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Making Waves: towards a pedagogy of discourse

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ABSTRACT This article re-examines the classroom discourse context in early years settings and primary schools. It seeks to understand why such slow progress has been made in developing talk for learning in recent years. The article acknowledges that children are already expert language users by the time they start school and offers practitioners practical ways to enhance children's thinking and learning by developing their capabilities in talk.

Introduction

'Interactive discourse' (Corden, 2000, p. 3), or talk for learning, is the essential element in any early years setting and primary classroom if children are to be successful learners. Alexander argues strongly for dialogic teaching: 'Dialogic teaching puts talk back where it belongs and where in many countries it already resides: at the heart of the pupil's learning and the teacher's professional skill' (2004, p. 1). Corden, too, wants to 'reassert the central role of talk in learning' (2000, p. 3). We are not short of writers, thinkers or global theorists who promote talk in classrooms but we are short of schools in England that embed pedagogy centred on talk and provide documented evidence on how this is to be achieved at the level of everyday experience. We are particularly short of schools that adopt the use of educational technologies for promoting talk in the classroom, and do so consistently.

In this article we renew our understanding of both the child as a language learner and the role of talk in learning and thinking in general. We re-examine what is written about talk in the curriculum and why it is hard to foster talk in the classroom. Finally, we identify how 'pedagogy in discourse' can be achieved.

Children as Expert Language Learners and the Role of Talk

From birth, human beings are highly capable learners, particularly in the art of human communication. Noam Chomsky argued that babies are born with an innate ability to make sense of linguistic structures, and because of this genetic pre-programming, children learn the grammatical rules of their language before the age of three years. Other research studies (for example, Moon et al, 2012) have shown that, given a choice, newborn babies prefer to turn their heads towards their mother's language rather than a language that is new to them, thus providing evidence that they have learnt about language sounds, rhythm and vocal pitch in the womb. Babies arrive genetically predisposed to learn as well as already experienced at learning. They are curious and intuitive collaborators. Selby and Bradley (2003) showed how seven-month-old babies, who were studied in groups of three with no adult presence, developed 'mini-dramas' with each other, and demonstrated, for example, jealousy. They suggested that what is unique about the human mind is its derivation from in-group dynamics. On the one hand, there is nothing new in this assertion; Vygotsky (1978) had argued that children begin to perceive the world not only through their eyes but also through their speech, and that thinking is mediated by language, which in turn originates as actual relationships between individuals. On the other hand, Selby and Bradley's work provides a new contribution to this discussion because their focus is on young babies' peer relationships, rather than adult/parent–infant relationships. They argue that more studies of babies' communication with each other are needed to better understand how shared meanings are developed, as this informs language acquisition. All human beings, young and old, are 'story seeking'. Their understanding of 'self' develops and is maintained by sharing meaning in relationships and by communicating with others. We all need narratives to make sense of the world. And we want to hear them and need space to tell them.

Key thinkers, linguists, psychologists, sociologists (such as Chomsky, Vygotsky, Bruner and Wells, to name a few) have shown how talk plays a key role in thinking and learning. By the time young children enter an early years classroom they have learnt the grammatical rules and the sounds of their language and possess a sizeable vocabulary. In the case of multilingual children they have two or three sets of these in their repertoires. They are experts in language learning and thereby learning in general. Children in Reception classes can, for example, hypothesise different endings to familiar stories and defend their own perspectives, and engage in a great number of different cognitive tasks. Collaborative talk, that combines the use of their own hands and the manipulation and movement of resources (mud, sticks, toys, paint and so on), tends to be young children's preferred method of showing what they know. It will be some years before they can write with similar complexity and provide teachers with the same level of insight into their thinking through their writing. In addition, there has been much scholarly work over the years from different disciplines which all converges on the essentiality of talk for thinking

and learning. This is true for all children, including those who speak another language at home. Problem solving and reasoning, for example, are improved when talk is involved. We also know from a large body of work and research that when teaching reading and writing, the process should 'float on a sea of talk' (Britton, 1983).

