Principled Understanding? Teaching the Active and Passive Voice

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This paper describes some of the misconceptions and confusions in metalinguistic understanding which are established by the teacher during whole-class teaching of the active and passive voice. It draws on findings from a larger study investigating how teachers use talk in whole-class settings to scaffold children's learning. Through a detailed analysis of the teacher's interactions with her class, the paper illuminates the significance of clarity in explanations and choice of examples and the importance of secure subject knowledge. It demonstrates how the teaching of metalinguistic knowledge requires more than an ability to identify and define terminology, and how an overemphasis upon content can lead to a failure to acknowledge the cognitive and conceptual implications of pedagogical decisions.

Introduction

Recent educational innovations in the primary curriculum in the UK have promoted a renewed emphasis upon whole-class teaching, rather than upon the group work which had previously typified many primary classrooms. The National Literacy (NLS) and Numeracy Strategies (NNS) place a high premium upon interactive whole-class teaching, 'characterised by high quality oral work' and in which 'pupils' contributions are encouraged, expected and extended' (DfEE, 1998). The significance of talk as an educational tool for learning is underlined by the *Use of Language* series (SCAA, 1997) which emphasises how different curriculum subjects can use talk effectively within their respective disciplines to develop and extend pupil learning. The aim of such teaching is to establish what Edwards and Mercer (1987) describe as '*principled understanding*', a full conceptual and transferable grasp of the material being taught.

For the teacher, a primary responsibility is to enable the connections to be made between the 'already known' and the 'new', to lead children from their present understanding to new understandings: in Vygotskian terms, to support the child to 'do in co-operation today' what he or she will be able to 'do alone tomorrow' (Vygotsky, 1986). The teacher is positioned as an expert guide, who offers both challenge and support to learners and assists in the process of constructing new meanings and knowledge and scaffolding children's learning. The term 'scaffolding' describes the 'temporary, but essential, nature of the mentor's assistance as the learner advances in knowledge and understanding' (Maybin *et al.*, 1992) and is directly referred to in the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) as one of the advocated 'effective teaching styles' (DfEE, 2001a). However, other aspects of the NLS also draw on the notion of scaffolding: demonstration of the metacognitive processes of reading and writing; using models to identify features of written texts; and guided reading or writing 'in which the teacher

dedicates substantial time in the lesson to stretch and support a particular group' (DfEE, 2001). Vygotsky's belief that language is fundamental to this process of learning, and to the complex interplay of thought and language in shaping meaning, is at the heart of any consideration of how classroom talk promotes learning. Implicit in the political and educational initiatives of both the NLS and NNS is a recognition that talk is both 'a medium for teaching and learning' and 'one of the materials from which a child constructs meaning' (Edwards & Mercer, 1987); in other words, talk is not only a product which can be formally assessed (as in the National Curriculum for English, 2000) but also a process, a tool for learning.

This paper explores in some detail the interrelationship between whole-class teacher-led oral work and the development of principled understanding, and, in particular, considers how the teacher's talk operates to establish that understanding. The paper examines, in the context of teaching metalinguistic terminology, how misconceptions can be established by whole-class teaching which, although encouraging pupils' contributions, does not consider the conceptual connections which young learners are making.

The Study

The data described in this article derive from a larger sample in an ESRC-funded project to investigate how teachers use talk in whole-class settings to develop children's learning. The study has focused upon whole-class teaching episodes in nine Year 2 (age 7) classes and nine Year 6 (age 11) classes, covering Literacy, Numeracy and one other curriculum subject. The teaching episodes were tracked in sequences of three in order to follow how the teaching and learning developed, thus making a total of 54 episodes in 18 classes in three curriculum areas. The episodes were observed using a semi-structured observation schedule and video-recorded for *post hoc* analysis. Four children from each class (two high achievers and two low achievers) were interviewed after the sequence of three episodes to explore their perceptions and understanding of what they had learned. The class teachers used the video recordings as a stimulus for reflection upon how they had used talk to support and develop children's learning.

This paper draws on data derived from one sequence of three Year 6 Literacy lessons and analyses how in the teaching of the grammatical features of active and passive voice, conceptual confusions in learners' understanding are created. The study fully involved the participant teachers in reflecting upon their own video extracts and in responding to the interim findings of the research.

