

Why Classroom Talk?

Michael Halliday (1993) states that 'when children learn language they are not simply engaging in one type of learning among many; rather, they are learning the foundations of learning itself'.

As educators, we know that learning is social and that peer interactions help extend understanding.

Robin Alexander (2000) affirms that: "Dialogic teaching harnesses the power of talk to stimulate and extend students' thinking and advance their learning and understanding".

"You can't give students simply what you know. Learners have to take it and make it their own and discussion is central to that."

"Oral rehearsal separates the formulating of a sentence from the very difficult demand of writing it as it helps students try out better possibilities for eventual writing. Writing aloud is a key component of writing better."

Prof. Debra Myhill

What is Oral Communication?

Oral skills – both speaking and active listening – are at the very foundation of literacy. Classroom talk helps students to learn, to reflect on what they are learning, and to communicate their knowledge and understanding.

Active listening is effective participation in a conversation. It is an activity which helps the speaker become understood. The listener must actually hear what is said. A passive listener is attentive but does nothing to assist the speaker. Active listeners sit or stand alertly, maintain eye contact with the speaker, concentrate on the speaker's words, make verbal responses, and summarise parts of what has been said when clarity is needed.

Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) professor of Applied Linguistics, asserts that "the world in language is half someone else's. It becomes one's own when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention." For example, we often think we did a great job teaching a topic to students but wonder why they haven't learned. The key is for students to take ownership of what they hear and discuss it with each other.

Nystrand (1997) believes that, "well-structured oral and collaborative activities maintain children's time on task more consistently than do solitary written and text based

Students will fail to develop academic language and discourse if they are not afforded the classroom opportunities. Hearing the words but not using them can be a flawed methodology."

Fisher, Frey & Rothenberg

tasks. Where students verbally share intentions, ideas and experiences, real learning will take place.”

Douglas Barnes (1976) makes the case that “we need to give much greater attention to the processes if we are to ensure that the products are of lasting value” and he continues, “the purpose of schooling is not to acquire large quantities of (inert) knowledge-the banking model-but rather increase continually one’s understanding in order to act effectively and responsibly when faced with challenging situations. To do this, classroom exploratory talk is essential.”

*“Reading and writing
float on a sea of talk”.*

*“Talk is the foundation
of literacy”*

James Britton, 1993

The Flanders Report (1970) found that, “teachers of high achieving students spend about 55% of classroom time speaking, compared with 80% for teachers of low achieving students”. It is clear from the research that there is a symbiotic relationship between listening, speaking, reading and writing. As Britton (1993) puts it, “telling does not equate to learning”.

Oral language requires focused attention on planning. Altering the ratio of teacher to student talk, doesn’t just happen. Rather, it occurs through both believing in the importance of student talk and planning with a clear purpose and expectations.

*“Teachers rely primarily on questioning to check for understanding, but students need time for dialogue to assimilate **their** understanding. We want students not simply to respond but to analyse, synthesize and evaluate. We get critical thinking where we encourage discourse”. Durkin (1978)*

According to the *Ontario Curriculum for Language Academy*, “oral communication skills - speaking and listening - are fundamental for the development of literacy and essential for thinking and learning. Through talk and listening, students explore and come to understand ideas and concepts; identify and solve problems; organise their experience and knowledge and express and clarify their thoughts, feelings and opinions. Listening and speaking skills are essential for life.”

*“Oral communication
skills are essential both
in the classroom and in
society.”*

Sarah Jane Henderson

There are three parts to Oral Communication in the specification that are important and integrated: **speaking, listening and reflecting**.

James Flood (1991) highlights how research suggests that emphasis in the classroom should be on how to use language effectively in a variety of contexts and oral communication should form part of all lessons. Rahman (2010) also noted that “activity based teaching where there is purposeful talk, will result in students more actively engaging and developing a greater understanding of what is being taught”.

A culture is mediated by its language and it is through language - especially spoken - that teachers teach and students learn. In Blackwell (2001) published “Culture and Pedagogy” which was the account of a research project over four years in five countries. The findings concluded that children need a rich diet of spoken language in order to think and learn and that talk is arguably the true foundation of learning. Talk, unless it

has memorable, rhetorical or emotive power, fades to a remembered sensation. We tend therefore to be less reflective about what is said than what is written and consequently, lower educational status is ascribed to talk than to writing. After students have explored ideas through discussion they are told, now write it and when learning and understanding are assessed, it is on the basis of what they have written. Writing is therefore viewed as “real” school work.

Teaching in the 60s was influenced by the Piagetian idea of the child as a lone scientist who develops cognitively by interacting with stimulus materials, but by the 80s this approach was challenged by the Vygotskian view that the child needed to engage through the medium of spoken language with adults, other children and the wider culture. Children construct meaning not only with interplay of what they newly encounter but also from verbal interaction. The “others” with whom children interact, assume a critical role in the process of cognitive ‘scaffolding’ - a term first coined by Wood, Bruner and Ross (1970). Learning and development are not synonymous. Children do learn regardless of interaction of parents etc., but learning to a ‘specific, cultural purpose, requires scaffolding.

Barnes found that when students are directly involved, and have a ‘sense of agency’, in the ongoing activity, they are more interested and motivated to engage in dialogue because it is then that they have something that they want to contribute. Learning should never truly be passive, but should be active learning where students engage with students to help reinterpret their own meanings.

“Children must think for themselves before they truly know and understand, and teaching must provide them with linguistic opportunities and encounters that will enable them to do so”.

Bruner (1996) - ‘The Culture of Education’.

“Understanding is fostered through discussions and collaboration”.

Jerome Bruner

“Talk is the foundation stone of all learning.”

Debra Myhill