

# It's only words: why classroom talk is important

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From recent research in neuroscience, psychology, sociolinguistics and education we know that:

Language is an integrated function of the ‘social brain’....

... but we all have to learn how to use language well

Children’s language competences and reasoning abilities develop through their interactions with others

Levels of confidence and skill in using spoken language can affect young people’s life chances

(Mercer, 2019; Mercer & Mannion, 2018)

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The amount and quality of the conversation children experience at home:

- (a) varies enormously
- (b) is a good predictor of their eventual academic attainment

Hart & Ridley (1995)

Roy, Chiat & Dodd (2014)

Gibson et al. (2020)

**School offers the only chance for many children to develop a full repertoire of talk skills**

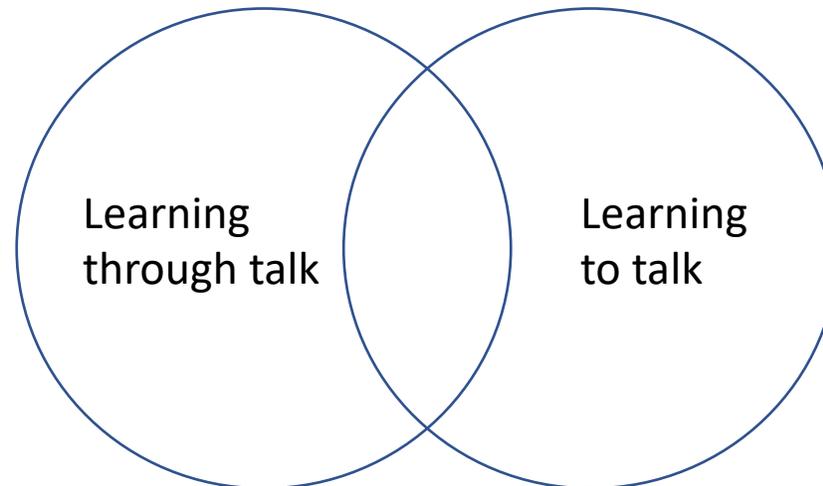
# Two themes

**Learning through talk**

**Learning to talk**

**Using talk for teaching and learning**

**Developing children's oracy skills**



# 1. Talk for teaching and learning

Does the the way teachers use talk affect the quality of education?



Research has shown that talk about literary texts which promotes students' comprehension skills has the following characteristics:



- teachers reformulate and summarise what students say, which provides an opportunity for other students to build on these ideas;
- teachers encourage students to put the main idea in their own words;
- teachers press the students for elaboration of their ideas, e.g. 'How did you know that?'

(Wolf, Crosson & Resnick, 2006. See also Nystrand, 2006; Myhill et al., 2006.)

# The Cambridge Classroom Dialogue research project

(2015 – 2017: 72 teachers in 48 UK primary schools)

Students (aged 10-11) improved significantly more on statutory tests of Maths and English when teachers did *all* of the following...

1. achieved **high levels of participation** in classroom dialogue  
(e.g. numerous children contribute to a whole class discussion and discuss each other's ideas)
2. encouraged children to **elaborate** their ideas;  
(e.g. 'Can you explain a bit more what you mean by that?')
3. encouraged the **questioning** of ideas by students,  
(e.g. 'Do you agree that Tom is right?')
4. organised productive **group work**

Howe, C., Hennesy, S., Mercer, N. Vrikki, M. & Wheatley, L. (2019)

# The EEF Dialogic Teaching Project

(2014-2017, 80 primary teachers in 78 UK primary schools)

Students (aged 9-10) of teachers who were trained to teach ‘dialogically’ gained significantly better results on standardised tests of Maths, Science and English than students of teachers who were not trained

“The consistent results across subjects suggest that the approach may improve children’s overall thinking and learning skills rather than their subject knowledge alone.”

(Education Endowment Foundation Evaluation Report)

<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/projects/dialogic-teaching/>

(Alexander, 2020)

# What are the implications for classroom practice?

Available evidence suggests that teachers should...

- balance **authoritative presentation** with **interactive dialogue**
- During whole class dialogue, encourage many students to **participate**, to question ideas, express their thoughts and reveal their misunderstandings
- use authoritative presentation **contingently** to take account of what students do and do not know
- integrate **teacher-led activity** with well-organised **collaborative learning**

(Alexander, 2020; Mortimer & Scott, 2004; Howe et al., 2019; Nystrand, 2006; Mercer & Dawes, 2016; Resnick et al., 2015; Wells 1999)

## Year 5 science: whole class talk : 'Why does the moon change shape?'



## Year 5 science: whole class talk : 'Why does the moon change shape?'

**Teacher:** Keighley, would you read out number nine for us?

**Keighley:** *(reads)* 'The moon changes shape because it is in the shadow of the earth.'

**Teacher:** Right, now what does your group think about that?

**Keighley:** True.

**Teacher:** What, why do you think that?

**Keighley:** Hm, because it's when earth is dark then, hm, not quite sure but we think it was true.

**Teacher:** Right, people with hands up *(to Keighley)* Who would you want to contribute?

**Keighley:** Um, Sadie?

**Sadie:** I think it's false because when the sun moves round the earth, it shines on the moon which projects down to the earth.

