

Classroom talk and teaching

The **‘Classroom talk and teaching’** reading offers an introduction to the importance of effective talk in the classroom. Differences between dialogue and ‘just talk’ are also considered, as are indicators of dialogic teaching.

Please acknowledge the source of this information in all subsequent use.



Introduction

Talk is the teacher’s most important tool. Teachers use talk for a wide range of purposes, but three decades of research in a wide variety of Anglo-American schools indicates relatively consistent patterns in the whole class teaching observed, in which teachers primarily use talk for providing information, checking understanding and maintaining control (Cazden 2001; Edwards & Westgate 1994; Galton, Hargreaves, Comber and Pell, 1999; Mehan, 1979; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975; Smith, Hardman, Wall & Mroz, 2004). All of these uses of talk by the teacher are absolutely necessary in a classroom. But the research also indicates that, in using them, teachers can often dominate classroom interaction; and as a result, pupils in these classes talk much less than the teacher, for shorter durations and in many cases only in response to teacher prompts.

In considering uses of talk for instructional purposes (rather than for behaviour management), it’s useful to think beyond the dominant purposes of providing information and checking understanding that are highlighted above. In your own classroom you’ll be aware that you also use talk for such purposes as linking present activities to past experience, setting up future activities, relating existing ideas to new educational frames of meaning and

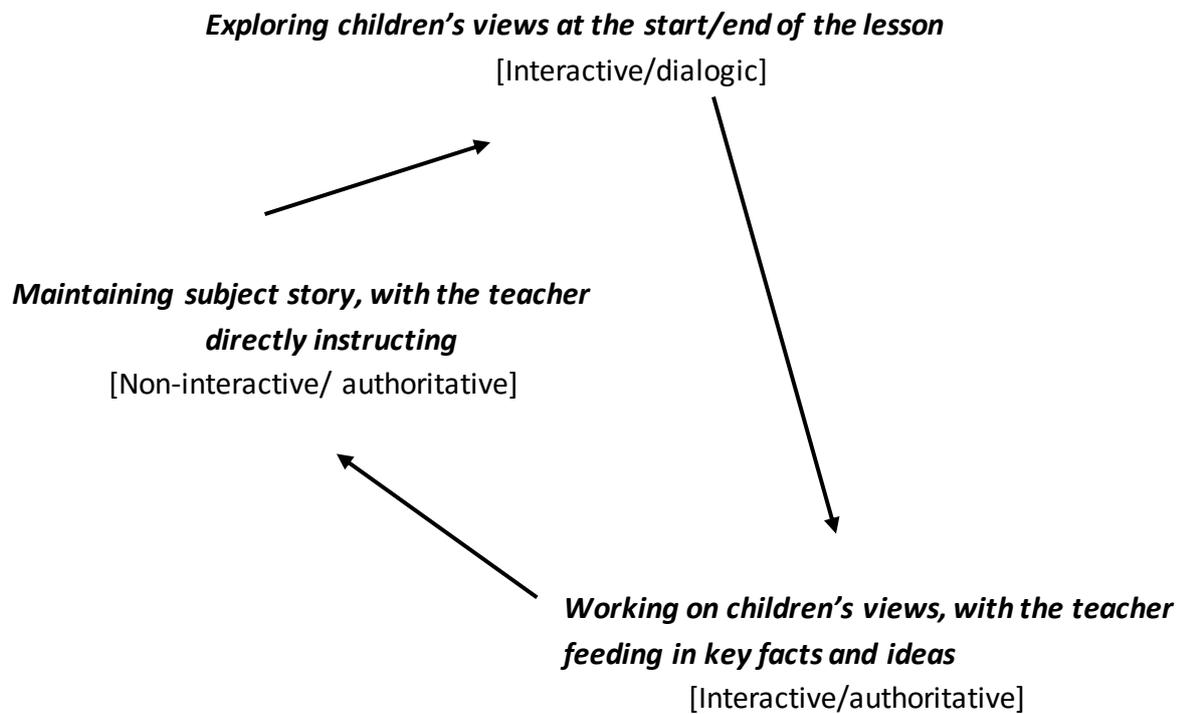
modelling educated ways of using language. These might be thought of as higher order uses of talk, and the last one in particular has strong associations with the kinds of interactions that might happen during dialogue. When language is used in an educated manner you might expect:

