

Teaching speaking and listening

Background and context paper

The purpose of this paper is to outline the background and the context to the development of the Secondary National Strategy's *Teaching speaking and listening* DVD ROM for English subject leaders, teachers and teaching assistants. The impetus came from a number of sources: Secondary National Strategy (SNS) English regional advisers' and local authority English consultants' classroom observations and discussions; OfSTED reports and recent research. Regional advisers and local authority consultants had noticed across the country that whereas speaking and listening was a significant feature of English lessons for all ages, it tended to be used as a tool to support and guide reading or writing, and was rarely addressed on its own merit, and even more rarely, explicitly taught or assessed. Rather, teachers seemed to expect that pupils' skills as speakers and listeners would develop simply through doing it. As Cameron (2003) says, 'In the modern era, talk has more often served as the medium of instruction rather than as its object.'

OfSTED

OfSTED, in its report *English 2000-2005: A review of inspection evidence*, states that:

Too little attention has been given to teaching the full National Curriculum programme of study for speaking and listening and the range of contexts provided for speaking and listening remains too limited. Emphasis on developing effective direct teaching approaches has led, at best, to good whole class discussion but, in too many classes, discussion is dominated by the teacher and pupils have only limited opportunities for productive speaking and listening.

One of the report's recommendations to schools is that they need to 'make sure that schemes of work give equal emphasis to the development of pupils' speaking and listening as to reading and writing.' The first part of Section 2 concentrates on speaking and listening and they comment that although it is one of the three attainment targets of the National Curriculum, it is not given 'the same attention or curriculum time as reading and writing' and that assessment of speaking and listening is not sufficiently rigorous at Key Stage 3 and that it is 'rare to find that pupils have targets for speaking and listening, although there are many for whom this is the main obstacle to achievement.' Concerning class discussion, they acknowledge the work that the National Strategies have done to emphasise whole-class direct teaching which at its best leads to 'good whole class discussion where teachers ask challenging questions, match them to pupils' ability and encourage detailed and reflective answers' but adds that such discussion is too often dominated by the teacher 'and pupils' responses are short and limited.'

Recent research

Underpinning recent research and writing about the teaching of speaking and listening by those such as Robin Alexander, Debra Myhill and Neil Mercer, is the work of Vygotsky who drew attention to the socio-linguistic importance of talk, the child's 'inner' speech and the value of language as a tool for learning. His formulation of the *zone of proximal*

development (ZPD) as ‘the gap between a child’s existing knowledge and means to solve problems unaided and the understanding he or she can reach with the guidance of a more capable peer’ (1978) is well known but has connections with and supports the process of ‘scaffolding’ which Bruner termed to describe the intervention and guidance that can be given to the learner to span this learning gap. And it is talk that is a prime resource for bridging the ZPD gap and for acting as a scaffold to independent learning.

Other influences include the investigative work into classroom talk in the late 1960s and early 1970s of Douglas Barnes, James Britton and Harold Rosen (1968), and then in the late 1980s of the National Oracy Project (1991). It is acknowledged by Neil Mercer (2000) that Barnes and Todd (1977) first used the term ‘exploratory talk’ to describe the type of discussions referred to by him and in this paper. Recent reviews of research, such as that by Myhill and Fisher (2005) supports some of OfSTED’s findings, indicating that there is a limited range and quality of speaking and listening in our classrooms. Robin Alexander considers some of the key research on talk in classrooms from the 1970s onwards and identifies what he terms a number of ‘features on the debit side’ including; the lack of ‘talk which challenges pupils to think for themselves’; the ‘dominance of closed questions’; ‘ubiquitous and unspecific praise rather than constructive feedback to inform future learning’; and the ‘rarity of autonomous pupil-led discussion and problem solving’ (Alexander 2006). Julia Sutherland (2006) in her small-scale study into promoting group talk and higher-order thinking in pupils found that ‘one of the main challenges with promoting effective group talk was refraining from dominating the group discussion.’

