**CLASSROOM TALK: UNDERSTANDING DIALOGUE, PEDAGOGY & PRACTICE**

**Christine Edwards-Groves, Michele Anstey & Geoff Bull**

Primary English Teaching Association of Australia, 2014

Extracts from Chapters 1 & 4

Imagine a classroom completely quiet – not one where everyone is silently working but one where nobody ever talks. How much learning is taking place and how would you know? Of course classrooms are not like this, nor would we wish them to be. However, thinking about a ‘no talk’ classroom focuses attention on just how important talk is in supporting and promoting learning, both by students and teachers. Talk plays a central role in learning; in learning how to think and in talking your way into meaning. As Emily Dickinson suggested some would say that words are transitory while she believed that words have a life beyond their utterance – the sounds may die but the meanings live on.

The problem with something as universal as talk is that ‘common sense’ beliefs about the nature of talk have come to be accepted and adopted without any basis in evidence about what actually happens in classrooms when teachers and students are, or are not, talking. It is not so long ago when teachers were evaluated by the absence of talk and the quality of the learning taking place was judged by the ‘sounds of silence’. The sounds of silence can indicate that students are productively involved in completing a task set by the teacher but it can also indicate that the system of communication set up by the teacher has shaped the roles of the student learners into passive consumption rather than active engagement. There is also an assumption that productive involvement is best conducted in silence and that talk in and around a task is of no benefit.

Conversely, classroom talk was sometimes viewed as a natural act that occurred spontaneously and, as such, required little thought, planning or rehearsal. In this view classroom talk was seen as more of an informal conversation. There is a difference between talk and conversation. This concept of talk as being natural is quite removed from the complexities of the classroom where rules for talk need to be established between teachers and students, that encourage cooperation in making meaning through talk, rather than developing a competitiveness to be heard. In some classrooms students struggle to be heard over other students and have to embark daily on bidding to give answers. Such competitiveness means that talk is not natural.

Aside from being an unnatural act, talk is far from a smooth or even a continuous process. It often flounders as individuals, either teachers or students, struggle towards meaning having travelled up blind alleys and related personal anecdotes. When students engage in this type of cooperative talk in groups, then what Booth (1988) called coproduction occurs where students draw out meanings from each other that they would not have arrived at on their own. This type of classroom talk where students explore ideas is, by its very nature, hesitant and incomplete and is what led Barnes (1976) to term it ‘exploratory talk’.

Barnes (1976) postulated that talk played a central role in learning by enabling students to increase knowledge and develop understandings about particular topics by talking their way into meaning. In this view talk allowed students to explore meaning and try out new ways of understanding and to modify existing ideas. He concluded that the value of exploratory talk was that it required the learner to be actively engaged in the learning process through deliberate participation. Such active participation depended on learners taking responsibility for their learning by asking questions, making predictions and inferences and generally being thoughtful and critical about their learning. There is, therefore, a relationship between exploratory talk and reflective and critical behaviour on the part of the learner.

It is through this critical but constructive engagement that students are able to challenge and counter-challenge thinking and to make reasoning visible in the talk. In contrast to exploratory talk Barnes proposed a second function, that of ‘presentational talk’. He suggested that in presentational talk the speaker was focused more on content and audience. In this case the talk was more of a performance where information was shared or presented rather than a context in which meaning was developed. Presentational talk was seen more as a procedural display in response to a question from the teacher where some sort of evaluation would take place and where the emphasis was on providing information in an appropriate manner. Barnes reported that much of the talk that teachers required of their students was presentational, and while not denying the value of such talk, he concluded that teachers often expected this type of talk too soon in the learning process. In other words, students were often required to engage in display before they had been allowed sufficient time to explore and digest new ideas.

These two functions of talk proposed by Barnes highlighted the role that exploratory talk played in the process of learning through talk and the role that presentational talk played in evaluation of student performance. Wells (1991) also attached importance to the exploratory nature of teacher–student and student–student talk. He suggested that teachers were commonly so focused on asking comprehension questions that they inadvertently prevented exploratory talk from developing. He called for a greater emphasis on talk among students and teachers that he termed ‘collaborative talk’.

**Features of classrooms that foster talk**

Following from these ideas, the development of these functions of talk and behaviour require the teacher to develop a pedagogy that allowed students to be responsible for, and actively construct, their own learning (at least for some of the time). It also requires establishment of a climate in the classroom where students felt encouraged to talk and where they were not constrained by a fear of making mistakes or being contradicted, but rather involved in making approximations in meanings and developing understandings.

Students will engage in talk that is constructive only when they feel at ease to do so, and when they feel that the teacher has given them permission and allowed them the space to talk. In such classrooms teachers take a step backwards so that there is not only teacher talk but also learner talk.