The context and planning for learning

The sequence of lessons under consideration was part of a longer unit, focusing upon developing skills in narrative writing (see Appendix). The learning objectives selected are guided by the objectives for Year 6 in the NLS and the teaching sequence strongly guided by materials produced by the NLS (DfEE, 2001b). Although the Strategy specifies learning objectives, these are not connected to contexts and purposes and in this sequence the teaching of the

passive does not appear to be fully grounded in a purposeful context: it is not clear how these objectives relate to children's wider understanding of reading and writing narrative. In particular, there is no obvious relationship between the use of the passive and the use of flashback. By the final lesson, when the children begin writing their own narratives, the reference to the passive voice has been dropped.

In the second lesson, one of the objectives was 'to discuss how the passive voice can be used to withhold and give out extra information to the reader' which appears to be an attempt to establish a reason for using the passive, albeit apparently contradictory. However, in the lesson itself this objective was not explored in the context of narrative writing. By contrast, the concept of flashback introduced in the third lesson is much more clearly linked to its use in narrative to handle time and reveal additional narrative information. One implication arising specifically from this sequence of teaching, but one which has arisen consistently in other teaching sequences observed in this research, is that effective planning for learning needs to address not only what objectives will be taught and what activities will meet this objective, but also how the teaching will make connections for the learner between what is being learned and why.

The clarity of the learning outcomes

From the planning, the intention to help children 'understand the active and passive' is evident, formally framed by the NLS learning objective (to understand the terms active and passive and be able to transform a sentence from one to the other). However, when enacted in practice this translated into uncertainty about whether this was to be implicit or explicit knowledge of the terminology. Twice in the first lesson the teacher states that identification of the passive is not important:

> It is not important that you can identify active and passive what is important is that you know there is two different ways

> Ok you don't need to know the difference between active and passive but what you do need to know is that sometimes just by using the other one it can have an interesting result.

Despite these statements suggesting that identification was not important, a substantial part of the first two teaching episodes in the sequence was devoted entirely to identification of the passive construction, both through verbal interaction and through a written task. Indeed, analysis of the teacher's questions highlights the role of identification:

- Is that active or passive? (twice)
- Is that an active or a passive sentence?
- Which one is the passive?
- Which one is active?
- 'Hannah got slapped by Jo' or in the active . . . ?
- What would the passive version of that be?
- Which one is which? (active or passive)
- The dolphin got chased by the killer whale – who is doing the chasing?

- How would we do it the other way around? (form the passive)
- And the other way?

The emphasis on identification and use of the terminology is reflected in the pupil interviews. All four children interviewed were clear that the point of the lesson sequence was to learn about the active and passive, and all four children used the grammatical terms, active and passive. Clearly, from the children's perspective the intended learning outcome of the lesson was the ability to identify the active and passive; in other words, to gain explicit metalinguistic knowledge, despite the teacher's statements to the contrary. However, they were much less assured in demonstrating understanding of the terms or how they might be used in writing. In terms of learning outcomes, there appears to be a lack of clarity about how to 'convert linguistic discussion into learning practice' (Wilkins, 1979).

The impact of the explanations upon learning

The abstract nature of grammatical terms can make explanations difficult. Linguistic definitions of grammatical terminology are rarely helpful, often relying on hierarchical understanding of other grammatical terms (Myhill, 2000), or using highly abstract language. Consequently, many teachers explain grammatical terms through a combination of verbal explanations and examples. The next two sections of this paper will explore how the quality of the explanations and the choice of examples can contribute to the creation of conceptual confusions.

In the sequence of teaching captured for this study, there are two key points of explanation. Firstly, there are the explanations of the passive construction; and secondly, the explanation of why children might use the passive in their writing. At each of these points, there is a lack of clarity which establishes incorrect associations and sets up contexts for acquiring misconceptions.

The teacher's explanation of the passive construction instantly sets up a mistaken conceptual connection. She links the forthcoming lesson with a previous one which had looked at lexically vivid verbs:

Teacher: Yesterday you were looking at active verbs. Can anyone remember some of the active verbs that you found anywhere in the world – there are some wonderful ones?

The class then provides the teacher with the verbs she was seeking: for example, *pulsated*, *bulged* and *wriggled*. From this recap on 'active' verbs, the teacher moves on to teach about the passive. Having given the class an example of an event described in both the active and the passive voice:

> The mouse frightened the elephant
> The elephant was frightened by the mouse

the teacher continues:

Teacher: We have to find the tools to describe these. Yesterday's sentences, they were like these, were they – they were active verbs.

