Level 1 English - From Recounting to Reflecting in Prep

PEEL in Practice: 1300 ideas for quality teaching
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How can I improve my students' reflective thinking skills so that they will not recount the activity when sharing?

The Victorian Early Years Literacy Program incorporates a whole class share time. At the conclusion of the reading session, students are brought back together to reflect upon, discuss and celebrate their learning. This time provides an opportunity for students to analyse and make judgements about what has happened. They are also required to think about their learning and strategies they used. Share time also makes students accountable for their learning because they may be required to contribute to the discussion.

Within my teaching practice, I have recognised the benefits of reflective thinking and I value share time. I do this by scheduling reflection time into the day. At the commencement of the school year, I had the (Year Prep) children share with the rest of the grade something they enjoyed doing and we talked about the things that we had learnt and practised during the day. This made the children aware of the idea of learning. This was a great introduction to reflective thinking. However, when I included share time into our reading session I was very disappointed with the children's responses. When I asked them to share with the grade what they had done in reading groups they simple described the task that they had completed. They would make comments such as 'I made a ladybird. I cut out the spots that had L things on them and stuck them on' or 'Read with Miss Saffin. The book was about a Hedgehog.' These comments devalued the purpose of share time because there is no thinking about learning or conscious awareness of the activity. They also concerned me because I was aware of the skills and strategies that this reflection time had to offer my grade and myself in terms of teaching and learning.

I set out to improve share time by reintroducing learning. As a grade we discussed 'what is learning?' and we talked about the things that we had learnt. We began to develop a list of things that we had learnt to do, not only at school but also outside of school. This chart increased the children's awareness of learning. They all want their name on this chart. I used this list as a prompt during share time. The children were required to add to our list of 'things that we have learnt' during share time. This was very successful because it diverted them away from describing the task and they were very excited to add to the list. They began to make comments such as 'I learnt how to read', 'I learnt how to make a question,' and 'I learnt how to match the picture to the word.' These comments were a vast improvement on prior share time responses.

As a teacher I was happy with these advancements but I was aware that if my grade were going to be reflective or metacognitive thinkers, an understanding of learning was not enough. I wanted the children to be more aware of themselves as learners and to understand why they were doing such activities.

Originally, I did this by giving the children a focus question before they completed their reading activity. These were questions such as 'How did you learn?' 'What
helped you to learn?' and 'How could have you improve your work?' These questions worked well for a couple of sessions but I found myself getting very uninterested with the idea and responses. The children were also suggesting that they felt the same way. This was evident in their behaviour because they were restless and tended to talk when others were sharing. I needed to find a fun and enjoyable way of presenting metacognition.

Due to my interest in metacognition I had read a lot on thinking and noticed that Edward de Bono's Six Thinking Hats (1992) was mentioned many times as a means of encouraging children to think creatively and critically. This book highlighted the Six Thinking Hats framework. This method allows children to think more richly and more comprehensively as each hat stands for one kind of thinking (de Bono).

Red Hat - Feelings  
Yellow Hat - Good Points  
Black Hat - Bad Points  
Green Hat - New Ideas  
White Hat - Facts  
Blue Hat - Thinking about thinking

The hats provide cues, but they also allow for open-ended responses. In schools, this method is commonly used as means to introduce problem-solving skills - however, when I was reading over some examples of yellow thinking, I recognised that this method would be a fantastic way of introducing the thinking skills required for metacognition. I felt that this structure would be useful for my Prep grade, because I hoped that the hats would self-direct the children without them becoming lost and aimlessly drifting. When they had a certain hat on, they were required to participate in that form of thinking. To promote this thinking even further, I anticipated that the children would really enjoy making and having their own 'thinking hats'. This would also make it a colourful and fun way of paying attention to thinking.

I began by using the yellow hat, because I felt that the children would be familiar with the language associated with this hat. Therefore, when direct instructions took place, the words and phrases associated with this method were well known to them. When the children use their yellow thinking hats, they think about the good points, or benefits, of a plan or an idea. When they wear their yellow hats they must tell why something is good or why it will work. When the children are sharing their yellow hat responses there must be a reason behind the statement.

