

Oracy APPG's 2019 Inquiry: *Speaking for Change*

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In my response to this inquiry, I focus on oracy in the classroom, which I take to include both the specific development of pupils' speaking and listening skills *and* the use of talk to mediate teaching and learning more generally. I focus primarily on the latter and review evidence related to whole-class discussion (rather than small group or paired pupil talk). I make the following key points:

- Certain kinds of classroom talk (or 'dialogue') can enhance pupils' learning and cognitive development, and under the right conditions all pupils can participate.
- Dialogue is talk that stimulates thinking, makes thinking public, and refines thinking.
- It is important to recognise the difference between 'talk for performance' (speeches, presentations, interviews, debate) and 'talk for learning'.
- Pupils can make valuable contributions to class discussion ('talk for learning') without using Standard English and the formal language associated with schooling.
- If only one form of spoken language is considered 'correct' or 'acceptable' in the classroom, the effect will be to inhibit some pupils' oral expression.
- It is important to open up opportunities for *all* pupils to participate in class discussion; otherwise, the kind of teaching that is associated with better learning outcomes will be available only to those pupils who are already advantaged in the education system.
- Structural issues, such as standardised testing, militate against many critical features of dialogue.
- Teachers need time, support and effective professional development to cultivate the complex set of skills required to orchestrate dialogic classroom discussions.
- Professional development should also include 'knowledge about language' so that teachers and pupils gain an awareness of the full potential of spoken language.

1. What does good quality classroom talk look like?

1.1. Researchers have analysed patterns of classroom talk and assessed their impact on pupils' learning, cognitive development and communication skills. A strong consensus has emerged from this research. First, there is general dissatisfaction with current classroom discourse, which is typically dominated by Initiation-Response-Evaluation (IRE) cycles: teachers *initiate* topics, primarily by asking closed questions that test pupils' recall of previously transmitted information; pupils *respond* with brief answers; and teachers *evaluate* pupil responses. This IRE pattern (sometimes referred to as 'recitation') positions teachers (and textbooks) as the sole legitimate sources of knowledge. Within this structure, pupils' main task is to recall and recite for evaluation what they have previously read or been told. As a result, IRE has been widely criticised as detrimental to pupils' independent thinking and learning.

1.2. Second, dialogue has been offered as a promising alternative to traditional patterns of classroom talk. Dialogic approaches to teaching and learning have grown largely out of the work of Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934), a Russian psychologist who argued that thinking originates in social interaction – that talk between people becomes internalised as individual cognition. From this perspective, if pupils are routinely pushed to provide justification for their arguments, question assumptions, work hard to clarify concepts, and so on, they will internalise these processes as habitual ways of thinking.

1.3. Talk is thus a powerful tool for learning and cognitive development, but it has to be the *right kind of talk*. Dialogue is talk that stimulates thinking, makes thinking public, and refines thinking (where good thinking is: independent, engaged, critical; responsive to ideas/evidence; and more). In dialogic² classrooms, teachers work to elicit a range of pupil ideas, including those that are only half-formed or emerging, and in doing so, they bring multiple (and potentially conflicting) perspectives into play. This is not to suggest that all perspectives are equally valid; but understanding why one point of view is better than another requires exploration and understanding of contrasting views. Teachers probe pupil responses, pushing pupils to extend and clarify their thinking. In turn, pupils listen carefully to the teacher and to each

other, and with their teacher's support, they build on, challenge or clarify others' claims and offer alternative explanations. Throughout, teacher and pupils remain committed to factual accuracy and to disciplinary standards, and they work hard to develop coherent lines of inquiry (see Sarah Michaels, Catherine O'Connor and Lauren Resnick on 'Accountable Talk' and Robin Alexander's principles of dialogic teaching).

