**Classroom Dialogue**

**Tony Brown (2013)**

Children need to talk and teachers need to listen.

The *Five Nations Study* is a large scale research study of primary classroom dialogue. Its focus was *dialogic teaching*, which is a classroom teaching approach where both children and teachers make substantial contributions to classroom talk, not only in terms of quantity but also, more importantly, in terms of quality. The result is that children’s thinking is significantly developed (Mercer & Littleton, 2007).

(Alexander, 2005) identifies a number of elements. Dialogic teaching:

- is collective and collaborative;
- is a supportive and genuinely reciprocal interchange between all those in the classroom;
- involves carefully structured verbal interactions that are gradually extended in length by teacher intervention;
- is promoted by the teacher to build understanding through accumulated experience;
- makes children’s own words prominent;
- ensures that children’s thoughts, ideas, speculations and arguments feature strongly.

Discussion in dialogic classrooms is very different from the more common classroom routines created by teachers who seek to encourage question and answer sessions. In the most common classroom routines, the teacher asks the questions – mostly *closed* – and expects students to bid competitively for the teacher’s attention and the opportunity to give a single response. This is intended to result in relatively brief answers, so that the teacher can test individual children’s responses to questions based on a particular focus.

In contrast, dialogic teaching is characterised by fairly long interactions. Some of these will be between a teacher and a child or a group of children. More significantly, perhaps, the teacher creates opportunities for extended dialogue between members of a group without much adult intervention. This means that groups of children are very familiar with working collaboratively and supportively. It is the children, as well as the teacher, who take responsibility for ensuring everyone is involved in decision-making, sharing viewpoints and being heard in discussions.

Dialogic interactions occur in a variety of ways: during whole class, group or one-on-one settings. The purpose is to help the individual child to work with ideas, practise thinking, present their thoughts and ideas to an audience and build understanding through externalised talk that describes the concepts they are working with.

Teachers who adopt this approach do so as a permanent feature of the classroom, not as a single lesson or a short-practice ‘training’ slot. Dialogic teaching demands full commitment. During these interactions teachers take on a meta-role, monitoring the extent to which children need dialogic practices to be modelled for them. Teachers combine the teaching of the maths topic with explicitly taught strategies that children can adopt to support reasoning, enquiry and negotiation.

The theoretical base for dialogic teaching is the argument that human intelligence develops primarily through listening and speaking. Our ability to communicate and discuss our thoughts, feelings and ideas is in large part, seen as determining the quality of our lives. Speech (both internal and external) is intrinsic to
literacy and to the human relationships we form with others. According to (Fisher, 2007) dialogue is the basis of verbal and emotional intelligence.

The *Five Nations Study* was conducted in five countries – England, the US, France, India and Russia (Alexander, 2000). The study focused on primary classroom practice and had a special focus on classroom talk. The study showed that there were many points of similarity across the different participants. Dialogic teaching methods featured most strongly in French and Russian classrooms and the children in these classrooms clearly benefited in terms of classroom behaviour and learning and social development.

Vygotsky (1962) theorises that when children participate in guided interactions with more experienced peers and adults, they more quickly acquire the “mental tools” required by their culture. Lave and Wenger’s (1991) work on the benefits of *communities of enquiry* also suggests gains for children’s learning in language-rich environments. Vygotsky argues that language tools begin as social products (i.e., external to the young child) but are internalised as the child gains language skills and then uses language to create thought.

“Scaffolding” is a widely used term for describing the activities of the teacher and more experienced peers in supporting learning. The more experienced person can use language, activities and emotional warmth to guide the child’s persona, linguistic and cultural construction of the ideas, skills and processes that are the focus of learning. Alexander’s research shows the extent to which the teacher’s purposeful classroom dialogue promotes this process of sharing knowledge and skills with the “apprentice”. Dialogue creates new ideas and conditions for learners, whereby they have new thoughts that they might not have been able to create at the time, through independent working and thinking.

Talk is the main mode for instruction in schools. In mathematics, as in many other subjects, much of the content is abstract and needs description, explanation and metaphor to help make the abstract concepts more tangible. However, in contrast to many subjects taught in school, maths lends itself to showing as well as telling, but much of the telling is procedural and connected to “showing-types” of activity: this is how you complete an addition calculation, this is how to use the number line for subtraction, this is how to use an angle measure, etc.

Evidence for the essential role of dialogue comes not just from large-scale classroom studies like Alexander’s, but also from recent brain research. There is evidence of critical changes in the brains of young children, which take place on a scale that declines significantly as the child approaches adulthood.

Language-rich environments:

- have a physical impact on the young child’s brain;
- modify the shape of the brain and the neural connections;
- cause an expansion of brain power;
- stimulate the development of cells;
- stimulate new neural connections;
- enhance the capacity for learning, memorisation and emotional responses to learning;
- stimulate new language acquisition.

There is evidence from psychological studies that language and thought are intimately related. The forms and contexts of language to which children are exposed have a powerful influence on their cognitive development. Childhood learning is essentially a process whereby children learn about social, cognitive and emotional interactions. Children construct meaning most effectively in language-rich contexts where their
contribution is “scaffolded” to ensure full participation. They make sense of their world most effectively when what they already know is challenged and modified by what they newly encounter. Discourse provides the most effective medium for making connections between the two.

From a political perspective, the core values of dynamic, democratic societies include the freedom to engage in listening, questioning, debating, arguing and justifying one’s thinking, tolerating the views of others, presenting and evaluating ideas, etc. These are the crucial skills that children need to develop through their daily practice in classrooms that emphasise dialogic teaching. They are also the activities that nurture learning. Democracies are weakened when their citizens are denied opportunities to exercise these skills, where listening, debating and freedom of thought are substituted for compliance.