**Teacher:** *(to Sadie)* That sounds good. Do you want to choose somebody?

**Sadie:** Matthew.

**Matthew:** Well, we weren't actually sure cos we were thinking if the actual moon changes which it never does - or if it is our point of view from earth which it puts us in the shadow.

**Teacher:** That's a good point isn't it, it doesn't actually change, it looks as if it changes shape to us, that's a really good point.

## Year 5 science: 'Authoritative Presentation' whole-class follow-up session



**Teacher:** Right, put your hands down, I want you to listen now...

Look, if the sun's shining from here (*holds tennis ball behind the globe*) on earth what we can see is a big circle, a big full shiny moon. Right? That's a full moon.

However, have a look now, what happens now. If I put the moon here...

(*holds tennis ball between lamp and globe*)...is there any light from the sun falling on the moon that we would be able to see from earth?

**Children:** No

*[session continues in similar fashion]*

Mercer, Dawes & Kleine Staarman, 2009/2019

## 2. Developing children's oracy skills

Should schools give more attention to developing young people's spoken language skills?



(The term 'Oracy' was coined by Wilkinson, 1965)

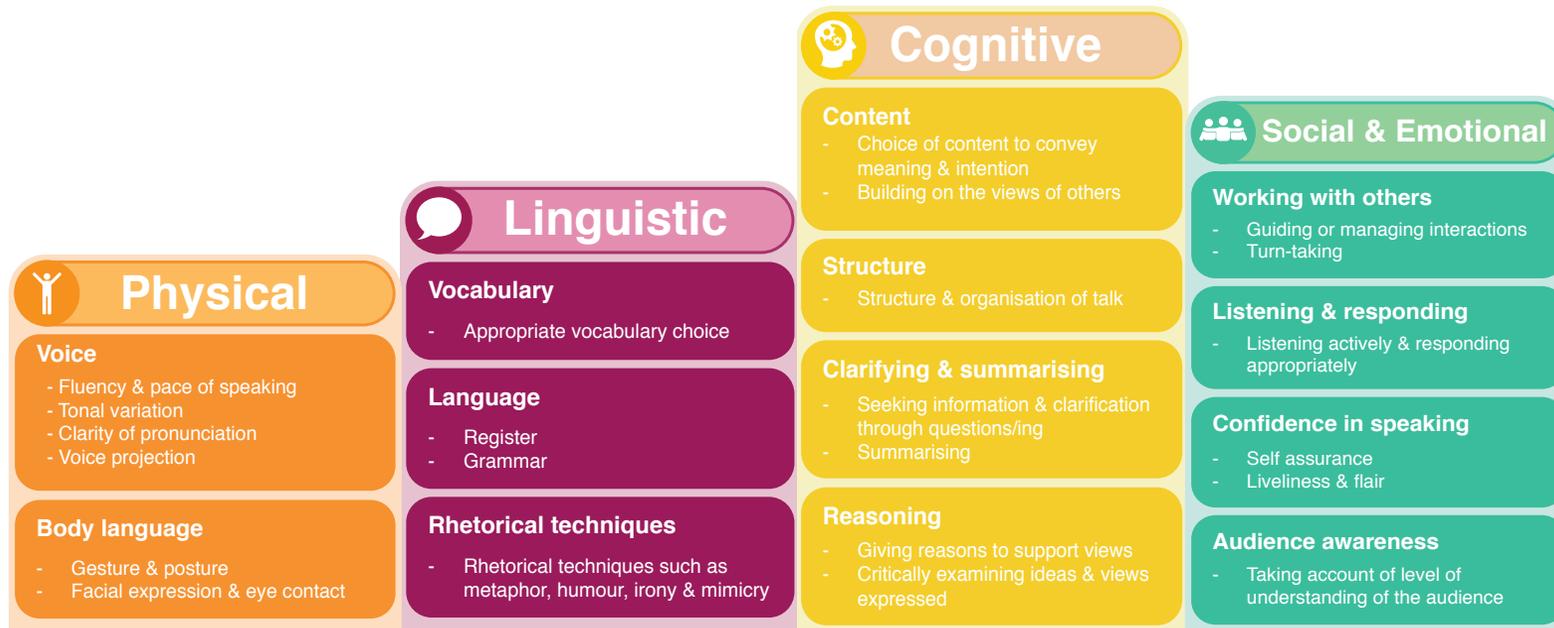
# Spoken language skills will enable young people to..

- teach and learn
- make speeches and presentations
- engage in debates
- take part in reasoned discussions
- engage fully with wider society
- become critical aware of how language is used to influence and persuade

# The Oracy Skills Framework

## Oracy: The Four Strands

Use the oracy framework to understand the physical, linguistic, cognitive, and social and emotional skills that enable successful discussion, inspiring speech and effective communication.