A 'sea of talk' can be created through dialogic teaching and exploratory talk. Alexander states that dialogic teaching, which he describes as reasoned discussion, 'harnesses the power of talk to stimulate and extend pupils' thinking and advance their learning and understanding' (2004, p. 1). Barnes first discussed exploratory talk in the 1970s and his work identified the pivotal role of the teacher: 'The communication system that a teacher sets up in a lesson shapes the roles that the pupils can play and goes some distance in determining the kinds of learning that they engage in' (Barnes, 2008, p. 2). Mercer and others have built on the work of Barnes. When analysing different types of group talk, they state that exploratory talk is cognitively demanding and combines challenges and requests for clarification that rest on explanations and justifications (Littleton & Mercer, 2013). Yet, in spite of global research and policy recommendations, 'talking to learn' (Alexander, 2004) is simply not happening in the classroom in England. The evidence for this assertion comes from several sources. When researching for his book, *Culture and Pedagogy* (2000), Alexander found that the most common discourse approach in classrooms was the model of initiation/response/feedback (IRF) where the teacher initiates the topic, pupils respond, and the teacher then provides evaluative feedback before moving on to the next initiation. Although IRF was widely used in the five countries he examined, French and Russian teachers and pupils tended to engage more deeply in feedback. If IRF is the dominant approach in classrooms, we suggest that it is generally not conducive to developing exploratory talk in class. Studies of the impact on teaching of the National Literacy Strategy (NLS), National Numeracy Strategy (NNS) and Primary National Strategy (PNS) showed a high percentage of teacher talk during lessons, with limited opportunities for children to talk (Alexander, 2012). In spite of the emphasis on whole class *interactive* teaching, the approach used was predominantly IRF.

During the late 1990s and early 2000s teachers voiced their need for guidance in the classroom use of speaking and listening. In response to their uncertainty about how to incorporate talk into the curriculum, the government produced a set of speaking and listening materials (Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2003). Rose (2006) reported that little attention had been given to the teaching of the full programme of study for speaking and listening and the range of contexts provided was too limited. The Talk Project (Myhill et al, 2006) showed that a high percentage of questions asked by teachers were factual, closed ones, and that this type of questioning does not accord with a dialogic teaching approach.

What is Written about Talk in the Curriculum?

Oracy is not firmly embedded in primary practice despite several statutory and non-statutory policy documents identifying the importance of talk for cognitive development. The advocacy for talk has been reduced over the years. Things looked promising in the 1970s. Firstly, the Bullock Report (Department of Education and Science [DES], 1975) opened the door to possibilities. Influenced by work in the 1970s on children's talk by Harold Rosen, James Britton, Douglas Barnes and Joan Tough, the report encouraged teachers to give greater importance to talk for learning, exploratory talk and small group work, and acknowledged oracy in the context of the development of thinking. In many ways the report was ahead of its time with its views on talk's centrality for education: 'We welcome the growth in interest in oral language in recent years, for we cannot emphasise too strongly our conviction of its importance in the education of the child' (DES, 1975, p. 156).

The first National Curriculum (DES, 1989) gave speaking and listening equal status with reading and writing, and subsequent versions (Department for Education [DfE], 1995; Department for Education and Employment [DfEE], 1999; DfE, 2013) have, in their various different ways, included speaking and listening, but there have also been confusing mixed messages regarding what gets prioritised, esteemed and rewarded. When the NLS was introduced (DfEE, 1998), speaking and listening were not included, yet, the NLS framework briefly acknowledged the centrality of talk. Later, talk was included in the Primary National Strategy Framework (DfES, 2006). This was the time when 'literacy' truly became, as Freebody put it, a global 'media superstar' and as such was seen as central in the government's attempts to 'raise standards':

