

Unit 5.3

Learning Through Dialogue

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INTRODUCTION

This unit looks at current issues concerning speaking, listening and learning in the primary school. It discusses why there is a need to change pedagogic practices so that the dialogue that takes place in the classroom between teachers and pupils and between pupils themselves can become a powerful learning tool. It explores different approaches and strategies for introducing and supporting collaborative learning in small groups and suggests a number of ways in which you may begin to develop a range of skills which will enable you to encourage effective discussion and dialogic talk in your classroom. This may entail a reconsideration of your own role as teacher. As Alexander suggests, 'if we want children to talk to learn – as well as learn to talk – then what they say probably matters more than what teachers say' (2004: 19).

OBJECTIVES

By the end of this unit you should be beginning to:

- understand the need to change pedagogic practices;
- understand the meaning of dialogue and dialogic talk;
- understand why this will have a productive effect on children's learning and
- develop a range of skills to introduce dialogic talk in your classroom.

IS THERE A PROBLEM?

We want to start this unit by looking at some of the issues and considering why these may be problematic. You could begin by imagining that you are in a classroom observing a lesson.

Teacher Now I want you all to think about the story we were reading yesterday. Can anyone remember what it was called? Sit down, please, Sam. No, we don't call out. I am looking for someone who is sitting quietly with their hand up. Yes, Alison, can you tell us the title?

Alison The Iron Man?

Teacher Good girl, that's right, it was called The Iron Man, wasn't it? Can anyone remember what happened to the iron man? Where did he come from? Where did he go? Yes, Danny, can you tell us?

Danny Fell off the cliff.

Teacher That is right, he walked up to the edge of the cliff and he fell off, well done!

This is not a real example but one we made up to illustrate a common routine of question and answer: elicitation, repetition and reformulation. You will notice who does most of the talking and might like to ask yourself what sort of message this gives to children about the importance of their talk. You might also ask yourself why teachers seem to need to reformulate children's answers and praise them for simply doing what they have been asked to do. This pattern of classroom talk, in which the teacher controls the discourse, asking the important questions, repeating children's answers and offering praise does not seem likely to advance children's thinking or develop their talking skills. The prevalence of this kind of routine has long been a matter of concern and this has come to a head quite recently.

By 2002 (that is 5 years after the National Literacy Strategy Framework for Teaching was introduced), there was a general feeling that children's competence in speaking and listening was being held back. Research (English *et al.* 2002) showed that on average only 10 per cent of oral contributions by children aged 5 to 7 in the literacy hour were longer than three words and only 5 per cent longer than five words. Similar research (Elmer and Riley 2001) showed that teachers of 7 to 11-year-old children were not asking sufficiently challenging questions and further research claimed that longer interactions between teachers and children had dramatically declined since the introduction of the literacy hour.

Teachers spent the majority of their time either explaining or using highly structured question and answer sequences. Far from encouraging and extending pupil contributions to promote higher levels of interaction and cognitive engagement, most of the questions asked were of a low cognitive level designed to funnel pupils' response towards a required answer... Most of the pupils' exchanges were very short, with answers lasting on average 5 seconds and were limited to three words or fewer... It was very rare for pupils to initiate the questioning.

(Smith *et al.* 2004: 408)

Their data forced them to conclude that, "top-down" curriculum initiatives like the NNS and NLS, while bringing about a scenario of change in curriculum design often leave deeper levels of pedagogy untouched' (p. 409). They suggest that there is a need for different approaches in order to change habitual classroom behaviours and that changing pedagogic practices is the major challenge to the future effectiveness of the strategies. In this unit we look at some of the suggestions for speaking, listening and learning that are already changing classroom practice in the primary school.

MAKING CHANGES

Guidance appeared in schools at the end of 2003. This new material aimed to ensure that spoken language, including drama, would be specifically taught and that there would be explicit links between the literacy objectives in the NLS Framework. More significantly, for the first time, there would be a specific rationale for progression in each of the four strands: speaking, listening, group discussion and drama.

A far more structured approach to speaking and listening was offered than we have seen hitherto; a far more detailed account of the relationship between speaking, listening and learning. A new concept, teaching through dialogue or dialogic talk was introduced:

Teaching through dialogue enables teachers and pupils to share and build on ideas in sustained talk. When teaching through dialogue, teachers encourage children to listen to each other, share ideas and consider alternatives; build on their own and others' ideas to develop coherent thinking; express their views fully and help each other to reach common understandings. Teaching through dialogue can take place when a teacher talks with an individual pupil, or two pupils are talking together, or when the whole class is joining in discussion.

