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'There's No Time to Talk because the Evidence is in the Writing': fostering talk in an evidence-driven primary education culture

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ABSTRACT Pressures on primary teachers to improve writing are often to the detriment of quality talk in the classroom. This is despite decades of research emphasising that knowledge and understanding are developed through such talk. Primary teachers' experiences of incorporating the current Spoken Language national curriculum are often at odds with current policy: some are unaware of the statutory Spoken Language curriculum while others are left to negotiate for themselves how best to incorporate talk into their practice with minimal training and guidance. This article describes the affordances for all learners when talk is incorporated as a tool for learning, developing vocabulary and ideas, having a positive impact on children's social and emotional development, and fostering engagement in learning and academic progress. Drawing on a recent Master's study, the author explores the experiences of teachers as they incorporate talk into their practice, and identifies the enablers and dilemmas for teachers who place talk at the heart of their practice.

What Is Talk and Why Is It Important?

As a teacher educator, working closely with initial teacher education students on their journey to becoming qualified teachers, I explore a range of ways that children can learn through effective talk, discussion and dialogue. My desire to promote talk has been at the heart of my own teaching pedagogy as a primary school teacher for 20 years and is grounded in my experiences of the potential rewards, including but not limited to children's progress and enjoyment, to be accrued when talk as a tool for learning (TTfL) was incorporated into my practice.

Flitton and Warwick (2013) coined the term 'talk as a tool for learning'. They suggest that the term illustrates the range of strategies which may be employed in the classroom to explicitly use classroom talk as a 'rich route to improving learning' (p. 103). This can encompass a range of strategies, from drama and role play to pupil-led enquiry-based learning, art and junk modelling, or the use of Lego. It is not limited to the classroom environment: assemblies, performances and school visitors all lend themselves towards opportunities for incorporating talk, allowing TTfL to be seen as truly cross-curricular. Indeed, within my research, most of the teachers viewed such strategies as the backbone of their planning and teaching, with TTfL strategies being 'paramount to our practice' (Sally).[1]

It is widely recognised that knowledge and understanding are developed through talk (Mercer & Littleton, 2007; Coultas, 2015), and that meaning is constructed not just through new knowledge and what children already know, but from interaction with others (Alexander, 2008). Many teachers assert that talk is central to their pedagogy, yet knowing that knowledge is constructed through talk is not enough, on its own, to ensure that opportunities for talk will support a child's cognitive development. Jones (2007, p. 569) suggests that many teachers may assume that children will become competent talkers because 'classroom talk is interwoven into the fabric of the classroom', rather than focusing on the purpose of the talk itself. Through careful planning, teaching and utilising the social situation in the classroom (teacher to pupil, pupil to pupil, pupil to teacher), teachers can build on information a child has already mastered to develop knowledge and understanding through talk (Jones, 2007; Alexander, 2008; Barnes, 2008). What is clear from decades of research is that there are many benefits for children in incorporating a talk-based pedagogy, including social and emotional benefits, academic benefits and improved social interactions in the classroom (Jay et al, 2017).

Current policy does promote a talk-based pedagogy. Indeed, the national curriculum (Department for Education, 2014) sets out a Spoken Language statement for all curriculum areas to the effect that it is taught across the curriculum 'cognitively, socially and linguistically' (pp. 100, 145). However, despite the 'crucial importance of pupils' development across the whole curriculum' through talk set out in the national curriculum (p. 13), recent research argues that talk seems to be almost absent (Jones, 2017). It should be noted that, unlike past curriculums, there is no guidance for teachers on how to actually teach the current Spoken Language objectives, leaving the implementation to the discretion of schools. This position assumes that schools and teachers will work out a way to deliver the Spoken Language curriculum themselves or that policy writers anticipated that schools would develop appropriate support for teachers (Westgate & Hughes, 2015). It could be argued that because the national curriculum does not state *how* quality talk should be taught, this allows opportunities for schools to develop a curriculum where talk is central. In practice, research has shown that teachers are aware that TTfL needs to go beyond the English curriculum in order for it to be effective, but

need guidance to ensure it is planned for and taught correctly (Barnes, 2008; Bignell, 2011; Westgate & Hughes, 2015).

So, What Is the Problem?