> Twenty years ago, Graff (1979) exploded many of these 'literacy myths' [such as improving the economy, eradicating ignorance, poverty, crime, consolidating democratic processes] but their durability in the public imagination and the perennial lure they hold for politicians and educational administrators mean that they not only run deep in a generally literate society, but also serve to hold in place certain powerful regulatory, political and ideological systems of surveillance and management. (Freebody, 2001, p. 105)

Oracy has never become a media star and for the past twenty years, typically, teachers' success has been measured by high-stakes testing, or SATs, in reading and writing. Primary school teachers' performance-related pay is now routinely based on literacy results – oracy does not get a look-in – thus confirming the elite status of literacy.

The current National Curriculum makes its intentions clear about the role of talk:

> The national curriculum for English reflects the importance of spoken language in pupils' development across the whole curriculum – cognitively, socially and linguistically. Spoken language underpins

> the development of reading and writing ... Teachers should therefore ensure the continual development of pupils' confidence and competence in spoken language and listening skills.
> (DfE, 2013, p. 3)

Speaking and listening have been renamed 'spoken language', which suggests a preference for more formal speech events. Nevertheless, talk has a presence that provides a licence for change.

Strong and confident teachers can and will, of course, create some opportunities for oracy, even if the formal policies offer no guidance. Teachers are the lynchpin connecting the principles promoted by research and what happens in everyday practice. Consequently, teachers are our focus for developing talk-based pedagogies.

Why is it Hard to Foster Talk for Learning?

Before we discuss the development of teachers' professional skills in this respect, it is important to acknowledge the overall conditions in which they teach. Pedagogies are shaped by real-life contexts and broader societal structures. For example, resourcing and funding are critical issues. Currently, the majority of primary school children are taught in classes of 30 or more pupils. This is one of the largest average primary school class sizes amongst the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries (DfE, 2011). With this size of class it is not easy for teachers to hear spoken contributions or to encourage everyone to speak.

If classrooms fit for a pedagogy of discourse are to be developed, smaller class sizes are needed. However, reducing class size, providing realistic guidance materials and developing new projects that lead the development of practice all come with an economic cost attached. These require consistent funding that lasts longer than an individual government's reign. A successful change requires long-term professional investment, from initial teacher training, to mentoring newly qualified teachers and to the development of senior leadership teams.

Lack of resources and guidance also impact on practitioners' ability to put principles into practice. In the past 25 years there have been primary national strategies (NLS/PNS) and two national projects, the National Oracy Project (NOP) and Language in the National Curriculum (LINC), each costing millions of pounds. Any one of them had the potential to lead to change but the government refused to publish LINC's teaching and training materials, and there was little in the way of dissemination of other material. The lack of political will to promote good practice in oracy has resulted in little guidance material being offered to teachers.

The approaches required for dialogical teaching are complex. With no successful past model of dialogic pedagogy to draw upon and with a climate privileging other kinds of pedagogies in England, it is not easy for teachers to change their practice and innovate new approaches. We have also identified five

different kinds of fear that need to be challenged and removed before schools, senior leadership teams, individual teachers and teacher educators can move on and make positive changes.

Fear number 1: Talk is too political

Is talking dangerous? It seems that successive Departments of Education have mistrusted both teachers and their pupils and have actively reduced the role of speaking and listening in the curriculum at a time when competition in literacy scores and between schools has been increased. Currently, at the level of practice, pupil talk is promoted to develop competency 'in the arts' of speaking and listening and 'making formal presentations' (DfE, 2013). To approach talk differently is to challenge the government's own policy makers: every pedagogical act is also a political act.