(DfES/QCA 2003: 35)

DEFINING THE TERMS

What do we mean by dialogue? How do we learn through dialogue? In this unit, we hope to define this term and consider why it is so important for children's learning and your teaching.

'Talk in learning is not a one-way linear communication but a reciprocal process in which ideas are bounced back and forth and on that basis take children's thinking forward' (Alexander 2004: 48). In dialogue, ideas are bounced back and forth, participants are equal partners striving to reach an agreed outcome and trying out and developing what Mercer has described as the joint construction of knowledge or becoming involved in a process of 'inter thinking' (Mercer 2000). You can do this in dialogue with your pupils; pupils can do it with each other in a process of 'joint enquiry' (Barnes and Todd 1995). In order to create a dialogic repertoire in the classroom, 'It is not sufficient... to repeat or reformulate a pupil's contribution: what is said needs actually to be reflected upon, discussed, even argued about, and the dialogic element lies partly in getting pupils themselves to do this' (Alexander 2004: 20).

DIALOGIC TALK – PROMOTING EXTENDED TALK AND THINKING

The lack of extended talk and opportunity to articulate ideas has a limiting effect on children's thinking skills which has been recognised as a problem that needs to be tackled. The research carried out by Robin Alexander has had considerable impact on print and video materials for the classroom. This material has a new focus: the relationship between speaking and listening and children's learning. Rather than a teacher's questions eliciting brief responses from pupils, we see that dialogic talk is a type of interaction where teachers and pupils make substantial and significant contributions.

The child as a powerful thinker

While sequences of Alexander's dialogic talk are not necessarily easy to achieve in the Early Years classroom, nevertheless, all children need 'involvement in thoughtful and reasoned dialogue' (Mercer 2003: 76) which should become a part of their oral repertoire. Larson and Peterson (2003: 309) indicate that 'early childhood educators should give children ample opportunities to participate in extended discourse forms, including narratives, explanations, pretend talk, and other forms of complex conversations, in order to achieve successful school-based outcomes'.

As you develop your teaching, you will probably feel the need for some basic approaches to encourage dialogue, such as opening questions of the type 'Can you tell me what you have been doing?'. Then, of course, you need to listen to the child. This might sound obvious, but during the course of a busy day in the classroom it is easy to forget, especially as talk is the easiest, most used and most accessible form of communication.

The help which we give to children in order to further their learning is often called scaffolding, a term coined by Bruner. But Eve Gregory (1996: 21) warns us that, as learning is different across cultures, so the scaffolding we provide should also take account of this difference.

Rethinking classroom talk

The new approach requires you to consider making changes in the way you interact with children: there are features of language that are distinctively oral and do not occur in a written form and which need to be explicitly addressed in the classroom. We have to take on board the collaborative nature of meaning-making and the oral exploration of ideas. There is the importance of variation and range of spoken language and the need to teach children how to use this repertoire effectively. You may find that children successfully explore the nuances of spoken language in drama and role-play.

Task 5.3.1 Your talk in the classroom

You might like to discuss some of the following:

- What sort of questions will challenge children cognitively?
- How can you model the kind of language and subject vocabulary that you want them to use?
- How will you encourage children to express their ideas and views?
- What strategies can you use to extend dialogue?
- How can you ask children to explain their thinking when they give the wrong answer?

Questions and answers

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 by children are as important as the questions asked by the teacher, as are the answers given. You are not using questions solely for the purpose of testing pupils' knowledge but also to enable them to reflect, develop and

extend their thinking. And when you have asked questions you need to pay attention to the children's answers: 'there's 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). You can use questioning to lead children through a line of reasoning by responding to their answers. This may mean spending rather longer on individual children's responses while you help them to explore their understanding. In a whole class setting this may mean fewer children making an oral contribution but it gives you a chance to model the types of language that children should be using to solve problems, test evidence, analyse ideas and explore values.

Carol Smith expands these ideas and gives further ideas about ways in which you can think about your questioning. She suggests that when teachers speak to children about their work, asking questions is the most commonly used strategy to assess their learning and progress, but that should not be the sole objective. If these questions are 'kept open', they can lead into other areas of discussion and further questions, positively encouraging further thinking. She feels that,

the best way to support children in developing their ability to respond to open or semi-open questions is to encourage them to prepare their own questions either for the plenary in the literacy hour or for other groups to respond to in guided/independent times.

