

## Occasional Paper on on Talking, Listening and Learning

### Introduction

It is now over 40 years since Wilkinson (1965) first coined the term 'oracy' and argued for its inclusion in our conception of literacy. Since then a recurring and consistent message from research, curriculum development projects, national initiatives and inspection reports has been that speaking and listening is an essential part of literacy (e.g. DfEE, 1998:8). The Rose Report (2005) highlights the value of cooperative learning in language rich contexts and the QCA (2005) emphasises both the cognitive and social importance of spoken language.

The inclusion of an oral component in GCSE examinations ensured a place for oracy in the English Secondary Curriculum and the belated but welcome inclusion of speaking and listening in the Primary National Strategy (DfES, 2006) formally recognised that successful teaching is characterised by interactive discourse.

However, if we are to avoid the historical marginalisation of oracy and secure a place for speaking and listening in English, and across the curriculum, teachers need support in the practical application of concepts such as inter-thinking and dialogic discourse. Although teachers may now be spending more time in group and whole class teaching, patterns of interaction characterised by teacher-dominated talk remain stubbornly unchanged (Galton et al, 1999; Burns and Myhill, 2004). Research by Hardman et al (2003) found that teachers' questions tended to be low level, designed to funnel children's responses towards a required answer and that children provided answers which were three words or fewer for 70% of the time with children's exchanges lasting an average of 5 seconds.

Research therefore indicates that despite rhetoric about the value of interactive teaching and learning, children are not engaging in the shared construction of knowledge (Mercer, 1995) or participating actively in sustained discourse (Wells, 1999, Alexander, 2000). This may be because teachers are facing conflicting pedagogical demands. A weighty, objectives-led curriculum, which requires tangible evidence of content coverage and rigorous assessment of achievement, tends towards an instructional rather than exploratory,

experiential approach. As Burns and Myhill suggest, 'with accountability and performance management pressures, teachers may continue to be unable to relinquish control of the discourse (2004: 47)'.

A significant finding from Hardman et al (2003) was that teachers had no clear concept of what interactive whole class teaching is or shared language to discuss it. The development of teachers' theoretical knowledge, practical expertise and metalanguage is, therefore, crucial and should be a priority for initial teacher training and professional development. Similarly, successful interactive discourse will not simply happen by encouraging children to talk. They need to understand the importance of audience and purpose and the different functions of talk, and develop strategies that will enable them to code-switch appropriately and interact effectively in a range of contexts. Developing teachers' confidence, skills and subject knowledge is vital. The QCA (2003) has provided useful material for professional development in schools but has not published additional resources to support dialogic teaching. The dissemination of research findings and the provision of national training materials need to be supplemented by focused regional support from Education Authorities and through school networks operating in partnership with Institutes of Higher Education.

### Implications of current research

In a literature review commissioned by Ofsted to provide an overview of recent national and international research in the field of literacy, Myhill and Fisher (2005) detail recent and ongoing research on talking, thinking and learning in English. Research has been carried out in a number of areas. The PLS advocacy of more interactive whole class teaching (1998) focused research attention on classroom interaction. General findings both at home and abroad, notably Alexander's international survey (Alexander, 2000), were that children had little opportunity to question or explore ideas in classrooms (Myhill and Fisher, 2005). Often there was little constructive meaning-making and limited opportunities for pupil participation. There tended to be an emphasis on factual recall rather than higher order interactions involving reasoning.

# Occasional Paper on on Talking, Listening and Learning

Further research has looked at how children use collaborative talk to make meaning and there has been much discussion about the extent to which young children can be taught to use 'exploratory talk' where joint reasoning is made explicit (Mercer, 2003). The effectiveness of collaborative group work in classrooms continues to be a focus for researchers as is the relationship between spoken language and the ability to write.