Fear number 2: Fostering talk is too scary

Creating classrooms of discourse, where there is greater opportunity for discussion and dialogue (Alexander, 2004), may lead to some practitioners feeling exposed and insecure, as there is uncertainty in the organisation and outcomes of such talk. However, instructing, explaining and asking factual questions give teachers greater control of the class *and* the knowledge (Myhill et al, 2006). This is not something necessarily done consciously, but a traditional transmission model of pedagogy appears to be the default model for many teachers. Teachers may fear, as Alexander (2004) suggests, losing control of their class. But a class out of control, or misbehaving, because lessons call mainly for passive listening, may be an expression of frustration. Mercer's research (for example, the Thinking Together Programme [1]) suggests that teaching children reasoning skills does have a positive impact on behaviour.

Fear number 3: Changing the classroom culture and pedagogy is too complicated

Some teachers may well believe this approach is too complicated, as the policies tend to instruct them in *what* to do. There seems to be an underlying assumption that they know *how* to do it. But do they?

The burden of proof – that pedagogical changes are successful – currently rests with teachers and individual schools, and as such it is exhausting and takes attention away from the goal of ensuring teachers are skilled and confident in creating purposeful talk experiences. The most common model of talk in any classroom is the IRF model where teachers do most of the talking and ask closed questions and pupils respond briefly. It requires a change in the teacher's mindset to bring about a change in the culture of talk in the classroom. Teachers need to rethink the relationship of pupil/teacher and pupil/pupil in classroom discourse. They need to change themselves and regain trust in

children as learners. The development of dialogic teaching requires strong subject knowledge across the curriculum, knowledge of learning theories, knowledge of and skill in the art of questioning and perceiving what children will require next for progress in their understanding. Change will not happen overnight. However, small but steady gains have been shown in projects conducted in a number of local authorities (Alexander, 2004).

Fear number 4: Talk is too theoretical

Alexander says provocatively, 'the problem with British culture is we do not take theory seriously' (Alexander, 2010) and consequently it is sometimes said that teachers do not seem good at applying theory or research outcomes to classroom practice. But at the same time it has to be recognised that even when they do (as with the past LINC materials), the national policies push them in an opposite direction. The best ways to give feedback, to move children's learning on, and to ask questions, appear not to have been grounded in theoretical understanding; the overreliance on IRF exchanges attests to this. Currently, universities' teacher education is in flux, and increasingly training takes place in schools where the focus is more on day-to-day practice than theory. There is a clear link between patterns of discourse within the classroom and teachers' theories of learning: 'The most effective teachers are those who can theorise their teaching so as to make confident and professionally informed pedagogic decisions' (Askew et al, 1997, cited in Hardman, 2008, p. 146).

Fear Number 5: Talk is too time-consuming

A common argument put forward by teachers is that talk is too time-consuming. Teachers fear not being able to cover the set curriculum objectives and failing to reach the schools' attainment targets. There seems to be a difficulty in justifying the time that is being taken away from 'tested' curriculum subjects. Anecdotally, reasons given are: children cannot cope with long discussions and groups cannot stay on task. Today, nevertheless, there may be an assumption that a pedagogy of discourse is finally taking root in schools because the use of 'talk partners' has become widely accepted in primary schools. 'Talk partners' are typically used in the context of whole-class teaching; after the teacher's input or direct questions, all pupils are encouraged to turn to their 'talk partners' (a person sitting next to them) to explore and exchange ideas without direct teacher intervention. The time provided for this is often less than a minute, and whilst this may well be a useful strategy for engaging pupils, it does not provide time and opportunities to develop the kind of talk discussed here. We argue for a different kind of talk. We urge teachers to provide spaces for fostering exploratory talk, across the curriculum and for a range of purposes. As the Bullock Report (DES, 1975) suggested more than forty years ago, teachers' planning should include a focus on, and an intention to increase the complexity of, the child's thinking through oracy.