From the above, it seems clear what teachers should be doing – even if some guidance is needed – and that leaners will reap the benefits of a TTfL approach. However, in a recent initial teacher education seminar I led, a group of students expressed that although they agreed that using TTfL is important in primary teaching, my ideas may not be realistic, as there is limited time to provide opportunities to talk in schools due to the pressures felt by teachers (and by the students themselves as trainee teachers) to provide written, easily accessible evidence from pupils at the end of every lesson. This was exemplified by one pertinent comment from a trainee: 'There's no time to talk because the evidence is in the writing'. This is particularly pertinent given that it comes from an undergraduate trainee at a stage in their career where they might be considered somewhat immune to the pressures and myths – particularly around the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) and evidence – that are so prevalent in our schools. It is important here to note that these experiences, and the focus on writing over talk, conflict with the national curriculum's (Department for Education, 2014) statutory Spoken Language requirements. This incident fuelled my interest in this field and I became interested in how different teachers experience incorporating TTfL under the current national curriculum context. This article, based on six interviews with teachers conducted as part of my Master's research, explores the everyday experiences of primary school teachers when employing a talk-based pedagogy, highlighting the 'dilemmas, not deficits' (Alexander, 2008, p. 48) of incorporating a talk-based pedagogy into everyday practice.

Let us start with one teacher, Mo. Her reflections on her teaching since incorporating TTfL into her everyday pedagogy highlight the affordances of such an approach for pupils and teachers. Interestingly, this demonstrates that TTfL is not just about lots of talk; the talk of silences, although perhaps ironic in a discussion of talk, is particularly pertinent:

> I think, as a teacher, I'm so much happier with this approach to teaching. I think their behaviour in the class has actually changed ... the behaviour is better, and it's not amazing all of the time. But, for example, yesterday, when they were doing a bit of writing, they'd had all the role play and when I said, 'Right, you're going to write down all your responses', they actually were, like, 'Yes'. They wanted to. They went and sat at their tables and I didn't once have to tell them not to talk ... it was just silent. The room was silent. And not because I didn't want them to talk. I hadn't said a word about what I wanted them to do – they were really happy to go back to their tables, get their ideas down on paper ... So, that puts me in a better mood. The children are, you know, quite happy. I can really

> celebrate their writing and what they're doing. ... And so, I think, with talk and language ... it is a chance that we can enjoy that time together as well. I think it has a much better positive atmosphere in the room.

Here, it is evident that this shift towards a talk-based pedagogy is about more than just improving writing for Mo. She highlights the social and emotional benefits for both the pupils and herself. Improved pupil engagement and behaviour, and improved academic progress for all learners, has impacted her experience as a teacher.

What Are Primary School Teachers' Experiences of Incorporating TTfL?

In the teacher interviews, the affordances of TTfL dominated the narratives. Immersion in a topic or theme through a range of talk strategies influences the way questions, vocabulary and structures for talk can be taught in context. Many teachers viewed these strategies as the backbone of their planning and teaching. The idea of the interrelationship between questioning, planning and immersion when planning TTfL opportunities was emphasised by Mo as follows:

> It all, kind of, blends in together because those opportunities to talk, that's when they're using the vocabulary and the sentence stems ... without the sentence stems and vocabulary, those opportunities aren't quite as rich, so they work really closely together.

Talk as an Essential Component of Writing

The teachers I spoke to, consistent with the view that talk must be planned if it is to be used effectively (Alexander, 2008; Barnes, 2008; Westgate & Hughes, 2015), were clear that planning was a key strategy for the effective incorporation of purposeful talk. However, a range of variables influences how TTfL is planned for, with two divergent planning discourses emerging regarding how teachers plan for talk. Sally expressed the freedom for planning for talk since talk had been a priority on the school improvement plan: 'We do whole lessons of talk now ... before the writing'. Others, such as Justin, saw talk as a more fluid but quick process:

> It's not like I'm splitting the entire lesson to have discussions on talk. It just really organically fits in. I put a question up, we look at it and I say, 'Okay, talk about that for 30 seconds' ... it doesn't take any time at all.

The teachers demonstrated that, for some, opportunities for discussion and dialogue to go beyond the 30-second discussion were essential for an effective talk-based pedagogy. In line with research, one teacher asserted that, without

talk, cognitive processing and understanding may not occur for some children, and therefore incorporating TTfL into her everyday planning was necessary. These differences in practice may be influenced by what Black (2004) describes as the range of perspectives held by teachers regarding what TTfL actually is. Black reported that often teachers view their practice of holding talk as central, but, when observed, the talk was central to an initiation–response–feedback pedagogy, which seems to be echoed in Justin's narrative above.