Thus from the outset, the learners are encouraged to conceptualise the active voice in terms of lexical action, a conceptualisation which Martha reveals in her interview, when she claims of her prior knowledge 'I knew what active was – doing something'. This association of the active voice with 'doing' is sustained throughout the teaching sequence and leads to considerable confusion about the distinction between the subject or agent of an action and the object or recipient of an action. The teacher implies that the passive alters who undertakes the action of the verb, even though in the example given it is the mouse who frightens the elephant in both cases.

Teacher: The mouse is doing the doing isn't it – the mouse is frightening the elephant. You see, the mouse is doing the action. In this one this is called a passive verb because it is the elephant that is doing the doing.

This emphasis upon 'doing' is evident in the following extracts, which repeatedly draw children's attention to the lexical notion of who is doing the action, rather than drawing attention to the grammatical constructions which foreground either the agent or the recipient of the action.

Child: (*reads*) The dog is being painted by Fred.
Teacher: The dog is being painted by Fred is exactly right. Which one is which?
Child: That is passive and the other one is active (*pointing to the relevant examples*).
Teacher: Because Fred is doing the action, isn't he – the action is being done by Fred and in this one the action is being done by the dog.

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Children: The killer whale chased the dolphin.
Teacher: So that is definitely active isn't it because the killer whale is doing the chasing.

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Teacher: It's active because Craig is doing the action.

Two of the children reflect some of this confusion in the post-lesson interviews when they attempt to explain the difference between the active and passive.

Martha: When somebody's doing something you can write an active verb.
Tom: I think a passive describes what the thing that you are describing does and an active is describing what the person does.

Another significant point of explanation in the teaching sequence is the explanation of why the passive might be used in writing. On one level, the teacher suggests that the passive can be '*useful*', '*interesting*' and can give writing '*more variety*', explanations which give little depth or substance. She also reiterates the association between the active voice and lexical action:

Teacher: Sometimes it is useful to use the passive verbs. Sometimes is can be a bit boring to write in the passive voice. If you want lots of action you would go for the active verbs wouldn't you?

However, the teacher tries to explain that by using the passive, the writer can conceal who is the doer or agent of an action, a legitimate, purposeful use of the passive. But the explanation itself is not clear, particularly since in the examples used, the agent is not concealed because of the use of the 'by (agent)' (i.e. by the mouse):

Teacher: Sometimes the passive can be a useful tool to use when you want to establish a sense of mystery . . . Because this method this way of writing allows us to do that. It allows us to create a sense of mystery. Why was the elephant frightened, we don't know, do we? Because if we do the active version it is straightforward – we know exactly why the elephant was frightened.

Perhaps it should be a matter of concern that no child in the class responded to this explanation by saying that he or she did know why the elephant was frightened (*by the mouse*!).

The clarity of the explanation is further confounded a little later in the sequence when the teacher suggests that not only does the passive enable the writer to withhold information, it also enables the writer to give additional information.

Teacher: The passive voice is not used very often and most of you will use it without thinking about it. When you might consider using it is when you are writing to conceal a piece of information, hide a bit of information or when you want to add more information Ok! So if you want to give more information consider the passive voice, if you want to use less information, particularly if you are writing detective stories, that's a good example of the elephant is frightened, creating a sense of mystery, you're not letting your reader have the information . . .

In the interviews, three of the four children reveal considerable confusion about the appropriate use of the passive, reflecting learning at a superficial level, and with little cognitive grasp of either the grammatical construction or its purpose.

Joe: A passive verb is one that you would use if you didn't want to give away the whole sentence . . . as in: 'The boy broke it.' . . . And an active verb is to tell you that that person actually made a movement and did that particular thing himself whereas with passive you would say that he did it rather than putting it into how he did do it.

Martha: Umm, it just helps interest the reader, helps add a little bit of interest whereas if you just use active all time saying, 'He did this, he did that,' it does get boring.

Sally: The passive voice – you can like cover up, it can be like a clue of some sort, because you can take out the . . . you can cover it up like the one we used – 'the elephant frightened the mouse' or 'the elephant was frightened by the mouse' – you can take out information. And the other one was to add more information to it.

The impact of the examples used upon learning

It is easy to underestimate the power of examples to support or confound the acquisition of understanding. In this sequence of lessons, the teacher is guided by support materials on teaching the passive in the Year 7 Sentence Level Bank (DfEE, 2001b). She uses the example given in the booklet, 'The mouse frightened the elephant/The elephant was frightened by the mouse'; she uses a passage from the booklet written in the passive (*Mr Hasbean*); and finally, she uses mime to exemplify the difference between active and passive, as recommended in the booklet.

