

# Talk for Spelling

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# Chapter 1

## Talk for spelling

*The value of talk in all subjects as a means of promoting pupils' understanding, and of evaluating their progress, is now widely accepted.*

(English for Ages 5-16, DES, 1989, 15.2)

This book is about the teaching of spelling. It is also about talk in the classroom; 'talk for learning' within which we can find 'talk for writing' within which lies 'talk for spelling'. The quotation at the head of this chapter is about 'talk for learning' taken from a set of government recommendations now over twenty years old. It draws our attention to the fundamental importance of both pupil and teacher talk in the classroom. It also draws our attention to the fact that 'talk for learning' has been around for a long time! (Indeed we could go back a further twenty years to 1969 and the publication of *Language, the Learner and the School* by Douglas Barnes, James Britton and Harold Rosen, the book which really began to focus attention on the role of talk in learning).

Now in England in 2009 we have four speaking and listening strands in the Primary National Strategy Literacy Framework and a new national curriculum which places great emphasis on speaking and listening. Yet it seems we are still trying to establish talk for learning in classrooms. The wider questions around why this should be and what the future might bring are for another book. Here the focus will be on the development of engaging, exciting spelling lessons in which pupil talk plays a major role.

### Talk for writing

'Talk for learning' poses the question, 'What sort of talk in the classroom might help children learn?' Or, to put it more bluntly, 'Why do we want children talking in class?' 'Talk for writing', poses the same question but with the more specific focus; 'What sort of talk in the classroom might help children write better?' This is a fascinating question which I have enjoyed exploring with hundreds of teachers and in many schools over

the past ten years. In England it has recently been incorporated into the Primary National Strategy where it has been defined as the ‘developmental exploration, through talk, of the thinking and creative processes involved in being a writer’ (DCSF, 2008:3). This ‘exploration’ happens through teacher talk (teachers modelling how writers think), supported pupil talk (structured opportunities through class and group activities) and independent pupil-talk (paired and small group work). The focus is on a teaching sequence moving from reading to writing, so ‘talk for writing’ includes talk around texts (Aidan Chambers concept of ‘booktalk’) and talk at different stages of the writing process (writer-talk). There is a welcome emphasis on oral story telling.

It is not the purpose of this book to analyse and discuss ‘talk for writing’ in general, but to point out that in the PNS materials there is no specific mention of how talk might contribute to the teaching and learning of spelling. Within literacy lessons talk is seen as contributing powerfully to the ways children respond to and comprehend texts, the ways in which teachers model the writing process and how children might use talk as they compose and revise their own writing. But talk within the teaching of spelling is nowhere to be seen. There is, in fact, a section of just four lines headed ‘Linking Sounds and Letters’ which refers simply to ‘Reception children’ being able to write ‘phonemically plausible attempts at anything they can verbalise’ (DCSF, 2008 : 9). How this initial grappling with phonics might develop into ‘talk for spelling’ is not explored.

### **Talk for spelling**

*Talk for Writing* (DCSF, 2008) has now been followed up with *Support for Spelling* (DCSF, 2009), which recommends ‘short, lively, focused sessions’. These sessions follow a sensible teaching sequence which moves from *revisit, explain, use*, through *teach, model, define*, onto *practise, explore, investigate* and finally to *apply, assess, reflect*. This is a generic teaching sequence which teachers will recognise as applying to anything they teach; elements of it will be reflected in the classroom spelling sessions outlined in this book. Words such as ‘explore’ and ‘investigate’ are powerful words for the spelling curriculum and lie at the heart of talk for spelling. In terms of lesson length, *Support for Spelling* (*ibid.*, 2009) suggests that sessions should last for 15 minutes. However if a teacher is to develop her/his approach to teaching spelling with, say, a Y5 class who do not see spelling as exciting or fascinating, s/he needs the freedom and professional judgement to decide

how best to do this. A spelling lesson with the aim of engaging and exciting the children with spelling, using a range of talk and drama strategies will take longer than 15 minutes. Exactly how long is up to the teacher.

In order to explore what ‘talk for spelling’ might involve I will pose what might seem like an obvious question, but please do take a minute to consider how you might answer it. Over the past twenty years I have asked this question to thousands of teachers. Usually the teachers are in small groups and I really do only give them a minute as I only want their initial thoughts; the responses uppermost in their minds.

*‘Why do we teach spelling?’*

Just one minute.

Now I ask the groups of teachers to indicate whether one of their reasons for teaching spelling is to excite, enthuse and fascinate children with spelling. The general response is silence, perhaps followed by someone calling out, ‘Of course we did!’ And everyone laughs. If you had come up with one of your reasons, then great. You probably don’t need to read this book! But if you did not, it is worth reflecting on how you might have answered if the focus had been, say, poetry rather than spelling. Most teachers would include wanting to enthuse children with poetry as a reason for teaching it. Of course there are other reasons for teaching spelling. Perhaps the major one is that it still ‘counts’ as a life skill. We all know what happens to the application form for a job that is littered with spelling errors. But if our aim is to teach children to become confident, accurate spellers, a key factor will be the extent to which we can engage them with the spelling curriculum. This engagement is more likely to occur if we aim to excite, enthuse and fascinate them with spelling.

In terms of teacher talk we promote this engagement in the ways we model our enthusiasm for the curriculum when we teach. For example, we show how interesting we find the ways people lived long ago, or how amazed we are at the power of a natural phenomenon such as an earthquake, or how sad we felt at the end of the picture book that we have just shared with the class. The same can be true with teaching spelling. We demonstrate enthusiasm for the group which has come up with over fifty examples of a particular spelling pattern for their spelling challenge - wow what

a list! (see Chapter 3); an interest in the way a pair of children have sorted the words in their spelling investigation (see Chapter 2); excitement for the way a group of poor spellers begin to notice a pattern and work out the spelling of the next word by analogy, during their collaborative test (see Chapter 4).

Enthusiasm and fascination lie at the heart of all teaching and learning. Brian Cambourne's (2001) notion of 'engagement' as his first condition for literacy learning really does mean that children go beyond just paying attention and going through the motions and are actively engaged with their learning. Yet, my experience is that in too many KS2 classrooms the teaching of spelling means little more than a list of words given out on Monday to be learnt for the Friday test. And it is so often the case that I am told that spelling attainment is poor in these classrooms. There is also evidence of the well known phenomenon of children spelling words correctly in the Friday test but then incorrectly in their writing the following week or who ask for the spelling of a word which they spelt correctly in the previous week's test. The word has been forgotten already, such is the low level of engagement with the task. My own experiences in these classrooms are confirmed by research carried out by Olivia O'Sullivan and Anne Thomas for the excellent *Understanding Spelling* (2007). Their observation of school and classroom practice showed, among other things, 'there was little active teaching of spelling as part of classroom practice' (O'Sullivan and Thomas, 2007: 9). As a result of their project, they were able to demonstrate that 'the active teaching of spelling played a decisive role in children's development' (*ibid.*:110). Their list of the characteristics of effective teaching of spelling begins with 'generating a real enthusiasm for language...' (*ibid.*:110).

### **Spelling in the classroom**

This generating of 'a real enthusiasm for language' can take place both in the classroom and in the wider school. In the classroom it will be seen in sessions focused purely on spelling and also in shared and guided writing sessions where it is part of the writing process. The teaching sequences outlined and discussed in this book are about the former and attempt to provide a clear picture of engaging, interactive sessions in which children grapple with words and how they are spelt. During the sequences children talk in different pairs and groupings as well as take part in drama activities linked to the words. It may appear surprising to see reference to drama in