Despite the research evidence that demonstrates the crucial role of classroom discourse, in too many classrooms it is the teachers who still do most of the talking and children who do most of the listening. For many children, their contribution to classroom talk occupies no more than a few seconds in every hour. Only rarely do teachers’ questions help children to complete or elaborate their ideas. Most of the children’s exchanges in classrooms are very short, and verbal responses in many classrooms last on average no more than 5 seconds, often limited to three words or fewer.

The Five Nations Study shows that where teachers supported dialogue in their classrooms, they also expressly taught children a number of important strategies to help them engage fully in extended dialogue. Teachers in these classrooms deliberately train the children in dialogic techniques as the lessons progress. They don’t just hope that dialogue will somehow break out in the classroom.

Children need guidance on improving expressiveness, the volume and clarity of voice, the need for precision in vocabulary, grammar and syntax, and the acquisition of the distinctive terminology needed in maths and other subjects. Children need to have more than one register: not just a friendly conversational or colloquial style. There is a need for children to have access to a full dialogic style. They develop this best when it is modelled by the teacher, and where they have opportunities in every lesson to practice refining different registers for different purposes.

Dialogic discussion does not a lessening of teacher involvement: far from it. It is not a laissez-faire approach. It is the role of the teacher that changes to ensure:

- the teacher focuses on the enhancement of dialogic techniques;
- teacher talk is reduced and student talk increased;
- teacher talk includes guidance to children on the use of dialogic techniques;
- the teacher works hard to develop the learning process by skilful interactions and interventions that promote dialogue;
- children are not left to discover important ideas, concepts and ways of interacting by chance.

Lave and Wenger’s (1991) legitimate peripheral participation is a useful tool for analysing children’s behaviour in the dialogic classroom. The Five Nations Study shows that children do not have to be directly involved in all dialogic exchanges to benefit from them. They need to be taught that active observation akin to LPP is a legitimate activity, provided that they are intellectually engaged with what is happening, by:

- watching another child participating in a dialogue with a teacher;
- closely observing a more knowledgeable peer;
- hearing peers discuss their thoughts about a concept, expressed in their own language;
• watching their peers discussing and coming to know new ideas.

The teacher’s role is to assert the value of LPP, to suggest ways in which a child can observe legitimately from a peripheral position, and to encourage this practice. When children have the opportunity to work as observers on the edge of other children’s activity, they learn to internalise the tools that their peers are using, and make them a part of their own knowledge and understanding.

Evidence from research (Nuthall, 2007) is clear that competitive bidding between children for a few seconds of time in which to answer the teacher’s questions does little to develop learning. But this state of affairs characterises traditional classroom question and answer routines, which are usually dominated by children who Nuthall describes as “key students”.

When children’s experiences are dominated by competitive attempts to participate in classroom talk, they learn:

• that there is little opportunity for most children to become involved;
• learning is a competitive activity in which they need to beat their peers;
• that learning is about being seen to have the right answer;
• that learning is an individual activity, not a collaborative, mutually supportive one.

By contrast, children who are fortunate to work in classrooms where dialogic discussion is effectively managed by skilful teachers are shown that learning is not a competitive task, but a collaborative one, where they are expected to receive and give peer support. Alexander (2006) emphasises this by describing dialogic teaching as; collective, reciprocal, supportive, cumulative and purposeful.

This time we are going to be sorting numbers. So that’s our objective – sorting numbers.

[Teacher takes on role of child with a grumpy expression] I’m going to work with Donal and Alan today and in my group I’ve decided I’m going to sort the numbers by multiples of three, and I don’t care what they think.

What’s the matter, Maya?

You should, um, decide as a group.

Oh super. There’s one of our ground rules already, “Decide as a group”. OK, how am I going to do that? Because I want to sort my numbers by multiples of three. How am I going to make sure that we decide as a group?

Ask them what they think. Also, when you ask them what they think, don’t turn your back on them because that is not positive body language.

You mentioned positive body language. What other type of language do we need to make sure is positive? Not just our body language.

The way we talk.

The way we talk! Am I going to say “I’m going to sort these in multiples of three!”?

No

Maya, what would you say if you were in my situation?

Um, “I want to sort them by multiples of three. What do you think about it?”

OK. I am wandering around the classroom . . . I wonder what I might hear you saying.
What do you think?

What do you think? Brilliant.

Why do you think that?

Why do you think that? That’s another good one, not just what but why you think that. Brilliant!

From: (Mercer & Littleton, 2007)

Where children are offered opportunities to make substantial contributions to classroom talk, they are able to develop and practise a range of important speaking and thinking skills. These include the ability to:

- narrate;
- explain;
- instruct;
- ask different kinds of question;
- receive, act and build upon answers;
- analyse and solve problems;
- speculate and imagine new possibilities;
- explore and evaluate ideas;
- discuss, argue, reason and justify;
- negotiate.

In addition children develop four essential abilities for interacting productively:

- listening;
- being receptive to alternative viewpoints;
- thinking about what they hear;
- giving others time to think.

The following excerpt demonstrates the communication skills of children in fifth grade working as a maths group:

S1 Five, seven and five equals twelve. So put five.

S2 Do you agree?

S3 Yes, and then we need to sort this out.
   [A little later]

S1 I know, why don’t we use the seven again?

S3 What do we do now?

S1 What do you think we should do now?

S2 I don’t know, it’s too hard. I have never done this before.

S3 I haven’t done this before.

S1 What can we remember? A blank square. All I remember is numbers. Eight plus one is nine.

From: (Mercer & Littleton, 2007)

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References