- To hear questions being used that support thinking
- To hear pupils being encouraged to elaborate or add detail
- To hear both teachers and pupils challenging the thinking of members of the class
- To hear pupils being asked to give reasons, justify what they assert and speculate
- To hear people negotiating their position and changing their mind

In this sense dialogue is more than 'just talk'. It involves teachers and learners commenting and cumulatively building on each other's ideas, posing questions and constructing interpretations together (Alexander, 2008); it means being able to articulate ideas seen from someone else's perspective; it is characterised by chains of (primarily open) questions and answers; it may be sustained over the course of a single lesson or across lessons; and it builds on the idea of 'exploratory talk', where learners construct shared knowledge and are willing to change their minds and critique their own ideas (Mercer, 2000).

So you can see that dialogue is talk with a very distinct character and purpose, designed to enable people to 'interthink' (Mercer, 2000; Littleton and Mercer, 2013) and come to an understanding of one another's knowledge and perspectives. Thus, classroom dialogue might be thought of as collective, reciprocal, supportive, cumulative and purposeful. There is now robust evidence (Mercer, Dawes, Wegerif & Sams, 2004; Rojas-Drummond, Littleton, Hernández & Zúniga, 2010) showing a direct relationship between individual and collective academic outcomes and teaching that has dialogic characteristics (Alexander, 2012). Importantly, in a systematic review of research conducted during the 40 years up to 2011, Howe and Abedin (2013) found positive associations between student learning and extended and cumulative responses in group dialogue; and they also found that the expression of competing viewpoints and working towards agreement through talk are associated with conceptual development.

As we have made clear, dialogue is not the only type of talk that should be going on in the classroom. Some activities lend themselves very well to a dialogic approach – for example, opening up a topic, exploring initial ideas, problem solving, critical thinking and reasoning – whilst other classroom activities require a different approach. In other words, a dialogic approach is part of an overall teaching repertoire. It is useful here to consider the work of Mortimer and Scott (2003). They show that sometimes the teacher will want to be dialogic, opening up topics for the class to explore. At other times, they will want to be authoritative, guiding children towards a specific understanding of an idea. Even within a single lesson, there are likely to be 'dialogic' and 'authoritative' elements, depending on the teaching intention. So a lesson may look something like this:



The important point, however, is that dialogue is comparatively rare in classrooms even where the task, context or lesson segment is crying out for a dialogic approach. Thus, the type of talk that needs greatest development in many classrooms is dialogue.

Things to consider

Dialogic teaching not only harnesses the power of talk to stimulate and extend students' thinking and advance both their collective and individual learning and understanding; it also helps the teacher to more precisely diagnose students' needs, frame their learning tasks and assess their progress. And it empowers the student for lifelong learning and active citizenship (Mercer, Warwick & Ahmed, 2016).

In looking for indicators of dialogic teaching in a classroom we would expect to see many of the following:

- Questions are structured to promote thoughtful answers, and feedback informs, encourages and leads thinking forward
- Extended answers are encouraged; children are asked to give reasons for their responses

- Children are encouraged to ask questions and comment on the views of others
- Responses are seen as the building blocks for further questions and comment, rather than always as end points
- Exchanges are chained into coherent and deepening lines of enquiry, helping the children to discern meaning
- There is a balance between encouraging participation and extending understanding
- Turns are managed by shared routines rather than 'bidding'
- Listening is important; those who are not speaking are actively participating
- Mistakes, errors and mis-understandings are 'allowed'
- Classroom organisation, climate and relationships is positively encouraging of the above





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