two choices available.; while 'turning over in his mind' suggests that the narrator understands the internal 'process' or cognitive experience that the character is going through, Peter thinks that *pondering* feels more appropriate as the narrator is positioned externally to the character being described and cannot explain this 'thought process'. We may not agree with this justification, however it does suggest that Peter, like Maya, is making connections between language choices.

Peter and Maya's remarks highlight the fact that reading AGG became a 'back-and-forth process' for my students (Rosenblatt, 2005b, p. x), a process that involved making sense of the (hyper)links connecting a series of language choices. Responding verbally to my colleague, I spoke of helping my students to 'join up the different choices'. I therefore suggest that teachers might be able to use IF in order to help students understand the ways that different elements of a text or sentence can relate semantically to one another.

As I did not ask Peter or Maya to make these connections, I suggest that they were able to make such remarks due to the way that AGG is designed. By making a nonlinear work of IF that places language choices in series, I arguably nudged students towards making such connections without having to verbally direct them towards doing so. As such, using Twine to create AGG enabled me to go beyond well-established approaches such as the use of Directed Activities Related to Texts (DARTs) (Department for Education and Skills, 2004); Twine enabled me to produce a resource that had a non-linear structure and which placed consequential linguistic choices in series. Each choice that we made impacted the subsequent critical-creative experience because it led to a different passage.

Conclusions

First of all, I reiterate that this paper draws upon data which relate to a single lesson, a lesson that involved a small group of nine English Literature students. This individual lesson does form part of a more extensive action research project, a project that involved the collection of classroom data over two academic years. However, the lessons I have learned and the theories I have developed are tentative, context-bound, living theories. Further research could examine the validity of my claims by examining the effects that IF might have upon teaching and learning in other educational

settings or by comparing, for example, the quality of talk in a lesson that features a critical-creative work of IF and a lesson that does not.

In this paper, I have shown that critical-creative forms of IF can be used to facilitate metalinguistic talk—talk that moves beyond mere 'feature spotting'. As such, my research will be of interest to teachers and researchers seeking to establish effective ways of facilitating and scaffolding metalinguistic talk in the classroom. Furthermore, I have created and applied a clear conceptual framework which could be used by other researchers to examine the metalinguistic quality of talk in various contexts. I have also argued that metalinguistic talk can be engendered and enriched by the choices and hyperlinks that are contained within a critical-creative work of IF like AGG. In so doing, my research forges a noteworthy connection between textual intervention as a critical-creative, pedagogical method, and the genre of Interactive Fiction, a connection that may be of interest to researchers and educators employing Interactive Fiction or textual intervention in their work. Finally, I suggest that critical-creative works of IF position consequential choices in series, enabling students to reflect upon the connections that exist between language choices in a way that other activities might not. Such works of IF can encourage students to consider the ways in which elements of a text interact with one another and with the reader.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by a bursary from the Department of Educational Studies, Goldsmiths, University of London. I would also like to acknowledge the support that my PhD supervisors, Dr Francis Gilbert and Professor Vicky Macleroy, have offered me during the course of my research.

Conflict of interest statement

The author reports that there are no competing interests to declare.

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