The children made their yellow hats and I taught them about this method of thinking. Every child was so enthusiastic about their hat, some even wrote a big M on theirs because they thought they looked like McDonald's hats! Before they went off to their reading activity I told them that I wanted them to do some yellow hat thinking and to think about the good things about the activity they were doing. When they returned for share time they contributed with responses such as 'I read with Miss Saffin. It is really good because when you grow up you have to read lots.' Another suggested, 'I had to match the start of the word to the end of the word. This was good because I had to practise sounding out the word.' A selection of the yellow hat comments can be found in Table 1.
Yellow Hat Comments

I read with Miss Saffin. I liked doing this because Miss Saffin helped me if I didn’t know the words. I was good at putting the Hey Diddle Diddle rhyme together because I know that. I have it in my big book at home. I knew what came next. I liked writing my funny story because I thought really hard and I sounded out the words. I got lots of the sound right.

Whilst the children were sharing all these benefits, I transcribed them into a reflective thinking book. The children were then able to recognise that I really valued what they were saying and I hoped that this suggested that what they were saying was extremely important. Having me scribe the comments also prevented me from interrupting what they were saying. It was important to me that I did not put in my ideas during reflection time. It was solely the children’s ideas. I was very impressed with what they were sharing and this illustrated to me that we should never underestimate the potential of young children, especially in the area of metacognition. We continued with this yellow hat for a couple of sessions and then I introduced further hat thinking.

To further extend the children’s reflective and metacognitive skills, I introduced the de Bono’s black hat. This is for critical thinking. When wearing the black hat, the children find weaknesses and flaws and predict problems that may arise (de Bono, 1992). When the children are sharing their black hat responses they must provide a reason why something did not work.

The same procedures as for the yellow hat were followed for the introduction of the black hat. The children were required to do their reading activity and come back to share their black hat thinking - i.e., things that they did not like doing and why. A selection of the black hat comments can be found in Table 2.

Black Hat Comments

I didn't like doing this because it was too easy and I knew how to do it straight away. I didn't like doing the 'guess who' game because there were too many words to read. I didn't like putting the words in the right order because the words were too small and they were really gluey

After I had introduced the constructive (yellow hat) and critical (black hat) aspects of thinking and felt that the children were comfortable with this process I suggested that they did not have to wear a specific hat to do their thinking. Therefore, during share time they were able to contribute both black hat and yellow hat thoughts. It was interesting to recognise that there was no dominance of one particular line of thinking. There was an even distribution of black and yellow hat comments. These comments also illustrated that the children were now thinking more constructively, sophisticatedly and productively.
I followed with the green hat because the children had been involved in 'reactive' thinking whereby they had to react to something that was put before them. The green hat introduced creative thinking. Consequently, they were required to think of new ideas, possibilities or alternatives (de Bono, 1992). In doing this, during share time I asked the children to think about what they could have done differently. For a selection of these comments refer to Table 3. I hoped to take the children's alternative ideas and use them in reading sessions. However, at this stage, the children have not really produced any new ideas or alternatives. They have only outlined personal improvements. In future sessions I would like them to suggest activities that they would have organised if they were the teacher so that they have had some input into their learning.

**Green Hat Comments**

*The author should have written the book differently. The motorbike rider should have told Tom to 'watch out for the bricks' instead of just saying 'Watch out!'*

*I should have done my colouring differently because it was too messy.*

*In the book, Tom should have looked at his feet instead of looking at the motorbike.*

Along with the thinking hats, I have also improved my questioning technique as a means of extending the children's thinking. I improved my practice by listening to the children's responses and writing them down in our reflective thinking book. Whilst I was writing, I was able to think about what they were saying before asking further questions. When I questioned their thoughts, I now asked them simple questions such as 'How?' or 'Why?' and I have consciously made sure that I pause after asking the questions. The children have responded to this well and are now giving answers that are of a higher level of thought.

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