The initial choice of example in the DfEE materials is apparently an accessible example of the active and passive voice. However, it is unhelpful for two reasons. Firstly, including the 'by agent' in the passive version makes it harder to recognise that the alteration is not about changing the action but about changing how the action is described. The passive allows the writer to conceal the agent, if desired. Secondly, the mouse and the elephant are equally plausible agents of the verb 'to frighten', thus making it more difficult for learners to grasp the difference between the two voices. In the lesson, one confusion that occurred at the outset was that several children felt that in the first example the mouse was frightening the elephant and in the second example the elephant was frightening the mouse. Perera (1987) records primary children's difficulty understanding the passive, noting that, as the children in this class do, when both subject and object are equally conceivable 'doers' children tend to give priority to word order. By contrast, the 'Mr Hasbean' story described what happened to Mr Hasbean at the seaside largely using subjects and objects which could not plausibly be interchangeable. For example, one passive clause was '*His coat was splattered by a low-flying seagull*': it is conceptually easier for children to recognise that the action described was that of the seagull, since it is unlikely that a seagull would be splattered by a coat!

Furthermore, the examples then tend to emphasise the notion of reversal, reinforced by the DfEE (2001b) guidance which states that '*In the passive voice the sentence is turned around*'. All the examples, and the use of children's examples, reverse the subject into a 'by agent' which foregrounds cognitive attention to word order, rather than to meaning or the way the verb construction alters. When one child is struggling to identify the passive in the Mr Hasbean story, the teacher advises him to '*turn it around*', and when the children mime examples, she again asks them to express it '*the other way around*'. Superficially, these strategies often lead children to the correct answer, but not necessarily because the learners have understood the conceptual principles underpinning the reversal. The potential confusion that this association of the passive with reversal can cause is revealed in the following exchange, where one child's example of active and passive reverse syntactic elements in the sentence:

Child: 'The tortoise plodded towards the finish line'
Teacher: 'The tortoise plodded towards the finish line' – active or passive?
            Active.
            (*reads child's passive example*) 'Towards the finish line the tortoise plodded'.
            Oh you have turned it around completely the other way: 'Towards the finish line the tortoise plodded' – I can't get my head around that.
Children: Passive – it does make sense.

The children's assertion that the passive version makes sense, which of course it does, highlights that their cognitive attention is not tuned into the passive construction itself, but to mechanisms, like reversal, which may or may not result in a passive construction.

The use of mime to exemplify the active and passive was a conscious choice of strategy: her reflections after the lesson record that the mime was a motivational tool, a tactic to '*help keep the children on task*'. She tries '*to present the information in as many different ways as possible, visual and verbal*' and hoped the mime would '*reinforce the teaching point*'. In this episode, the teacher asks three pairs of children to come to the front and she asks one of each pair to mime an action with their partner. She then asks the rest of the class to give her the sentence that describes this action in both the active and the passive. As already discussed, the examples frequently emphasise the 'doing' of the action and the notion of reversal. In the extract below, accompanying the mime, both of these tendencies are apparent:

Teacher: Right ok, Craig, your action. Will you begin please. Somebody give me the sentence.
Child: Craig is beating up Liam.
Teacher: Is that an active sentence or a passive sentence?
Child: Active.
Teacher: It's active, because Craig is doing the action. How would we do it the other way around?
Child: Liam is getting beaten up by Craig.

Once the teacher has elicited the correct answer, she moves on to further examples and repeats the sequence. Neither the teacher nor any of the children comment that in the passive example '*Liam is getting beaten up by Craig*', Craig is still executing or 'doing' the action. Potentially, the use of mime could have been highly supportive in cementing the learners' conceptual understanding of the passive because it visibly demonstrates that the action itself does not change. The mime could have illustrated how the active presents the subject as the executor of the action, whilst the passive presents the subject as the receiver of the action. This could foreground the different treatment of the subject in both constructions. In practice, the mime once again reiterated the emphasis on 'doing' and reversal. In doing this, the teacher is following the guidance provided in the DfEE materials (2001b) which sets up this confusion. One of the DfEE examples is '*Julian is poking Jim. No! Jim is being poked by Julian.*' It is not evident what the word 'No' is contesting, since Julian is poking Jim in both constructions. Examples and activities open up the possibility for children to learn through experience and to begin to take ownership of the learning in hand. However, if the learning purposes underpinning the choice of any given example or strategy are not clear, or if the key principles the example was intended to illuminate are not drawn out, it is very easy to lose sight of the learning:

> One of the real dangers of an emphasis on children's capacities to learn from their own activity and experience is that their understanding of things will remain at the level of specific experience and practical procedures while the hoped-for principled understandings are never grasped or articulated. (Edwards & Mercer, 1987)

The focus on teaching, not learning

Another feature of the sequence of lessons is the emphasis upon teaching, not learning. The lesson planning indicates the focus upon objectives to be taught and these objectives remained strongly foregrounded throughout all three lessons. The preoccupation with what has to be taught often led to teaching in which the conceptual connections being established were not considered, despite the best intentions of the teacher. In her *post hoc* reflections, the teacher indicated an explicit intention to make the learning purposeful: 'I try to give them a reason for learning as often as possible and show them how this piece of learning will be useful to them and their writing'. But there is little evidence in the lesson sequence of engaging with how the children will acquire an understanding of the passive and the teacher's reflections support this. She is able to talk confidently about the objectives of the teaching sequence and the concepts she wants the children to learn, but she does not reflect upon how her own teaching decisions relate to children's learning. When asked to reflect upon what prior knowledge this sequence built, the teacher constructed prior knowledge wholly in terms of content or coverage: 'In previous lessons the children had worked on using interesting verbs. The previous week they had been using simple and complex sentences.' There is no consideration of how interesting verbs or simple and complex sentences might contribute to their understanding of the passive, or how what the children already know might shape or influence what she wants them to learn. If 'knowledge is constructed by the individual knower, through an interaction between what is already known and new experience' (Edwards & Westgate, 1994), then planning for learning needs to address prior knowledge. This is not simply to facilitate building on the 'already known' but to anticipate and pre-empt possible confusions created by the already known, such as the association of active verbs with lexical action in this sequence.

In this particular sequence, the focus on teaching draws attention to the prioritisation of labels or terminology over principled conceptual understanding of those terms. This is a phenomenon common in the teaching of metalinguistic knowledge and its roots lie partly in lack of confidence in subject knowledge, which will be explored in more detail below. However, it also reflects a tendency to mistake the terminology for the concept. When asked what concepts the children would learn, the teacher named the active and passive, and later in her reflections noted that 'Repetition of the words "active" and "passive" is deliberate and reinforces the key vocabulary'. The pattern of teaching reveals this repetition in action, though without any parallel exploration of children's levels of understanding of the concept. Indeed, all four children interviewed used the words 'active' and 'passive' without prompting, and were explicitly aware that this was what they had been learning. However, the two lower achievers had not grasped the passive at all, and the two high achievers revealed some misconceptions or insecurity about the passive. The metalinguistic label is prioritised over '*exploring concepts*' (Keith, 1997).

The emphasis upon teaching, rather than learning, is mirrored in the discourse analysis of the three lessons. All three lessons follow what Goodwin (2001) terms the 'recitation script', whereby the discourse alternates consistently between teacher and children, with the length of the teacher's utterances exceeding those

of the children, who typically give short phrases or one-word answers. The teacher asked a total of 54 questions in the sequence, of which 47 were questions requiring a pre-determined answer. Of course, not all the discourse utterances nor all the questions in the sequence were directly related to the teaching of the passive. However, 12 of the 47 questions were categorised as 'practising skills' and all of these involved practice in identifying the active or passive, an activity where even the most confused child stood a 50% chance of getting the right answer. The interaction patterns found both in this sequence of lessons and in the study overall confirm Galton *et al.*'s (1999) findings that classroom talk is dominated by the teacher and by factual questions. The teacher reflects that she uses 'questions a great deal which allows me to pinpoint particular children and for the children to be more active in their learning' but the pattern of discourse in the teaching sequence suggests that 'active learning' is constructed as an opportunity to be involved in giving answers, rather than an opportunity to actively construct new meanings and understandings. Heavy use of 'frequent specific questions' often has the effect of closing down genuine interaction and the direct questions 'tend to generate relatively silent children and to inhibit any discussion between them' (Wood, 1988). The difficulty is that teachers' preoccupations with what they want to teach (or are required to teach) sometimes means children do not learn: there is little recognition that 'there is no way in which the knowledge of the teacher can be transmitted directly to the learner' (Wells, 1986). By contrast, one question used by the teacher in this sequence altered this pattern of discourse ('Explain to us why those two sentences perhaps give a different picture?'*)* and shifted the focus from teaching to learning. The question invited learners to articulate what they were thinking about the active and passive, and created opportunities for the teacher to monitor the level of genuine understanding. Rather than eliciting a correct answer, this question was able to 'encourage elaboration of responses' (Goodwin 2001).