(Smith 2005)

In order to develop dialogic talk in the classroom, to make learning through speaking and listening more effective, she recommends that we should give children more time to think before expecting a response:

We often expect an immediate answer from children, asking 'reliable' children with their hands up. The quality of response will always be better if time is given for individual thought to a whole range of questions. The use of 'talk partners' in both literacy and numeracy can give children an opportunity to think answers through, sometimes with the aid of a 'white board.' By allowing children plenty of time at first, to think their answers through, you might find they need much less time, as their experience deepens, to discuss and arrive at their answer.

(Smith 2005)

She also develops the use of 'talk partners'.

Ideas can be shared first with a partner, a teaching assistant or small group; after a little more time, the quieter child will feel able to speak in front of the whole class. Review times during a teaching session help everyone to clarify their thoughts and ideas and frequently spur on those children having difficulty with self-motivation.

(Smith 2005 :90)

EXPLORATORY TALK

This is a very useful term, introduced by Barnes (1976) and developed by Mercer (2000). It is the kind of talk that we should aim to develop. When children engage in exploratory talk we can hear them thinking aloud: hypothesising and speculating. Children speak tentatively, using words and phrases like 'perhaps', 'if', 'might', 'probably'; they give reasons to support their ideas, 'because' and seek support from the group by using tag questions, 'wouldn't it?'. They are evidently listening to each other or to you, the teacher, and considering their response.

When we engage in exploratory talk we are almost certain to be working in a small group with our peers; we will be sharing a problem, and constructing meaning together. We will be exchanging ideas and opinions, considering and evaluating each other's ideas, building up shared knowledge and understanding as we collaborate as equals. We are thinking together (Dawes 2005: 108). When children are working in this way their reasoning becomes apparent in their talk. However, this kind of talk does not come naturally to children; they need to be guided by their teachers to understand the value of collaborative talk. Our students often tell us that they have seen very little small group work going on in classrooms; on their brief school placements they find it difficult to carry out tasks involving small group work because of the children's lack of experience.

Dawes reminds us:

Teachers often specify 'exploratory talk' as the sort of talk that they would particularly want to encourage between children working in groups, at the computer or during any other task. However, disappointingly little exploratory talk may take place unless children know that this is an aim for their work together. Children may not be aware that the best use of speaking and listening is as a tool for exploring one another's ideas, or to reason together.

(Dawes 2005: 107)

Interthinking

The concept of interthinking is an important aspect of learning through dialogue.

Having to say what you mean – thinking aloud – is a way of making your thoughts clear to yourself: having to explain and describe things to a partner is a way of developing a shared understanding of ideas. If your partner is prepared to accept your initial suggestion, without you having to justify or defend it, you have no stimulus to engage critically with your own thoughts. Also, you have no alternative suggestions to produce the creative friction from which new ideas arise. This *interthinking* – the joint engagement with one another's ideas to think aloud together, solve problems or make mutual meaning – is an invaluable use of spoken language (Mercer 2000). Children need to learn how to do this, and need lots of opportunities to practice.

(Dawes 2005: 108–9)

Encouraging exploratory talk: teaching ground rules for talk

Exploratory talk is difficult enough for adults to achieve and it cannot be assumed that it will come naturally to children. Simply grouping children to work together will not necessarily help them to develop talking skills. Unless children know what we mean by 'discussion', and have the skills to engage one another in speaking and listening, they may gain little of educational value from the talk or the activity. However, a group of children who are aware of the importance of talk have a real advantage.

Children who are expected to work together in a small group need to be taught how to talk to one another. They need direct instruction in the talk skills which will enable them to get the best out of their own thinking and that of all the other members of their group. They have to understand and share the aims for their talk. They come to recognise that if all the group can agree on a set of rules, 'ground rules for talk', then talk can proceed in a way which will make the whole group, and its individuals, more likely to achieve success and develop new ways of thinking. Ground rules for

discussion are to do with active listening, thoughtful speaking and respectful collaboration. These are some of the ground rules for exploratory talk:

- everyone in the group is encouraged to contribute;
- contributions are treated with respect;
- reasons are asked for;
- everyone is prepared to accept challenges;
- alternatives are discussed before a decision is taken;
- all relevant information is shared;
- the group seeks to reach agreement.

Of course, you will want the children you are teaching to talk about this and draw up a similar list in their own words. You can put it up on the wall or print it out as a reminder for small groups when they are working on their own.