Alexander's research may be having some effect on the way teachers think about managing talk in the classroom but it makes considerable demands on professional expertise and teachers' habitual ways of behaving. In genuine dialogue, ideas are bounced back and forth between equal participants (Alexander, 2004; Mercer, 2003, 2000; Barnes, 1995). Through using dialogue teachers and children enter a process of joint inquiry or the joint construction of knowledge, as they become involved in a process of 'interthinking' (Mercer, 2003; Mercer & Littleton, 2007). Developing classroom practices to make this possible are likely to require some support.

## Issues to consider for supporting talk in the classroom

- *Developing dialogic talk.*
- *Class organisation for collaborative talk.*
- *The differences between 'exploratory' talk and other kinds of talk.*
- *Variety of language for different activities and in different situations.*

## The importance of home language experience on learning in the classroom

Talking and listening are central to learning in the early years of schooling; recognising the experience that children bring to school from a range of different cultures and communities is very important. If we do not recognise this then there is a tendency to feel that children come to school unable to talk fluently or express themselves effectively. This language deficit model, much loved by the press, has been pervasive for a very long time. Mismatches between the discourses of home and school can cause problems for both teachers and children.

- The range of talk that children experience outside the classroom needs to be acknowledged and valued.
- Strategies need to be developed to build on home language experience.

Home language experience inevitably includes talking about television and DVD/video. The work of Marsh (2003) has illustrated how much popular cultural experience and learning the young child brings to the classroom, much of which is viewed on screen. Talking about what they watch will have meaning for children and the inclusion of multimodal and screen based texts in the revision of the Literacy Framework should be welcomed.

In America a growing interest in the subject has led to articles on critical viewing for parents and children. Considine (2004) suggests that teaching children to become critical viewers helps them with their ability to 'read words and worlds'. By talking about these different text experiences children make sense of the words and pictures that surround them in everyday life therefore:

- More 'critical viewing' should be encouraged in the classroom with consideration of the sort of talk that needs to accompany screen-based texts.
- The impact of multimodal texts should be evaluated.
- Children's ability to read and comment on visual texts needs to be included in any assessment arrangements.

## Rethinking talk in the primary classroom

Taking on board the approaches recommended by Alexander and Mercer may involve rethinking classroom talk. A re-appraisal might include recognising the collaborative nature of meaning-making and the oral exploration of ideas while at the same time giving children 'ample opportunities to participate in extended discourse forms, including narratives, explanations, pretend talk, and other forms of complex conversations (Larson and Peterson, 2003: 309)'.

In providing this sort of variation and range of spoken language, we evidently need to think about our own role as participants in the dialogue. For example:

- how we model the kind of language and vocabulary that we want the children to use
- whether the questions we are asking will challenge children cognitively

# Occasional Paper on on Talking, Listening and Learning

- how we encourage children to express their ideas and views
- what sort of strategies we can use to extend dialogue
- how we ask children to explain their thinking when they give the wrong answer.

If we think of dialogue as a vehicle for a process of joint inquiry through which learners construct meaning, then questions and answers are vital. In dialogic talk the questions asked and the answers given by the children are as important as the questions asked by the teacher. We are not using questions solely for the purpose of testing children's knowledge but also to enable them to reflect, develop and extend their thinking. Alexander suggests paying more attention to children's answers, 'there is little point in framing a well conceived question and giving children ample "wait time" to answer it if we fail to engage with the answer they give and hence with the understanding or misunderstanding which that answer reveals (Alexander 2004: 19)'. This may mean slowing the pace of teaching considerably and perhaps fewer children making an oral contribution. Encouraging children to engage in exploratory talk where they can solve problems, test evidence, analyse ideas and explore values in order to develop dialogic talk may mean developing new strategies.