So far in this paper a rather bleak picture of the state of speaking and listening in classrooms has been painted and yet there are some reasons for optimism. For a start, many English teachers, as attested by OfSTED, are becoming more adept at whole-class direct teaching and small group guided work, particularly with reading and writing, and so it should be possible for those teachers to consider and adopt ways in which they can teach pupils necessary speaking and listening skills, for as Shirley Brice Heath observes (1982), for most adults ‘there are more literacy events which call for appropriate knowledge of forms and uses of speech events, than there are the occasions for extended reading and writing.’ In addition, Robin Alexander’s recent work (2001) which compares primary education in this country with that in other countries, has opened eyes to exciting alternatives to teaching talk, most notably ‘dialogic teaching’. It is dialogic teaching and dialogic talk that forms a significant part of the accompanying resource, and offers a major challenge for English teachers and those who advise and guide them, if the traditional culture of classroom talk is to change and develop to the benefit of pupils’ speaking and listening skills. Following the publication of that comparative study, Robin Alexander has supported and furthered investigative work into dialogic teaching in this country both at primary and secondary phases, and evidence from these projects (particularly in North Yorkshire and the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham) has informed the principles behind and content of certain sections of the resource.

Dialogic teaching

The roots of dialogic teaching and talk, as Myhill et al (2005) explain, probably date to Socrates in fifth century Athens, although it is clearly an extended development. Robin Alexander has been a champion of dialogic teaching as he sees the approach as an effective way to further pupils' thinking and learning through talk. He and others are critical of the traditional whole-class discussion as witnessed in many English classrooms where the pattern tends to be *Initiate* (teacher)-*Respond* (pupil)-*Feedback* (teacher) (IRF), a pattern and process controlled and dominated by the teacher and where the pupil's response is often short and lacking in any depth of thought. Alexander (2003) adds that other characteristics of this interaction process include a predominance of closed questions, pupils concentrating on identifying 'correct' answers and little speculative thinking. David Skidmore (2000) distinguished between pedagogic dialogue, the most conventional classroom discourse, and dialogic pedagogy. Pedagogic dialogue tends to be teacher-controlled closed interaction with limited opportunities for participation, reflection or extended contributions: the teacher owns the truth and corrects error. In contrast, dialogic pedagogy is a participatory mode in which the dialogue is all-important; the teacher manages the interaction and encourages children to voice their own evaluative judgements.

Dialogic teaching attempts to redress any negative aspects and influences and to give the opportunity for pupils to extend their talk and their thinking, so that talk becomes, as Alexander (2003) explains, a 'purposeful and productive dialogue where questions, answers, feedback (and feedforward) progressively build into coherent and expanding chains of enquiry and understanding.' Alexander (2006) puts forward five principles which he says bring together the essential features of dialogic teaching in the classroom:

- *Collective*: teachers and children address learning tasks together, whether as a group or as a class, rather than in isolation;
- *Reciprocal*: teachers and children listen to each other, share ideas and consider alternative viewpoints;
- *Supportive*: children articulate their ideas freely, without fear of embarrassment over 'wrong' answers; and they help each other to reach common understandings;
- *Cumulative*: teachers and children build on their own and each other's ideas and chain them into coherent lines of thinking and enquiry;
- *Purposeful*: teachers plan and facilitate dialogic teaching with particular educational goals in view.

Alexander sees clear and helpful overlaps between the dialogic approach and assessment for learning in that it allows the teacher and the pupil to see how learning is progressing and 'what needs to be done to accelerate and consolidate it' (Alexander 2006).

Dialogic teaching and talk can operate in classrooms in whole-class settings or in small groups, and can incorporate exploratory talk.

Exploratory talk

Neil Mercer's research and writings on talk have also been influential in guiding the emphases of parts of the accompanying resource, particularly that on exploratory talk. He stresses the special importance of language and thinking; 'education ought to be a means for helping learners develop ways of using language as a social mode of thinking, and this is hardly likely to be successful if their opportunities for using language are limited to narrow response slots in conversations with teachers' (Mercer 1995). He also emphasises the importance of social background and context to learning through talk and stresses the value of collaboration, with pupils needing to be taught how to collaborate. He analyses the language of pupils talking together in classrooms to come up with three ways of typifying talking and thinking:

Disputational talk, characterised by disagreement and individualised decision-making;

Cumulative talk, speakers build positively but uncritically on what the other has said. It is characterised by repetitions, confirmations and elaborations;

Exploratory talk, in which partners engage critically but constructively with each other's ideas' (Mercer 1995).