Moreover, the emphasis upon teaching and pursuing a particular teaching agenda means that critical learning moments are often missed. Although this sequence of lessons tended to encourage answers which fulfilled curriculum demands, there were critical moments when children's comments or responses were highly indicative of the way they were thinking. One of these was a child's comment on looking at the initial two examples of a passive and active construction, 'They just mean exactly the same- it's just the words are arranged in a different order'. This response suggests that this child may have grasped the concept that the active and passive constructions convey the same action described in different ways. At the end of the second teaching session, when the teacher had been trying to explain how the passive could be used to 'withhold information', one boy observed that 'It is like *Eastenders*, who shot Phil they didn't show who shot him,' suggesting that he may have understood the concept of using the passive to conceal the identity of the agent. In both cases, the teacher accepted the answer and moved on without capitalising on the opportunity to draw out from these responses the key learning the children may have been trying to express. Goodwin (2001) terms these moments 'critical turning points' where the teacher has the opportunity to adapt the direction of teacher talk in favour of 'alternative choices . . . which might have challenged pupils to engage in a higher level of literate thinking'. At another point in the sequence, a child asks a question (itself a

rare occurrence) which appears to be an attempt to clarify her understanding of the passive. The nature of her query is unclear, but the teacher's response misses what the child's question is saying about her understanding, as she simply uses the question to move the lesson back onto her own agenda:

Child: If you said in the second one that the elephant was frightened by the mouse who was like making faces or something then would it be like the same thing with the first one?

Teacher: Yes, you would just turn it into a complex sentence.

The significance of subject knowledge

This teaching sequence underlines the significance of subject knowledge in supporting and developing children's learning. The teaching of grammar, in particular, can pose specific challenges for several generations of teachers who were themselves never taught grammar. In implementing the National Literacy Strategy, many teachers are learning the conceptual terminology of meta-linguistic knowledge in order to be able to teach it. Inevitably, the practice of teaching a grammar term often illuminates weaknesses in this learning. The teacher in this sequence was well aware of her own limitations:

> This is my first year of teaching the top ability literacy set and I often find it challenging my own knowledge of the complexities of the English language. Sometimes I feel my insecurities stop me from making my explanations and instructions as concise as they should be.

The lessons observed show an enthusiastic teacher, with positive relationships with her class, with a variety of teaching strategies at her disposal, supported by focused planning. But the implications of uncertainty in subject knowledge of the active and passive impede her ability to create an appropriate site for learning. Watts *et al.* (1997) suggests that poor subject knowledge often causes teachers to control the lesson more tightly: 'they carefully formulate their planning, organization, assessment and materials and more tightly manage and control learning situations to minimize "exposure" of their own limited expertise.' Moreover, the support materials provided by the DfEE (2001b) appear to create overdependence on prepared examples and strategies which lend themselves to establishing misconceptions. The explanations establish incorrect conceptual connections between lexically vivid verbs and the active voice, they incorrectly suggest that the agent of the action changes between the active and passive construction, and they emphasise the notion of reversal which leads to misunderstandings. The relationship between secure subject knowledge and the ability to explain clearly is close: 'If you have a good grasp of the content (i.e. what is to be taught) it puts you in a better position to determine appropriate strategies (ie *how* to explain the topic)' (Wragg, 2001). The tentative subject knowledge leads to a lack of confidence dealing with children's questions or responses, as the syntactic reversal of the 'plodding tortoise' sentence highlights. The effective teaching of grammar is dependent upon secure subject knowledge, yet many teachers, like this one, do not have such security. In the words of Hudson (2000), 'a subject with such weak intellectual underpinnings is doomed to eventual extinction'.