We need to consider whether this would make learning through talk more effective. To create a climate where talk can 'breed' then teachers need to be learners as well. Pupils need to be able to ask questions of each other and the teacher and to realise that the answer may not be forthcoming immediately. Empowering pupils to enquire and research rather than giving answers is a more enriching experience for them. This is using their thinking skills. Grouping children for talk may pose problems but they need to be given opportunities to develop communication skills in whole class, group, paired and individual activities. Development will be supported best where:

- There is a classroom climate where children feel they can ask their own questions; be tentative; not expect immediate solutions
- Teachers have developed a dialogic role in classroom discourse
- Different areas of learning which can support talk to explain thinking have been identified.

## Implications for English teaching in the secondary classroom

The issues for secondary teaching and the questions raised are very similar to those raised earlier about working with young children:

- giving young people more time to think before we expect a response
- using a range of strategies, such as envoying and jigsawing to encourage small group talk
- developing young people's ability to engage in exploratory talk where we can hear them thinking aloud: hypothesising and speculating, giving reasons to support their ideas
- using talk partners when discussing responses to texts
- making links between talk and writing, for example oral redrafting before writing
- exploiting opportunities to deepen and extend pupils' talk, for example, through role play, simulations and drama
- discussing with young people what makes good talk, the importance of listening and turn-taking so that they can appreciate the value of engaging with each other's ideas as they solve problems and make meaning whatever the nature of the task
- using the QCA guidance on teaching spoken English, *Introducing the Grammar of Talk*, which examines some of the grammatical features of spoken English and how they compare to those of written English.

At the secondary stage, it should be possible to talk extensively about the relationship between talk and learning and to encourage young people to develop a range of skills relating to talking and thinking. However, the subject matter that pupils are asked to talk about remains critically important. If more attention is paid to skills than content, pupils' motivation and interest may be forfeited. This means:

- Ensuring that pupils discuss topics and texts which genuinely motivate and interest them
- Planning for progression in speaking and listening during the secondary years
- Explicitly teaching about talk from key stage 3 to post-16 to ensure pupils deepen and extend their understanding and develop their use of talk.

# Occasional Paper on on Talking, Listening and Learning

## Moving forward

If Speaking and Listening and Learning are to assume a new prominence in the near future, as indicated by the revised framework, then teachers will need to feel confident about ways in which they will implement talk for learning at all stages. We will need to be clear about the extent to which spoken language skills can, or should, be directly taught to children. What sort of guidance do we give children about effective communication and what sort of structured activities are appropriate?

Other related issues will arise:

- how best to assess children's language skills
- how to engage children in dialogues which will develop their spoken language skills and their learning
- how to raise young people's awareness about how talk can be used effectively, to share ideas, to negotiate thinking and build relationships
- how to develop problem-solving activities which will extend communication skills creatively and enhance learning.

## Summary

Teachers do not need convincing of the importance of spoken language or the centrality of talk in cognitive development. What they do need is support in implementing classroom practices such as talk-partners, group work, inter-thinking and dialogic discourse. They also need help to overcome the dilemma of developing interactive learning within what they still perceive (despite the PNS) as a nationally prescribed, instructional, objectives-based pedagogy. Assessment of speaking and listening also remains a challenge for schools. Teachers require more guidance in terms of what to look for (e.g. different kinds/functions of talk) and how to evaluate the quality of the different kinds of talk.

It is important to ensure that spoken language does not, once again, become the poor relation of reading and writing. It has suffered neglect in the past because it has been perceived as less tangible than reading and writing, difficult to capture for assessment purposes and not seen as 'real work'. However, we believe that a major reason for its neglect has been because it presents particular practical difficulties for teachers.