The shift from whole class lessons to group work was seen by many teachers as a way of facilitating collaborative and exploratory talk. However, there were a number of provisos to group work. Barnes cautioned against the idealisation of group work by suggesting that it should not be seen as a universal remedy and that not all students do well in group work. He also cautioned that the ability to think aloud and share thoughts was not universal. Earlier Wilkinson (1991) had suggested that achieving cooperative talk or consensus in group situations might be developmental in nature with younger students being more absolute in talk situations and older students more tentative and more prepared to listen to alternative opinions.

Kahn and Fine (1991) in their study of talk in group situations found that students in Years 1 to 6 judged their classmates according to ‘liked most’ or ’liked least’ according to the frequency of their talk. Interestingly, Cain (2012) also found that individuals (both children and adults) were judged favourably or unfavourably according to how much they talked in group situations. Cain also found that those individuals who spoke less frequently and were judged to be introverts exhibited higher order thinking skills than those of their more talkative, extrovert group members.

What these studies indicate is that teacher pedagogy and classroom climates are features that promote increasing amounts of student talk in everyday classrooms. The introduction of group work aids in this implementation but it is far from a straightforward process and requires careful consideration on the part of the teacher and a thorough knowledge of individual student abilities. This presents every teacher with the problem of how to allow each student the freedom to talk their way into meaning, while at the same time leading them in the desired direction. The key, according to Barnes, is to allow adequate time for student reflection so that they can ‘recollect in tranquillity’.

**Studying teacher talk in classrooms**

The early research about conceptions of classroom talk focused on teacher talk or what was sometimes called ‘recitation talk’, where pre-eminence was given to transmission of knowledge by the teacher followed by some sort of evaluation or assessment. Wells (2001) referred to this type of teacher talk as ‘monologic’ where the teacher acted as the giver of knowledge and the student as the passive receiver.

This monologic talk took the form of a monologue by the teacher where the talk was instigated by the teacher and was therefore one directional – that is from teacher to student and was typically controlled by questioning by the teacher. In the literature this has become known as IRE sequencing (Initiation by the teacher in the form of a question – Response or answer by the student – Evaluative comment by the teacher). IRE was found to be the most common type of teacher talk in many classrooms and has been described as the default option because teachers always return to it.

The research into teacher talk carried out by Wells (1999) and Mercer (1995) in the UK, Harste (1993) and Nystrand (1997) in the US and Baker and Freebody (1989a), Anstey (1993b) and Edwards-Groves (1998) in Australia, along with more recent studies by Resnick et al., (2010) and Alexander (2001), found the IRE pattern of teacher talk to be common in English/literacy lessons. The Resnick study involved studying teacher talk in science and mathematics lessons where IRE sequences were found to be as common as in English lessons.

In the Alexander study, sometimes referred to as the ‘five nations study’, teacher talk was studied in five countries (UK, France, India, Russia, US) and the same reliance on the IRE sequence was found, particularly in the UK and US and to a lesser extent in France and Russia. The common thread in all these studies was that the teacher was mediating students’ learning with little opportunity for student-initiated talk and that teacher talk was dominated by questioning. Both Wells and Alexander found this to be a ‘depressing state of affairs’ perhaps made even more so by a recent study by Smith et al., (2004) that found that only 10 per cent of teacher questions were open with the average student response lasting five seconds and limited to three words or fewer in 70 per cent of answers.

It would seem that the IRE sequence in teacher talk is a universal pattern that crosses disciplines and is common in both English-speaking and non-English-speaking countries. Just why IREs are so common in classrooms is a matter of opinion and it may be that it represents a pedagogy based on the idea that that is the way teaching has always been conducted or it may be, that it is the default option that teachers always return to in times of stress. These ideas may have some traction since recently Moyles et al., (2003), Smith et al., (2004) and Wolf and Alexander (2008) have all postulated that the ‘standardized testing drive’ in many countries has reinforced the more traditional patterns of teacher talk represented by IRE sequences, or at least encouraged teachers to abandon more interactive patterns of talk.

Whatever the case, there is a considerable amount of research confirming the ubiquitous nature of IRE sequences. There is general agreement among the researchers that these IREs can encourage monologic teacher talk that severely limits student or learner talk, that in turn affects the amount and quality of learning by students. Also Nuthall (2005) has suggested that in classrooms where IREs predominate there is clear tendency for the students with the loudest voices to be heard and valued highly (particularly by other students) and where the teacher depends on the responses from a small number of key students.

In a later study Nuthall (2007) concluded that continual responses to IRE sequences led students through their competitive bidding to supply answers to believe that learning was about being seen to be right rather than a collaborative process. However, this is not to suggest that IREs should be abandoned in favour of some other type of teacher talk. The major concern here is classrooms where the IRE sequence is the only one being used by the teacher. While it is the case that IREs limit students’ learning in particular ways (such as talking their way into understanding), there is nevertheless a place for them in certain lessons such as leading a class through a complex series of ideas.