His and others' observations suggest that most classroom talk is 'disputational' or 'cumulative' and 'only involving some of the children' (Mercer 2000). Furthermore, he asserts that exploratory talk deserves special attention because it 'embodies certain principles – of accountability, of clarity, of constructive criticism and receptiveness to well-argued proposals – which are highly valued in many societies' (Mercer 1995). His full definition of exploratory talk, and the one that is used in the accompanying resource, is:

Exploratory talk is that in which partners engage critically but constructively with each other's ideas. Relevant information is offered for joint consideration. Proposals may be challenged and counter-challenged, but if so reasons are given and alternatives offered. Agreement is sought as a basis for progress. Knowledge is made publicly accountable and reasoning is visible in the talk. (Mercer 2000)

That pupils may have knowledge of some or all of the strategies to enable them to take part in exploratory talk he acknowledges, but he argues that they will still need guidance from teachers on how to use talk and work together. Mercer lends much importance to 'ground rules'; 'the conventions which language users employ to carry on particular kinds of conversations' (Mercer 2000). To assist both teachers and pupils with being prepared for effective and constructive talk, he promotes the creation, by teacher and pupils, of ground rules for talk (Mercer 2000). On the same subject, Sutherland (2006) comments that 'the teachers felt the "key challenge" with group work was helping pupils develop the necessary "implicit skills". They commented how reiterating the ground rules of group talk ... helped because "they're not in the habit of asking questions or including everyone"'.

Grammar of talk

If talk and the teaching and learning of talk are to be investigated and considered with the rigour that the written language is, then a metalanguage to describe and define its components should be useful to teachers and pupils alike. Such a metalanguage and

grammar of talk would enable fruitful discussion and investigations of talk. The QCA has made a good start in this area with its publication *Introducing the grammar of talk* (2004) which owes much to the pioneering work of Ronald Carter. The publication considers the shared language that teachers and pupils can use to describe talk, and through investigations in secondary school English classrooms, indicates how ‘systematic ways of analysing and describing spoken language have beneficial spin-offs.’

Those benefits included:

- pupils’ awareness and reflections on the nature and purpose of talk;
- particularly for EAL learners, engagement with and knowledge of grammatical features could lead to improved fluency in talk,;
- a ‘clearer understanding of how interpersonal relationships are registered through talk’;
- increased pupil awareness of differences in speech and writing.

Speaking and listening and the Secondary National Strategy

The Secondary National Strategy has a history of developing resources and guidance on speaking and listening for schools and teachers, both through its English strand and through its whole-school, cross-curricular elements. The English strand developed and published its *Framework for teaching English: Years 7, 8 and 9* (2001) which contained objectives for speaking and listening (as well as for reading and writing):

- use talk as a tool for clarifying ideas;
- use exploratory, hypothetical and speculative talk as a way of researching ideas and expanding thinking;
- work together logically and methodically to solve problems, make deductions, share, test and evaluate ideas;
- ask questions to clarify understanding and refine ideas;
- use talk to question, hypothesise, speculate, evaluate, solve problems and develop thinking about complex issues and ideas;
- recognise and build upon other people’s contributions;
- contribute to the organisation of group activity in ways that help structure plans, solve problems and evaluate alternatives. (DFEE 2001)

In the same year *English Department Training 2001* was issued which included a section on teaching speaking and listening tied to those objectives. Further publications addressing the teaching of these objectives were to follow including *Year 7 speaking and listening bank* (2001), *English Department training Year 7 2002/03* (2002), *English Department training Year 8 2002/03* (2002), *Key Objectives banks* (for Years 7, 8 and 9) (2002) and *Drama objectives bank* (2002).

Speaking and listening has also featured strongly in two other aspects of the SNS, Literacy across the curriculum (LAC) and Assessment for learning (AfL). The initial Literacy across the curriculum training (2001) contained sections on the ‘The management of group talk’ which included collaborative group talk, group size,

composition and organisation, and on 'Listening' which included identifying the different demands made on pupils and the features of teaching that develops pupils' listening skills. In *Literacy and learning* (2004) 'learning through talk' was strongly promoted in all curriculum areas through a framework of cross-curricular objectives together with teaching guidance. The AfL materials contained units on developing oral feedback, peer and self-assessment, and developing questioning and dialogue in English. In the latter are school and department case studies looking at developing a shared understanding of effective dialogue. The case studies utilise a lesson observation sheet identifying features of effective dialogue. It also includes strategies for promoting classroom dialogue and a pupil booklet outlining and exemplifying different types of questions. Both the LAC and the AfL materials contain advice and guidance on questioning.