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# Spoken language skills can be taught explicitly

## Oracy education means...

- explicitly teaching children how to use spoken language effectively, across a range of situations
- assessing their strengths and weaknesses, and monitoring progress
- encouraging children to use their language skills for learning in every subject

## Oracy education does *not* mean

- Trying to eliminate children's regional accents or dialects
- Focusing only on the rhetorical skills of debating and speech-making

# Spoken language skills will enable young people to..

- teach and learn
- make speeches and presentations
- engage in debates
- **take part in reasoned discussions**
- engage fully with wider society
- become critical aware of how language is used to influence and persuade



Talk in groups is most productive when people do not just *interact* – they *interthink*

(Littleton & Mercer, 2013)

# What makes a good discussion?

People...

- share relevant information
- engage critically but constructively with each other's ideas;
- give reasons for their ideas
- all actively participate
- check understanding by asking questions
- build on each other's responses
- strive for agreement

This is **Exploratory Talk**

(cf. Accountable talk)



This is Disputational Talk  
A masterclass in how *not* to interthink

# Developing group discussion skills

**Step 1:** use a whole class discussion to raise students' awareness of how they talk and work together

**Step 2:** ask students to say what they think makes a good – and bad – discussion

**Step 3:** pick out the most important features of a good discussion

**Step 4:** convert these into a **set of 'ground rules'** for carrying out effective discussions, which they should agree to adopt

**Step 5:** give them some well-designed groupwork tasks

**Step 6:** with students, review their activity at the end of each task, focusing on the quality of their discussion

# Ground Rules for Group Discussion\*

## Class 5's Ground Rules for Exploratory Talk

1. Everyone should have a chance to talk
2. Everyone's ideas should be carefully considered
3. Each member of the group should be asked:

What do you think?

Why do you think that?

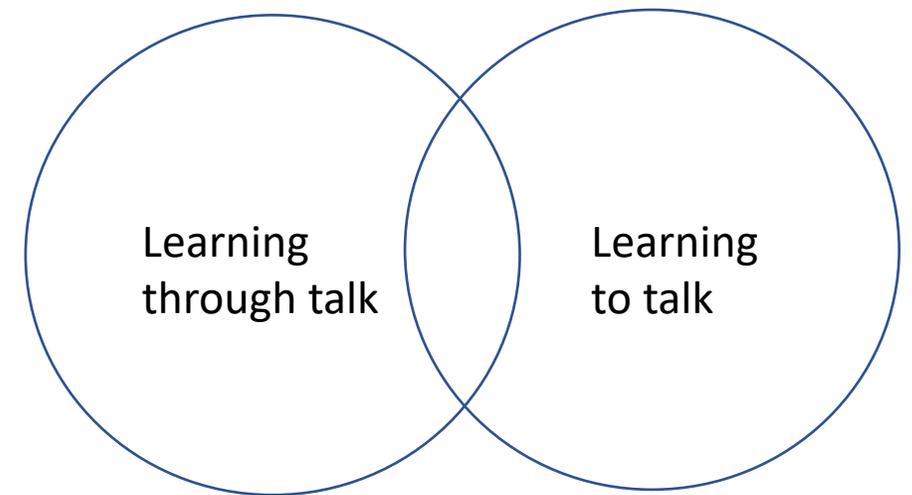
4. Look and listen to the person talking
5. After discussing, agree what to do

\*You can see a teacher rehearsing ground rules with a class at :

<https://sms.cam.ac.uk/media/2860702>

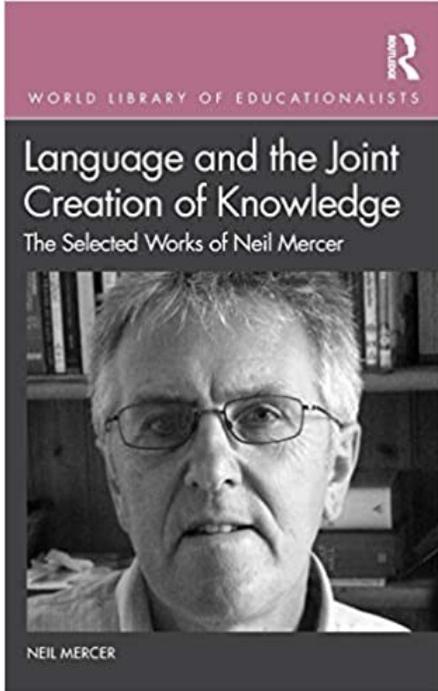
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## What happens if a school focuses on making the most of talk in the classroom?



- More students **participate actively**, and more effectively
- Students learn how to use spoken language **to get things done**
- Students become better at ***reasoning*** - *together and alone*
- Students' **attainment improves**— in English, science, maths...

For more information and useful resources see...



## **Oracy Cambridge**

<http://oracycambridge.org>

## **The Cambridge Classroom Dialogue Project**

<https://www.educ.cam.ac.uk/research/projects/classroomdialogue/>

## **The Oracy Skills Framework**

<https://oracycambridge.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/The-Oracy-Skills-Framework-and-Glossary.pdf>

## **Thinking Together**

<https://thinkingtogether.educ.cam.ac.uk/>

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