**The reconceptualisation of classroom talk**

This all gives a somewhat negative view of what is taking place in classrooms today. Many classrooms are approaching both teacher and student talk from new perspectives based on contemporary research and reconceptions of the nature of talk and how it influences student learning and teacher pedagogy. There has been a substantial amount of research about talk and there are significant reasons why talk should play a central and fundamental role in learning. There are five areas of research that have provided evidence that supports the importance of talk and have implications for teacher practice. A summary of these areas of research is presented in the table below.

This reconceptualising of talk necessitates a re-thinking, not only of the nature of talk, but also the roles that talk plays in classrooms. In the last fifty years this shift in the way researchers have conceptualised talk and investigated it in classrooms can best be described as a shift from monologic talk to dialogic talk.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Area of Research | Evidence Provided |
| Neurological | In the early years talk assists in brain development |
| Psychological | Talk plays a central role in the development of thinking |
| Socio/cultural | Talk assists in the development of relationships and views of the world |
| Political | Democracies are based on citizens talking rather than listening and discussing rather than complying |
| Communicative | Talk is central to the development of skills that support meaning making |

**Talk That Enhances Learning**

Talk that enhances learning can be describes as dialogic talk (as opposed to monologic talk). This is defined as an approach where both teachers and students made substantial and significant contributions to classroom talk and to learning in general. Talk that enhances learning is enacted enacted when:

* teachers and students share a joint inquiry where understandings are achieved through discussion and collaboration (Bruner, 1996)
* dialogue is mediated through open-ended and exploratory classroom activity (Wells, 1999)
* communication in the classroom is reciprocal between teachers and students and between student and student and involves exchanges of ideas (Mercer, 2000)
* Talk is not only reciprocal but also collective (in group and whole class), cumulative (chaining of questions, answers and ideas) and supportive (Alexander, 2008a).
* Talk encourages students to take on particular behaviours and roles and is more likely to occur when students:
* share a common purpose
* allow each other to talk
* value each other’s talk
* ask questions as well as answering them
* reflect on their own and others’ talk
* tolerate uncertainty and tentativeness
* explore and accept differences of opinion and points of view,
* give evidence to support ideas (Myhill, 2005; Myhill et al., 2006).

Such talk attempts to engage students and teachers in a genuine dialogue in order to engage in the process of inquiry – and is termed dialogic talk. It aims to promote critical thinking and encourage higher order thinking skills. It is quite distinct from the question and answer routines that are a feature of the IRE sequence-based interactions that are commonly found in classrooms, where there is a preponderance of teacher talk and little learner talk. There is a real attempt to create authentic teacher–student exchanges through the exploration of ideas and the use of exploratory and collaborative talk.

**What about Conversation?**

Is conversation a kind of dialogic talk? Does it enhance learning? As researchers began to analyse classroom discourse, a distinction between conversation and dialogic talk arose, necessitated by a commonly held belief that the two terms were synonymous. Alexander (2005a, p. 8) suggested that conversation was a more informal type of discourse where the direction and endpoint of the talk is largely unclear, whereas in dialogic talk the teacher normally had a clear view of the purpose and direction of the talk.

Further he suggested that conversation often consisted of a sequence of unrelated two-part exchanges where participants talked at, rather than to, one another. Conversely dialogic talk was seen to set out explicitly to seek attention and engagement and was therefore much more likely to contain meaningful sequences than conversation. As Wolfe and Alexander (2008) suggest conversation tends to be relaxed whereas dialogic talk is more purposeful and coherent.

**Dialogic talk and ‘vacating the floor’**

If talk is to be truly dialogic then student talk has to be appreciated as equally important as teacher talk by both teachers and students. If this position is to be adopted in a classroom then the teacher has to be very conscious of the use of IRE sequences. IRE sequences allow no space for student talk that is generated by the students themselves because they are too focused on answering of teacher questions (as is the teacher).

Dialogic talk requires the teacher to take a step back and provide opportunities for students to instigate talk in a classroom environment where they feel comfortable to do so. In the research on classroom talk this has been termed ‘vacating the floor’ (Bridges, 1988; Cazden, 1988; Perrott, 1988). Vacating the floor has come to be seen as one of the most significant factors in encouraging students to engage in exploratory talk and to take on some responsibility for shaping meaning through talk. In a contemporary study of the patterns of classroom talk, Godinho and Shrimpton (2003), concluded that vacating the floor created spaces for student dialogue and shared ownership of the talk where shared meaning making could take place between teachers and students.