Conclusion

Since Barnes *et al.*'s (1986) observation that teachers use talk as a medium for teaching, rather than learning, little seems to have changed. This sequence of teaching, with its preponderance of teacher talk, draws heavily on the teacher's skill as a talker to generate genuine learning. But analysis of the sequence reveals how unhelpful conceptual connections and misconceptions are taught by the teacher. The analysis also indicates the dangers of focusing too much on teaching at the expense of learning. Throughout the sequence (and indeed in many other teaching sequences in the study) the imperative of the lesson is to cover or address carefully specified teaching objectives, with the consequence that pedagogical attention and energy appears to be more closely directed towards content than towards how learners will react and respond to the content. The need to consider the learning implications of a given teaching objective is intensified when the learning is conceptual, rather than concrete. The analysis signals implications for both policy and practice.

Firstly, the issue of learners' prior knowledge is significant. All the teachers in the study tended to describe prior knowledge in terms of content covered in previous lessons, rather than in terms of conceptual understanding. In this case, learning the passive, the teacher makes a less than judicious conceptual link between active verbs (lexically vivid) examined in a previous lesson and the grammatical active construction. This may well be primarily due to lack of confidence in subject knowledge in this area, but a repeated pattern in the study is that of teachers making links to learners' prior knowledge without acknowledging how that prior knowledge might influence understanding. As Barnes *et al.* (1986) describe it, 'the pedagogical problem' for the teacher is how to help learners 'bring to mind relevant knowledge and understanding and to "recode" it in terms of the new framework offered by the teacher.' Here the children's existing schema for the word 'active' (and possibly also the word 'passive') could overlay the teacher's introduction of the grammatical terminology of active and passive. Elsewhere in the study there were many parallels: the teaching of 'simple sentences' without recognising that simple refers to grammatical simplicity, rather than what most children might understand by the everyday associations of 'simple'; or the teaching of the notion of a 'fair test' without recognising that children were interpreting 'being fair' as 'sharing out equally'. It seems that teachers do not always acknowledge what pupils know and do not successfully integrate ideas introduced with children's *'picture of reality'* (Barnes *et al.*, 1986). So school knowledge becomes a discrete category of knowledge unrelated to the pupil's own experience and this confounds the transfer of learning into real-world situations (Eisner, 1996).

Moreover, in this particular sequence, there is little evidence of building on short-term prior knowledge through cognitive or conceptual progression through the teaching: the progression is content led, not cognitively led. The DfEE (2001b) teaching materials, heavily adopted by this teacher, take no account of prior knowledge and do not appear to have addressed cognitive progression. Thus the teaching is framed by a sequence which provides initial examples of the passive, then provides further practice at identification, and finally attempts to consider the impact of the passive in writing. The learning

sequence might have been initiated by exploring the effect of the passive in several texts in order to provide a context for later more focused learning about the passive construction. Alternatively, it might have been decided that a conceptual understanding of subject and object was a necessary preliminary to understanding the passive; or that an important first conceptual step was helping learners to recognise that the event described remains constant in both passive and active constructions. It is not so much that there is a 'right' conceptual sequence to consider, as that conceptual understanding is not considered at all. It is important to think about learning as *'a developmental process in which earlier experiences provide the foundations for making sense of later ones'* (Mercer, 1995), particularly when dealing with knowledge at an abstract level.

Secondly, the clarity of explanations is crucial in developing principled understanding since it is frequently the explanations which establish appropriate, or inappropriate, conceptual connections. Explaining is an integral feature of teachers' interactions with children, and most teachers engage in numerous explanations in one school day, so much so that many explanations have become routinised. But explanations operate on different levels, from the kinds of procedural explanations which are virtually a set of instructions, to task explanations which may well draw on familiar classroom practices and routines, to factual explanations of new knowledge, and finally to conceptual explanations of abstract ideas. When explaining abstract ideas, teachers sometimes falter because their own implicit understanding of an idea has never before been articulated in words. This can lead to the kind of garbled tangle of words which every teacher and lecturer has experienced, or to explanations whose clarity is compromised by lack of precision (*'doing the doing'*, for example). At a more sophisticated level, however, it is important to recognise that explanations of conceptual ideas are not modes of delivery of information but mechanisms for scaffolding learning. This means thinking more explicitly about conceptual connections, and about appropriate steps and stages in an explanation.