UKLA members who produced this discussion paper:  
**Liz Grugeon, Gabrielle Cliff Hodges, Roy Corden, Jacqueline Harrett.**

## References

- Alexander, R. (2000) *Culture and Pedagogy, International comparisons in primary education*. Oxford: Blackwell
- Alexander, R. (2004) *Towards Dialogic Teaching: Rethinking classroom talk*. Cambridge: Dialogus
- Barnes, D., and Todd, F. (1995) *Communication and Learning Revisited*. London: Heinemann
- Burns, C. and Myhill, D. (2004) 'Interactive or inactive? A consideration of the nature of interaction in whole class teaching'. *Cambridge Journal of Education* 34 (1) pp 35-49
- Considine, D (2004) 'Critical Viewing and Critical Thinking Skills' accessed July, 2006 at [www.medialit.org/reading\\_room/article202.html](http://www.medialit.org/reading_room/article202.html)
- DfEE (1998) *The National Literacy Strategy Framework for Teaching*. London
- Galton, M., Hargreaves, L., Comber, C., Wall, D. and Pell, A. (1999) *Inside the Primary Classroom 20 Years On*. London: Routledge
- Hardman, F., Smith, F. and Wall, K. (2003) 'Interactive whole class teaching in the National Literacy Strategy'. *Cambridge Journal of Education* 33 (2) pp 197-215
- Goodwin, P. and Redfern, A. (2000) *Reading Aloud to Children*. Reading and Language Information Centre: Reading

# Occasional Paper on on Talking, Listening and Learning

Larson, J. and Peterson, S. M. (2003) 'Talk and discourse in formal learning settings,' in Hall, N., Larson, J. and Marsh, J. (eds) *Handbook of Early Childhood Literacy*. London: Sage

Marsh, J., (2003) 'Contemporary Models of Communicative Practice: Shaky Foundations in the Foundation Stage?' *English in Education* 37 (1) pp 38-46

Mercer, N. (1995) *The Guided Construction of Knowledge: Talk amongst teachers and learners*. Cleveland: Multilingual Matters

Mercer, N. (2000) *Words and Minds: How we use language to think together*. London: Routledge  
Mercer, N. (2003) 'The educational value of "dialogic talk" in whole class dialogue,' in QCA *New Perspectives on Spoken English in the Classroom*. London: QCA.

Mercer, N. and Littleton, K. (2007) *Dialogue and the Development of Children's Thinking: A sociocultural approach*. London: Routledge

Myhill, D. and Fisher, R. (2005) 'Informing practice in English. A review of recent research in literacy and the teaching of English' HMI. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office.

QCA (2003) *Speaking, Listening, Learning: Working with children in key stages 1 and 2*. London: QCA Publications

QCA (2004) *Introducing the Grammar of Talk* London: QCA publications or download from the QCA website.

QCA (2005) *English 21 Playback*. London: QCA publications.

Rose, J. (2005) Interim Report: Independent review of the teaching of early reading.  
[www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/rosereview](http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/rosereview)

Wells, G. (1999) *Dialogic Inquiry: Toward a socio-cultural practice and theory of education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Wilkinson, A. (1965) 'Spoken language' *Educational Review Occasional Publications*, Number 2. Birmingham: University of Birmingham

## Further reading

Alexander, R. J. (2004) *Talking to Learn: Oracy revisited* (National College for School Leadership Teaching Text) Nottingham: NCSL.

Bearne, E., Dombey, H., Grainger, T. eds (2003) *Classroom Interactions in Literacy*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press

Cliff Hodges, G. (2003) 'Speaking and listening' in Davison, J. and Dowson, J. (eds) *Learning to Teach English in the Secondary School*. London: RoutledgeFalmer

Corden, R. (2000) *Literacy and Learning Through Talk: Strategies for the primary classroom*. Buckingham: Open University Press

Grugeon, E., Dawes, L., Smith, C. and Hubbard, L. (2005) (3rd Edition) *Teaching Speaking and Listening in the Primary School*. London: David Fulton

Occasional papers are presented by groups of UKLA members, usually based on the work of UKLA Special Interest Groups so that they offer up-to-date perspectives on contemporary issues.

If you would like to join a Special Interest Group or offer ideas for future Occasional Papers, contact UKLA Publications on [admin@ukla.org](mailto:admin@ukla.org)

Registered charity number: 313714 [www.ukla.org](http://www.ukla.org)

UKLA