Further Godinho and Shrimpton (2003, p. 38) stated that such a move authorised students to become more analytical while still allowed teachers to be facilitators and mediators of meaning through talk and promoted a ‘collaborative inquiry approach’ to develop. Later in the study Godinho and Shrimpton reported that in classrooms where teachers had not vacated the floor students struggled to recall important points in discussions and that many teachers found this move difficult. Finally they identified in their study, three factors upon which classroom talk is dependent that might go some way to supporting teachers in a move towards vacating the floor:

* familiarisation of what constitutes a discussion by both teacher and student
* introduction by the teacher of strategies that encourage dialogic talk
* development of a pedagogy built upon a collaborative inquiry approach.

Teacher knowledge about what constitutes dialogic talk can be instrumental in supporting them to take the step towards vacating the floor. Mercer (2000) suggested that general agreement about the rules for talk was useful in creating a classroom environment where students could focus more on collaboration and acclimatising to having a voice of their own and less on competitive bidding for teacher attention.

Mercer (2000, p. 98) also identified three types of talk that occurred in discussions:

* disputational talk’ that is competitive and is characterised by unwillingness to accept alternative points of view
* cumulative talk’ that builds on others’ talk
* exploratory talk’ that allows students to explore new ideas.

Obviously the more a teacher knows about how talk is conducted and what is involved in discussions, the more likely they are to be willing and confident to vacate the floor.

**Advantages of dialogic talk**

Alexander (2005b, p. 15) reported a number of positive outcomes from his work on talk in the UK that was a reflection of his earlier conclusions in his five nations study (2001). Among these outcomes was evidence that suggested a focus on dialogic talk led to:

* more talk about talk by both teachers and students
* a discernible shift away from hands-up competitive bidding towards more in-depth discussion
* teachers giving more thinking time to students to answer questions
* a replacement of IREs with questioning sequences that contained more open questions,
* a greater involvement of less able students and the quiet students due to the more inclusive climate of their classrooms
* An increase, due to a greater emphasis on talk, in the reading and writing abilities of all students, especially the less able.

Alexander also reported an increasing use of videotaping of lessons by teachers in order to study their talk with some teachers using the videos to include students in analysis of classroom talk. Of particular interest were Alexander’s findings that students were increasingly commenting on the dynamics of the classroom such as taking turns, engaging with others, appreciating alternative points of view and use of eye contact.

Wolfe and Alexander (2008) and Mercer and Littleton (2007) all reported that when students were involved in dialogue and discussion, they were more likely to engage in critical discussion, learn more effectively and raise the levels of their intellectual achievement. Similar advantages were advanced by Scott (2009) who cited a study by Game and Metcalfe (2009) that concluded that dialogic talk enabled students to engage in levels of thinking that they were not capable of on their own while still recognising that such thoughts were developments of their own thinking.

Scott suggested that these types of collaboration could occur in interactions at whole class, group or one-on-one situations. Alexander (2005b) in discussing his five nations research concluded that students did not have to be directly involved in such interactions in order to benefit rather just watching other students engage in dialogue was sufficient.

An interesting contemporaneous development to this research was reported by Wolfe and Alexander (2008) who cited studies (eg Ravenscroft & McAlister, 2008 and Ravenscroft & Cook, 2007) that highlighted the potential of digital technologies to produce a series of forums that were more personalised and informal, where interactions might take place. Such examples are internet networks that allow students to interact in forums (or what could be called communities of learners or communities of inquiry) where they can engage in dialogue.

There seems little doubt that the benefits of engaging in dialogic talk are many and varied and that there are advantages to be gained for both teachers and students.

**Dialogic Talk & Learning**

Dialogic Talk supports a constructionist view of learning. The basic tenets of constructionism revolve around the following ideas about learning:

* meaning cannot simply be taught but must also be learnt
* learning involves students in an active process rather than passive reception of ideas
* content is learnt most successfully when students are sometimes involved in uncovering ideas instead of always responding to teacher-led coverage
* students need to learn knowledge and skills but they also need to learn to critically question
* learning involves actively constructing new ways of understanding in order to construct a personal view of the world
* working on understanding involves relating new understandings with existing ones by incorporating students’ interests
* constructing new understandings takes place most effectively when students are not afraid to be tentative and prepared to make mistakes
* while constructionism can be described as learner-centred it still requires explicit instruction by the teacher and therefore is also teacher-centred.

Constructionism is so termed because an important component of this view of learning is that students are required to be involved in structuring their own learning. However, it would be a mistake to interpret this view as an invitation for teachers to take such a step backwards or to no longer see a role for themselves in teaching.

Constructionism (also called: learning by discovery, inquiry learning, learning by doing or problem-based learning) is based on, among other things, the concept of differentiated learning where a balance is struck between teacher-centred and student-centred pedagogy. Nevertheless it is much more concerned with allowing students to play a role in their own learning. It is this feature that makes it an appropriate pedagogy for dialogic teaching where the concern for student talk, as well as teacher talk, is paramount.