Problem solving

'Investigations and problem-solving activities are efficient in helping pupils to apply and extend their learning in new contexts' (OFSTED Handbook 1995: 69). You may need to consider how we can address this explicitly in the classroom. One way is through group collaborative talk: collaborative talk in order to solve a science or technology problem is an example of children using talk in order to learn. Often in these contexts the nature of the talk is untidy; for example, sentences will be unfinished, words repeated, and considerable interruptions will take place. Children need to be in groups for this kind of activity and it must be a task which requires them to talk to each other.

Task 5.3.2

Talk in small groups: a classification game

You might like to try this out for yourself when you have an opportunity:

- Give each group plenty of small pieces of paper and a topic each – animals, plants, food, TV programmes. Each group should not know the topic titles you have given to the other groups.
- Each group writes down examples of the category on the separate pieces of paper. For example, the animals group would write down the name of an animal on each piece of paper.
- The group sorts and then classifies the names. *You would need to ask the group why they have organised their examples in this way.*
- Exchange papers with another group. *Will this group classify differently? Can they guess the title you gave the other group?*

Discussion and comment

There are no right answers, which in itself is a learning experience, but the level of reasoning, justifying, speculating, hypothesising, specifying and persuading is considerable from this kind of task. However, this is an activity which is worth further exploration and analysis. Why would we do such a lesson in

terms of the curriculum? The aim would be to widen the children's talk repertoire and improve their communication skills and an activity such as this would encourage the children to communicate effectively. They would need to choose their words in order to justify their standpoint and to learn the conventions of discussion, e.g. turn-taking and reasoning.

Dialogue in the home

In the close and more equal relationship of their homes, with parents and siblings and other carers, young children are confidently using dialogue to find out about their world. They regularly ask questions, 'why?', 'where is he gone?'; they initiate ideas and activities, 'let's go out'; and they speculate about the world, 'what would happen if...?' You might like to consider why this kind of dialogue seems to disappear when they enter school.

The richness of talk in the home has been well researched and documented, most notably by Brice-Heath (1983), Tizard and Hughes (1984), Wells (1987) and in the *Early Years Language Project* in Devon which started work in 1986. A typical transcript from this project reveals a four-year-old in conversation with his mother. The family lived in a dockland area of a major city and spoke in the local dialect. They are talking about Ross starting school:

- M* Yeah, well, that's what you go to school for to learn how to write things down and how to read and how to spell, i'n'it?
R You can't spell.
M Can.
R No you can't.
M I can.
R When you was four you couldn't spell.
M No, that's why Mummy went to school, to learn, that's why you go to school, i'n'it?
R To learn.
M Mmm.
R Did you go to school to learn?
M Mmm.
R You don't now do you?
M No, don't go t'school now.

Ross and his mother are using the language of their speech community to further Ross's knowledge about school. It is an example of what Tizard and Hughes would call 'a passage of intellectual search'. Ross, by making challenging statements, is trying to make sense of an important aspect of school life. Ross and his mother are communicating well and 'the basics' are there. What we need to remember is that home talk might well be different but it is not deficient.

Discussion and comment

Is the language spoken in this extract different from what we would expect in school? In what ways? Perhaps you feel that there is a more even 'balance of power' between the two speakers because of the close relationship between mother and child. The child is exploring something that puzzles him. Would he be able to do this in a busy classroom?

Into school: talk in the early years

Of course, teachers cannot attempt to replicate the one-to-one conversation which happens in the home, yet if the ‘basics’ of communication are there, teachers are well able to build on these. The guidance for the foundation curriculum (DfEE/QCA 2000) sets out its aims on language and communication in the Early Learning Goals and refers specifically to speaking and listening: ‘Conversation, open-ended questions and thinking out loud are important tools in developing vocabulary and in challenging thinking’ (p. 23). Further guidance is given in the stepping stones. Children with English as an additional language are specifically addressed and the importance of building on their language experiences at home.

Ourselves

A popular topic with young children is ‘Ourselves’. A good starting point for this is for the teacher to bring in a photograph of herself as a baby and tell stories of her own family. The next step is for the children to bring into school photographs of themselves when they were babies and any toys, clothes or books that might still be in the family. Topics like this are rich in learning potential and often expand to include parents and other areas of the curriculum. Their great strength is that they build on the child’s own background, knowledge and experience. You will find that it will help to focus on the spoken language; although a great deal of talk occurs naturally in an Early Years classroom, it is useful and fun to have specific lessons on talking about talk. You might ask the children to consider the kinds of language they used when they were very young:

- How did you ask for a drink when you were a baby?
- What did you use for ‘thank you’ and ‘please’?
- What do you say now?
- How do you ask for a drink at school?
- How do you greet your friends/teacher/head teacher?
- Can we write it down? What do you notice?