Most significantly, Mo described the shift in her practice towards a talk-based pedagogy and the reasons behind this:

> Before ... we would be asking children to write and they couldn't even form a sentence to say, let alone write it down. They just didn't have any ideas at all. And so, as we've sort of unpicked that a little bit more, they don't have the vocabulary, they don't have the sentences to say, they don't have the ideas. And so, writing has always been a focus of ours. We've always needed to improve our writing scores. And actually, as we've sort of sat back and looked at it, all of that that needs to be in their writing has to be developed through talk first.

Here, Mo presents the drive behind increasing the amount of talk in her practice as being to improve writing scores but, interestingly, she went on to explain *how* she planned for this:

> So, when planning anything, it's always looking at opportunities for immersion for children to actually be able to experience what they're writing about and, within that, they're learning the new vocabulary that they can relate to. The places, the things they're doing and then that's a great chance to start building in those conjunctions that you're asking them, so what they're talking about you can just add a little bit more sophisticated structures to what they're saying, and just that constant rehearsal of it. ... And then you can bring that back into the classroom ... there's lots of role play, and Lego and kind of creative junk-modelling, and then there's lots of practice at using the new vocabulary, the new sentence structures, until then, eventually, when they're ready to write, they're quite enthusiastic about that.

This range of strategies needed to be planned for carefully and, in contrast to the other teachers' experiences, Mo emphasised that three key strands – presenting language structures, exploring vocabulary and opportunities for immersion – were essential when planning for talk. The notion of vocabulary development through talk is a familiar thread in the literature (Bignell, 2011; Lefstein & Snell, 2014), policy (Department for Education, 2014, 2018) and this study. The narratives illustrate how some of the participants planned for focused vocabulary development using a range of different strategies. In some narratives, low levels of speech and language in school contexts were cited as reasons for specifically focusing on vocabulary development. Sally explained

how she planned to specifically extend children's vocabulary by organising activities where children could begin to 'really understand what the vocabulary means' in context.

Some of the teachers further asserted that while talk can be beneficial, a *reason* or *purpose* to talk is necessary for pupil engagement. Mo exemplified this, stating: 'lessons and activities should be engaging so that they inspire [children] to want to talk about it more'. Sally offered further insight here, reinforcing the importance of children 'playing, having a go, not being afraid to take risks verbally ... and having fun with language'.

These statements are significant because Sally and Mo had support from their senior leadership team (SLT) and had engaged in continuing professional development (CPD), and both communicated a risk-free teaching and learning environment where talk could be central. In response to the research question 'What are primary school teachers' experiences of incorporating TTfL?', these teachers appear to have the freedom to experiment with different approaches and have been given time to incorporate and adopt a TTfL pedagogy (Westgate & Hughes, 2015; Jay et al, 2017).

What Factors Influence the Incorporation of TTfL?

Continuing Professional Development

The findings suggest a clear link between CPD, SLT support and teacher confidence when incorporating TTfL, mirroring the findings of Jay et al (2017), Coultas (2015), and Flitton and Warwick (2013). When asked 'How important is TTfL in your practice?', the participants all emphasised that it was important. Sally explained: 'It's everything really, academic, social and emotional'. It appears that participating in CPD (in-service training days and staff meetings) had supported Sally's observations of the multiple benefits of TTfL and her autonomy in driving TTfL forward in her practice. The findings suggest that receiving CPD gives teachers confidence and guidance to incorporate TTfL more freely. Sally added:

> [CPD] is important because after I really understood it [talk], I then incorporated it in all of my practice. So, before I would maybe do a quick rehearsal – let's write this, let's have a quick chat – rather than going really deep into something for their understanding.

It becomes clear here that a teacher's own construction of knowledge through TTfL CPD allowed them to understand the interrelationships between language, thought and learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Alexander, 2008). Indeed, Sally's and Mo's narratives suggest that they had adopted a sense of agency when incorporating TTfL, as a result of engaging in CPD.

Senior Leadership Team Support

The remaining narratives point towards the dilemmas teachers have to negotiate when incorporating TTfL. Justin, Carla, Jamilia and Remi had never experienced any CPD relating to TTfL in their current school. However, they did state that talk was important to their practice. What emerges is that although the teachers collectively viewed TTfL as an affordance, incorporating talk is a complex process, and CPD and SLT support are needed for teachers and children to enjoy this affordance. Jamilia and Mo both also described the risks that teachers take in practice when incorporating TTfL, as 'so many children can be off-task' (Jamilia). Remi described how, in a recent lesson observation, she ensured that talk was central, '[e]ven though I know it could have potentially backfired'. Her use of the term 'backfired' may suggest that because TTfL was not a perceived focus at her school, she felt that incorporating talk was taking a risk. The praise received from the SLT regarding her incorporation of TTfL appeared to reaffirm her practice, making her more confident in incorporating it in the future. This implies perhaps a tension between the pedagogical principles that were at the heart of Remi's practice and the expectations of the SLT. Mo exemplified this, stating: 'If SLT are telling teachers that they need it to be done another way, teachers' hands are tied, aren't they?'