Closely linked to the role of effective explanations in developing principled learning is the appropriacy of examples selected to support explanations or subsequent activities. In teaching grammar, examples are frequently selected simply because they provide basic exemplification of a construction; indeed, they are often such 'perfect' examples of the feature that learners find it hard to transfer their understanding from the given example to live texts (Myhill, 2000). Frequently, they are examples for linguists, rather than for learners, and little attention is attributed to how learners will respond to them, as Perera's (1987) observations of learners' prioritisation of word order highlights. When selecting or creating examples for the classroom, there is a need to think more pedagogically about why examples are being chosen: what concepts are the examples intended to convey? What confusions might learners encounter? How can examples be used to move learners from heavily scaffolded understanding of a concept to independent understanding? In teaching the passive, initial examples which have no 'by agent' present in the passive, and which avoid equally plausible subjects and objects, may provide stronger support in the early stages, but later examples might deliberately introduce these complications to extend understanding and to facilitate recognition of the passive in real texts (where writers do not conveniently shape the passive to enable easy identification).

Furthermore, few teachers in this study supported children in cementing the conceptual idea that the example was intended to illuminate. In the sequence analysed in this paper, the teacher moved on to further examples or to tasks without pausing to consolidate the key learning point exemplified in the examples, or to establish what the children had assimilated.

Moreover, developing effective learning demands teaching contexts which provide thinking and talking space for children. Interactive teaching is not simply about participation and response levels, or teaching strategies which ensure continuation of rapid-fire teacher–pupil interactions: it is about engaging learners in learning and thinking. Arguably, the study is revealing superficial interactivity in whole-class teaching, characterised by regular exchange of contributions between teachers and pupils. However, as the discourse analysis reveals, there is still a dominance of factual elicitation type questions, with predetermined answers, and often accompanied by strong cueing by the teacher to elicit the 'correct' answer. In the case studied here, the relatively high number of questions practising the skill of identifying the passive when there is always a 50% chance of guessing correctly is a prime example of this. In this lesson, and replicated across the study, there is a very low number of speculative questions, which invite opinions or hypotheses, or process questions, which ask learners to reflect upon what they are learning. There is a dearth of questions which invite children to articulate their developing understanding or to explain their thinking processes. Questions offer teachers the possibility of making '*appropriate and strategic interventions*' which are '*crucial to the process of making implicit knowledge explicit*' (Carter, 1990).

Equally significant is the need to acknowledge that effective interactive teaching makes considerable demands on teachers' listening skills, as well as the accepted wisdom of developing children's listening skills. Both speaking and listening are potentially active cognitive processes, and the positioning of speaking as an active engagement and listening as a passive activity is unhelpful. From a pedagogical perspective, this paper argues the importance of addressing teacher talk and listening, as well as pupil talk and listening, in order to establish a genuinely '*collaborative construction of meaning*' (Wells, 1986). The teaching sequence described here suggests a lack of confidence in coping with children's responses and what those responses reveal about their emerging understanding, or misunderstanding. There is a need to shift from the tendency to reward the 'right' answer to responding more effectively to the implications of what the child is saying, if we are to ensure '*that meanings are mutually understood*' (Wells, 1986) and that learners attain principled understanding.

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Appendix: Outline of the Three Lessons Analysed

Learning objectives	Outline of activities
• To revise yesterday's work on active verbs • To understand the terms active and passive and be able to transform a sentence from one to the other • To discuss how changes from one to the other affect word order • To recap on features of good narrative writing	1. Introduce active and passive, using sentence strips. 2. Pairs write simple sentence in active and passive on whiteboard. Discuss differences in meaning. 3. Read Mr Hasbean at the Seaside – children to identify active and passive verbs. 4. Children to write own Mr Hasbean paragraph using passive voice.
• To understand the terms active and passive and be able to transform a sentence from one to the other • To discuss how the passive voice can be used to withhold and give out extra information to the reader • To recap on features of good narrative writing • To introduce the term flashback	1. Revise past and present tense. 2. Recap active and passive – use mime to establish understanding. 3. Demonstrate how passive voice can be a useful tool to withhold information – with sentence strips. 4. Demonstrate how passive voice can be used to extend information given to reader by answering the questions, Who did it? What was used to do it? What method was used to do it? 5. Pairs on whiteboards write examples. 6. Introduce term flashback – describe purpose. 7. Read Eagle of the Ninth extract. 8. Children write flashback based on above.
• To recap on features of good narrative writing • To understand how authors use flashbacks to handle time • To understand how flashbacks allow the author to quickly give information about people or events from the past	1. Demonstrate possible writing frame for Eagle of the Ninth flashback. 2. Identify features of good narrative writing. 3. In pairs, look at yesterday's work, using features to evaluate. 4. Write class frame for opening chapter of a book which uses flashback technique. Discuss possible sentences which would signify start and end of flashback. 5. Children to write opening chapter.