The teacher’s skill and sensitivity enables the children to reflect on their own language and perhaps on the wider issues of speaking and writing; for example, this is what we all *say*, but what would we *write*? Particular aspects that need to be addressed are adaptation to listeners and context and an introduction to some of the features which distinguish Standard English from the patterns of speech practised so far by the child.

The issue here is that the children are talking about the language itself; they are learning about language through talking about language and acquiring a metalanguage. As teachers, we are surrounded by constant talk in a busy reception class, so it is easy to forget its importance; there’s a danger of not giving talk its due attention. Speaking and listening are not incidental but require definite planning.

Talk opportunities in the classroom

By the end of Year 6, most children will be expected to achieve a level of competency in speaking and listening.

Talk in the classroom is crucial to learning. It is where answers to puzzling questions can be found. It is where thoughtful argument and discussion make way for the understanding of new skills and difficult concepts. It is where difficult issues, which emerge from the children's literacy work, their maths or science investigations, history or RE studies, can be talked through. It is where children listen to and respect the views of each other and where everyone's learning is empowered by talking about what they have learned. It is where children can be supported in raising their own questions about their learning.

(Smith 2005: 86)

By the time most children reach Year 3, they will have come to understand the appropriateness of different kinds of talk in different contexts. By placing a greater emphasis on group discussion and interaction children should now be given far greater opportunities to talk, discuss and share ideas. By giving children the language of argument and persuasion, we can give them the tools to be more effective and articulate at expressing their views in a democratic way. From Years 3 to 6 you should have introduced them to the idea that there is an agreed set of rules for this kind of talk.

Task 5.3.3 Ground rules for talk

You might find it useful when you next set a problem-solving task for a group of children to get them to discuss and record their own rules which they will use while they are carrying out the task. At first they may be puzzled by this and unsure what you want. You will need to plan very carefully to ensure that they discuss the importance of talk and listening in their own learning. Just as you have had to train yourself to listen to children, they have to learn to listen attentively to each other to take the group task forward.

SUMMARY

To introduce effective dialogic talk in your classroom you may want to think about the different ways you plan to involve talk in your teaching. In many cases, your talk will focus on organisation, the content of your lesson and questions which will show you how well the children are understanding that content. When you include speaking and listening in your planning, however, remember that engaging in dialogue with children involves a process of joint inquiry and the construction of meaning. You will need to think about the kind of questions you ask, and how you are going to respond to the children's answers so that you can extend their thinking. This is also the case when children work together in small groups; they will also need to adjust the way they talk together and will be helped by an introduction to ground rules for talk and a discussion of the importance of talk to their learning.

ANNOTATED FURTHER READING

Alexander, R. (2004) *Towards Dialogic Teaching: Rethinking Classroom Talk*, Cambridge: Dialogos UK.

This is a short booklet which explains the rationale for dialogic teaching, the international research which has led to this and the current research taking place in the UK to implement the changes that are implied in this document.

- Dawes, L., Mercer, N. and Wegerif, R. (2000) *Thinking Together: A Programme of Activities for Developing Thinking Skills At KS2*, Birmingham: The Questions Publishing Company. This practical book discusses the aims of the *Thinking Together* approach; how and why to teach the thinking together lessons; how to plan for group work and improve the quality of talk in the classroom. It has a very useful section which will help you to introduce ground rules for talk followed by suggestions for a number of lessons.
- Dawes, L. and Sams, C. (2004) *Speaking and Listening Activities for Learning at Key Stage 1*, London: David Fulton Publishers. Talk Box provides an effective way of teaching children about speaking and listening in the Early Years. It will help you to understand how to introduce ground rules for exploratory talk to young children. A number of ideas for lessons will show you how to use the Talk Box to encourage children's reasoning and decision-making.
- Grugeon, E., Dawes, L., Smith, C. and Hubbard, L. (2005) *Teaching Speaking and Listening in the Primary School*, 3rd edition, London: David Fulton Publishers. This book gives a comprehensive review of current issues and classroom practice. It includes information about using ICT, drama, storytelling, guided reading, planning and assessment for talk in both Key Stages.
- <http://www.thinkingtogether.org.uk>. This site includes further information about the Thinking Together approach.

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