The findings suggest that a lack of clarity regarding the importance of TTfL in their school left some teachers confused as to how they should incorporate it in their practice. However, a consistency in the findings is that when TTfL was incorporated, the affordances were enjoyed by both the teachers and the children.

The Affordances for Children When Talk Is Incorporated as a Tool for Learning

Social and Emotional Development

Flitton and Warwick (2013) argue that talk is a route to improving learning, with Westgate and Hughes (2015) furthering this in stating that children are motivated and enjoy learning where talk is central. What emerges from the narratives in my research is that both the teachers and the children enjoyed the learning when talk was central, which, in turn, motivated the children to learn and, at least within this small-scale study, improved academic progress. This extract from Mo's narrative captures the essence of such motivation after immersion in a topic through talk:

> I think, before, when I perhaps was always differentiating and thinking, 'Well, you do that activity, you do that', I was working more than the children ... It was the first time I think that I really thought, 'This is what really works – this has such an impact'. I just had a moment where I thought, 'God, I've been doing it wrong all this time'.

Sally went on to state: 'I think it's making such an impact and I feel my class are doing really well and I think it's because of talking'. These findings emphasise the importance for children to learn in a social context, and support theory asserting that children develop knowledge when they feel emotionally included (Wells, 1987). Mo, Carla and Jamilia all recognised that social talk provides a platform for children to feel confident to learn and to apply social language in context. This thinking is reflected in Alexander's (2008, p. 37) work, where '[s]ocial talk: to build relationships, confidence and self-esteem' is presented as a justification 'for making talk central to an empowering pedagogy'. Jamilia and Mo both described the accessibility of TTfL for all children in their class, many of whom struggled to engage when talk was not central. Their narratives further support the idea that in order for children to contribute to society, learning where talk, interaction and communication are central to teaching is imperative (Mercer, 2000).

Cognitive Development

The notion of talk as a cognitive process and the positive impact TTfL had on academic progress was one of the key affordances shared by the participants. Indeed, Justin argued that TTfL allowed space for in-depth discussion that could not be supported by 'a worksheet'. This perspective further supports the importance of language and words as a tool for thinking to develop intellectual understanding (Mercer, 2000; Alexander, 2008). Exemplifying this, Sally and Jamilia described how opportunities for discussion, oral rehearsal and playful collaborative learning were planned for first, resulting in a positive impact on academic progress. Sally stated: 'Everyone knew what they had to write because they had rehearsed and discussed the language first'. Mo added: 'I have a child who is a really low attainer ... who could access the learning ... and developed language' when TTfL was incorporated into her pedagogy – further emphasising the importance of TTfL as a tool for motivating children to learn.

What is surprising from the narratives is that all of the teachers stated that the overall aim of incorporating TTfL was to improve writing. Remi asserted: 'Talk is too important. If they can't talk about it, they certainly can't write it'. This perhaps supports Alexander's (2003, p. 32) suggestion that '[t]alk is at least a poor relation to reading and writing', but reaffirms that reading and writing do indeed float upon a sea of talk (Britton, 1983).

The Dilemmas for Teachers When Incorporating TTfL

Statutory Assessments and Curriculum Pressures

From the narratives, two clear perspectives emerge. Sally, Justin and Mo expressed that pressures from the national curriculum (Department for Education, 2014) and statutory assessments did not impact on their incorporation of TTfL. This finding is significant because it contradicts key research by Westgate and Hughes (2015) and Jay et al (2017), who suggest that

the amount of curriculum that needs to be covered can impact on the amount of talk incorporated. These participants supported the view of Lefstein and Snell (2014), who suggest that teachers should not see assessments and the incorporation of TTfL as incompatible. Their narratives asserted that by incorporating TTfL into their practice, the children in their class performed better in writing assessments.

In contrast, Carla, Jamilia and Remi stated that statutory assessments and the national curriculum did have an impact on their incorporation of TTfL, suggesting that TTfL and assessments may be incompatible. Remi's response indicated her frustration over time pressures from curriculum content and statutory assessments:

> There's so much you have to include now, and so quickly. There isn't really an opportunity for talk in the curriculum. The stuff that we are actually assessing the children on couldn't really care less whether they speak well, actually.