Calling for a Pedagogy of Discourse

Let us remind ourselves of good practice in schools. It is already happening in some early years settings. The longitudinal study 'Effective Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education' (EPPSE) (Sylva et al, 2010) has shown that dialogic teaching or 'sustained and shared thinking' (SST), as they originally termed it, is one of the factors that make a positive difference in children's academic and social development as well as their behaviour. Subsequently, SST has also been included in the Early Years Teachers' Status Standards (NCTL, 2013) and is a focus in the SEED project, a longitudinal study of five-year-olds. In support of the project, SSTEW scales (sustained shared thinking and emotional well being) have been developed and were launched by the charity 4Children at their conference in 2015. It is hoped that 'using the scales will give a more complete picture of what high-quality early childhood education and care can look like'.[2]

The London Early Years Foundation website suggests practical activities such as helicopter time and dialogic storytelling as ways for young children to engage in more meaningful talk experiences. Helicopter time is an idea from early years practitioner Vivian Gussin Paley, where 'children and staff use drama to build up and record children's own stories'. Children play, explore, share ideas and express themselves in a safe environment. Dialogic storytelling techniques 'develop listening comprehension, the ability to form an argument and to elaborate' (leyf).[3]

In the last few years in primary classrooms children have engaged in reasoned discussions in their lessons of 'Philosophy for Children'. Group work with a focus on purposeful talk is happening in some classrooms. Mercer and Hodgkinson (2008) have emphasised the need for groups to create their own ground rules in order for successful discussions to take place. Valerie Coultas gives practical advice for creating good conditions for group work in more challenging classrooms (Coultas, cited in Smith, 2010).

The Talk for Writing programme run by Pie Corbett [4] has grown significantly since its inception and a number of writing schools have been formed. The link between talk and reading and writing is seen in many classroom activities with opportunities for children to think collaboratively and build understanding – for example, literature circles; book clubs; shared and guided reading and writing; and in a variety of group formats such as jigsaws and envoys, which are explained in the Primary National Strategy speaking and listening materials (DfES, 2003).

There are increasing amounts of research and funded projects on classroom discourse and effective teaching strategies (e.g. Education Endowment Foundation). Recently completed EEF project evaluations (EEF, 2015) on discourse showed a positive impact in a variety of areas related to talk, but in particular those with greatest gains were pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. The Thinking Together website (University of Cambridge)[5] contains information on exploratory talk, projects and resources for teachers.

Further developments in initial teacher education need to focus on:

- initial teacher education programmes including compulsory modules on talking, thinking, learning and pedagogy;
- developing planning and teaching for talk across the curriculum, e.g. identifying group time and purposeful talk experiences; ensuring the 'interactive' remains in whole-class teaching; writing details of the planned pupil/teacher dialogue (rather than just stating key questions);
- initial teacher education tutors modelling dialogic teaching in their own seminars;
- trainee teachers studying a selection of readings on the role of talk, and taking part in discussions;
- trainee teachers conducting class-based research and tasks on discourse during school practice blocks.

The time for producing evidence to convince education professionals or policy makers of the worth of talk is over – now it is time for action. What is needed now is to increase capacity and expand good practice. There has been plenty of good work done over the years, by universities, literary groups, local authorities and individual schools and teachers. They are all in pursuit of the best ways to develop children's thinking and learning and to make a positive impact on children's futures and to influence practice. Their work should be our starting point for bringing about change. The time is right for making waves.

Notes

[1] Thinking together project, University of Cambridge, Education Faculty. http://thinkingtogether.educ.cam.ac.uk/about/ (accessed 25 October 2015).

[2] Conference 4Children (2015) Launch of the Sustained Shared Thinking and Well Being Scales. http://www.4children.org.uk/Event/Detail/Early-Childhood-Matters (accessed 4 January 2016).

[3] London Early Years Foundation (leyf). https://www.leyf.org.uk/blog/reading-and-writing-float-on-a-sea-of-talk-so-lets-ensure-more-conversations/ (accessed 4 January 2016).

[4] Talk for Writing developed by Pie Corbett. http://www.talk4writing.co.uk/about/ (accessed 25 October 2015).

[5] Thinking together project, University of Cambridge, Education Faculty. http://thinkingtogether.educ.cam.ac.uk/about/ (accessed 25 October 2015).

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