



Talk for learning

Talk is the bedrock of children's personal, social, cultural, cognitive, creative and imaginative development.

- Talk is a means of thinking through ideas as well as a medium of communication; it is the most important resource for teaching and learning in and beyond the classroom.
- Spoken language is not only the basis of reading and writing but has a repertoire of its own which deserves equal attention in teaching.
- Bilingual or multilingual learners benefit from being able to use all their language resources in classroom talk. They also offer a resource for monolingual children to learn more about language and how it works.
- Interventions to support bi/multilingual learners to build their confidence and competence in English contribute towards all children learning effective ways of communicating.
- The characteristics of effective classroom talk should be understood and used by teachers in their own talk as well as planned for pupils to acquire and practise.

'Talk involves as a spontaneous exchange of idea through multiple modes and media including, but not exclusively, language' (Taylor, 2014).

UKLA supports the view that the ability to communicate effectively is fundamental to all aspects of human development; the capacity to think and to learn and, ultimately to be successful in life, depends upon it. As Halliday puts it: 'Language is the essential condition of knowing, the process by which experience becomes knowledge' (Halliday, 1993: 94). Almost all current thinking about the role of language in learning draws on a social constructive approach, primarily on the social interaction theories of Vygotsky (1978) which focus on meaning making in cultural contexts. This is, in essence, no different from the processes engaged in

by adults and there is no set of universal, fixed, developmental stages. What is important is the developing ability to use language intentionally for an increasing range of cultural purposes. The role of the adult/teacher is to model and scaffold learning.

Robin Alexander, whose work has been fundamental in developing theories of the pedagogy of talk, (2000 and 2008) makes a distinction between ‘teaching talk’ and ‘learning talk’. Teaching talk is the interaction between teachers and individual pupils, whilst learning talk involves the different kinds of talk (narrating, explaining, justifying, questioning, analysing, speculating, arguing etc) that pupils can develop to extend and deepen learning between themselves (as well as with adults). He identifies five kinds of teaching talk which teachers should have as part of their repertoire:

- **rote** (teacher-class): the drilling of facts, ideas and routines through constant repetition;
- **recitation** (teacher-class or teacher- group): the accumulation of knowledge and understanding through questions designed to test or stimulate recall of what has been previously encountered, or to cue pupils to work out the answer from clues provided in the question;
- **instruction/exposition** (teacher-class, teacher-group or teacher-individual): telling pupils what to do, and/or imparting information, and/or explaining facts, principles or procedures;
- **discussion** (teacher-class, teacher-group or pupil-pupil): the exchange of ideas with a view to sharing information and solving problems;
- **scaffolded dialogue** (teacher-class, teacher-group, teacher-individual or pupil-pupil): achieving common understanding through structured and cumulative questioning and discussion which guide and prompt, reduce choices, minimise risk and error, and expedite ‘handover’ of concepts and principles. (Alexander, 2008: 30)

While teacher-pupil talk is critical in moving learning forward, there is significant research on the importance of group talk in the classroom. Neil Mercer is the key researcher for identifying the cognitive benefits of talking in groups and the practicalities which should be addressed. Mercer identifies productive talk in groups as ‘exploratory talk’ in which ‘partners engage critically but constructively with each other’s ideas’ (Mercer, 2000: 153). Exploratory talk helps extend thinking and learning through engaging with others’ ideas in a supportive but challenging setting either in a whole-class setting or in small groups or pairs. Mercer and Dawes (2007) suggest that ground rules which enable exploratory talk should include:

- Partners engage critically but constructively with each other’s ideas.
- Everyone participates.
- Tentative ideas are treated with respect.
- Ideas offered for joint consideration may be challenged.
- Challenges are justified and alternative ideas or understandings are offered.
- Opinions are sought and considered before a decision is taken.
- Knowledge is made publicly accountable (and so reasoning is visible in the talk). (Mercer and Dawes, 2007: 66)

The language that teachers plan for pupils to use needs careful thought, both about vocabulary and genre. Teachers need to be clear what language modes are important and how to model and embed them. Listening carefully to pupils' voices and responding to what those voices reveal, lies at the heart of effective teaching and learning.

Sources

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Classroom example

Deploying the repertoire of talk

In a class of 10 and 11 year olds the focus text was the narrative poem 'The Malfeasance' by Alan Bold. Two of the learning intentions were to:

- develop an understanding of the poem, both literal and beyond, using inference
- justify inferences and opinions using evidence from the text.

The focus for the development of the use of talk was for the pupils to work effectively in small and large groups, giving reasons for what was said and responding directly to the content of other people's comments. The class had already begun to compile a list of phrases and sentences that they thought were 'useful talk'.

The lesson started with the whole class. The teacher used **recitation** teaching talk to ask the children to recall what they knew about narrative poems and then their agreed ground rules for talk. This then made explicit the knowledge and understanding they would be building on during the session.

The whole class element then continued with the teacher using **exposition** to introduce the children to some possible new ways of expressing themselves when they responded to each other when working independently in their groups which would help their discussions be more productive, particularly when dealing with disagreement, for example: 'Why do you think that?' 'I don't understand what you mean.' 'Could you say a bit more?' 'I agree and/because...' 'I think I disagree because...' 'Those are good reasons but I'm not sure about that idea because...'. The pupils then briefly had some thinking time and, in pairs, discussed if they could come up with any more examples.

The teacher explained that the children would be working in groups of four to read and explore the meaning of the poem helped by the following authentic questions:

What is happening in the poem?

What is the Malfeasance?

What lesson is the poet trying to teach us in this poem?

The pupils engaged in **exploratory** talk as they discussed their response to the poem and annotated their A4 copies of the poem with their thoughts about each stanza and/or the conclusions they had come to about the framing questions. The teacher joined some of the groups during this time and deployed **discussion** teaching talk to share her ideas about the poem with the children, but in a way that showed that her ideas were not the 'right' interpretation but a contribution to the developing understanding.

Toward the end of the session the class were brought back together to share their thinking about the poem and their responses to the framing questions. The teacher asked each group in turn for their conclusions and then engaged in **dialogic** teaching talk to challenge their thinking through posing alternative views, returning to the same child to press them to justify their thinking, point out contradictions, bring in other members of the class and asking the children to reconsider their views as a result of what they had heard. Finally, the class and the teacher reflected upon their use of language in their exploratory talk and **discussed** whether they could add further words, phrases or sentences to their list of useful talk.

(adapted from Bearne, E. and Reedy, D. (2018) *Teaching Primary English: Subject Knowledge and Classroom Practice*. London: Routledge. pp . 58-9)

David Reedy on behalf of UKLA

See also

UKLA bookshop www.ukla.org/shop

Drama: Reading Writing and Speaking Our Way Forward

by Teresa Cremin and Angela Pickard

English Language and Literacy 3-19: Talk by John Richmond

English Language and Literacy 3-19: Drama by John Richmond

Talk for Reading by Claire Warner

Talk for Spelling by Tony Martin

Tell me Another... Speaking, listening and learning through storytelling

by Jacqueline Harrett

UKLA website www.ukla.org/resources

Effective talk for learning: teaching through dialogue by David Reedy

Investigating the language of learning by Kathy Hall

There is also a UKLA Special Interest Group: *Storytelling* <https://ukla.org/cpd>