These contrasting views suggest a tension that may arise in different teachers' experiences of incorporating TTfL. The 'dilemma' of incorporating talk causing constraints for teachers was exemplified in the vocabulary used by Remi: 'You sometimes feel *guilty* if you let a lesson *stray* into a big discussion. You think, "Oh God, I'm gonna have to make this up later; there's not enough time". So, yes, the NC [national curriculum] is a time constraint'. This view echoes much of the literature, where teachers are feeling panicked in covering a wide primary curriculum (Coultas, 2015; Jay et al, 2017).

One unanticipated but significant finding from this study is that the majority of the participants did not use the Spoken Language national curriculum (Department for Education, 2014) to support their planning. This finding echoes Ball's (2003) assertion that because teachers are rewarded for performance in schools through assessment outcomes, these pressures may, in turn, influence the incorporation, or otherwise, of TTfL. It supports the literature asserting the low status the Spoken Language curriculum is given by the government (Jones, 2017). Indeed, none of the teachers voluntarily mentioned the Spoken Language national curriculum: it was only discussed when prompted. This is significant because it appears that the statutory curriculum that supports the incorporation of TTfL was not on teachers' radar, suggesting that it could be missed in planning. Some of the participants seemed confused when I asked if they planned from it. This is exemplified in Jamilia's response: 'I am blissfully unaware it (the Spoken Language curriculum) even exists. I haven't even looked recently at whatever the programme of study says about talk'. This seemed to be a common theme, with only Sally and Mo (both of whom had received CPD) being aware of the Spoken Language national curriculum at all. Nevertheless, Mo and Sally stressed that they did not use it for planning because 'writing is always the thing that we're assessed on' (Mo).

The context of this study was based on students at my higher education institution stating: 'There's no time to talk because the evidence is in the

writing'. Remi's and Jamilia's perspectives supported this insight. Remi highlighted a perceived lack of trust from the SLT, even when talk had been planned for:

> You've got to prove you use talk and record it ... you can't possibly just have it in your planning, but have to prove that it did happen. ... They want so much evidence that is written down ... sometimes talk suffers as a consequence of that.

Flitton and Warwick (2013) and Jay et al (2017) concur, reiterating the pressures that teachers can feel to provide evidence in books. These findings are despite Ofsted (2018) emphasising that evidence in books for all lessons is not a requirement. It appears that reassurance regarding the amount of evidence in books needs to be guided by the SLT, a pressure that was not cited by Mo or Sally.

In light of the overarching research question – 'What are primary school teachers' experiences of incorporating TTfL?' – the narratives highlight a variety of experiences for teachers incorporating TTfL and the range of factors teachers have to negotiate, including curriculum and assessment time pressures. CPD and SLT support appeared to link directly to those participants who reported that time pressures from curriculum and assessments did not influence their incorporation of TTfL. All of the participants communicated a clear understanding of the importance of talk being central to learning, but how TTfL was incorporated could differ according to the school's expectations, priorities and contexts.

Conclusion

This study set out to understand primary school teachers' experiences of incorporating TTfL, given my trainees' reports that this was an impossibility in the curriculum-crammed, evidence-dominant primary classroom today. The findings highlight that curriculum and assessment time pressures do not need to be incompatible with a TTfL pedagogy (Lefstein & Snell, 2014). What is clear from the findings is that the Spoken Language national curriculum (Department for Education, 2014) *does not* offer support to teachers when incorporating TTfL. Most significantly, it appears that the Spoken Language curriculum is not being planned for because it is not assessed. The findings also reveal that primary school teachers' experiences of incorporating TTfL are determined by CPD and SLT support. Whilst teacher agency in embedding TTfL in practice is evident for some, it seems that the 'go-ahead' from the SLT is what affords teachers the opportunity to embrace TTfL.

In conclusion, the study has also provided insight into the critical incident that was the stimulus for this study – namely, 'There's no time to talk because the evidence is in the writing'. The findings demonstrate that this view was echoed in some of the teachers' experiences, but that there can be another way. For the remaining narratives, incorporating TTfL was not a constraint; the

teachers were practising in a 'risk-free' environment where TTfL was an expectation in planning and teaching, and talk was perceived as a 'rich route to improving learning' (Flitton & Warwick, 2013, p. 103), where the academic, social and emotional benefits could be enjoyed by both the teachers and the pupils. This suggests that, in some teachers' experiences, the 'dilemmas' (Alexander, 2008) around incorporating TTfL could be navigated with CPD and SLT support.

Note

[1] Pseudonyms are used throughout.

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