1.4. Pupils need support to develop the speaking and listening skills necessary to participate in this kind of robust and cognitively challenging dialogue. They must learn how to express ideas, explain their thinking, speculate, evaluate others' claims, respectfully contest opposing points of view, ask questions, and give others time to think. Likewise, teachers need to develop their own repertoire of talk moves to shape productive classroom discourse. Based on two decades of research on how some teachers are able to orchestrate productive discussion, Sarah Michaels, Catherine O'Connor and Lauren Resnick have identified a series of 'productive talk moves' that teachers can use to help pupils articulate and deepen their thinking, orient and listen to one another, and build on and critique one another's reasoning. Examples of these 'talk moves' include revoicing pupil contributions and checking one's understanding (e.g. 'Let me see if I've understood you correctly. Are you saying...?'), asking pupils to restate someone else's reasoning (e.g. 'Who thinks they understood what Susan just said and can put it in their own words?'), prompting pupils for further participation (e.g. Can you say more? Can you give us an example?), asking pupils to explicate their reasoning (e.g. Why do you think that? What's your evidence?), and giving pupils time to think. These talk moves and other practices help to cultivate a dialogic classroom culture, which in turn shapes how pupils perceive teacher questions, knowledge and the purpose of class discussion.

2. What is the value and impact of oracy in supporting learning across the whole curriculum?

2.1. Research has demonstrated that participation in the kind of dialogic talk outlined above is an effective means of advancing pupil learning and cognitive development (see Resnick et al. 2015 for a review of the research evidence). Studies in a variety of countries and school environments have shown that pupils who experience cognitively challenging classroom discussion perform better on standardised tests than their peers who have not had this experience. Some pupils retain their advantage for two or three years after a dialogic teaching intervention, and some even *transfer* their academic advantage across domains.

2.2. Dialogue is at the heart of the cognitive acceleration approach to learning developed in the 1980s at King's College London by Philip Adey and Michael Shayer. The programme was trialled with 11 to 14-year olds in a number of schools in which specific 'thinking lessons' were set first in science classes (Cognitive acceleration through Science Education), and in later trials, in mathematics (Cognitive acceleration through Mathematics Education). These interventions sought to promote formal operational thinking by prompting students to talk through their ideas during 'Thinking Science' or 'Thinking Maths' activities. An important finding was that benefits to learning were found not only in the target subject (i.e. science or mathematics) but across the curriculum (including in English), suggesting that the intervention had a general effect on children's thinking ability. Three years after the CASE programme, pupils' achievement was tested again by their results in GCSEs (Adey & Shayer 1993, 2015). Pupils who had participated in the intervention did significantly better than pupils in the control classes who did not participate. This was the case not only in science but in mathematics and English too, suggesting, again, that the intervention had stimulated pupils' general cognitive abilities. Other studies have provided evidence that pupils exposed to productive academic talk in one domain (e.g. mathematics) transfer their academic advantage across subjects (O'Connor, Michaels and Chapin 2015) and to tests of reasoning skills (suggesting an impact on general intelligence) (Topping and Trickey 2007).

2.3. More recently, a research team led by Robin Alexander conducted a large-scale randomised control trial of dialogic teaching with schools in areas of social and educational disadvantage in Birmingham, Bradford and Leeds. Participating teachers and teacher mentors were inducted into Alexander's approach to dialogic teaching through a series of training sessions and print materials. There followed a 20-week intervention, during which teachers worked with their mentors (who were more experienced teachers) and

with members of the research team to make their classrooms more dialogic. Teachers also recorded their own lessons and reflected on these recordings with their mentors.

2.4. The research team found evidence that participating classrooms were becoming more dialogic. Teachers made greater use of open questions, and regularly voiced pupil contributions, sought evidence of reasoning and requested justification. Pupils extended their contributions and exhibited higher levels of explanation, argumentation, challenge and justification. Intervention classrooms also became more inclusive, with fewer students remaining silent (see Alexander 2018 for full details).

2.5. Significantly, an independent evaluation (Jay et al. 2017) found that the 2,493 Year 5 pupils who received the intervention made, on average, two months more progress in English and science, compared to a similar group of pupils who did not receive the intervention (based on standardized tests). The results for mathematics showed an increase of one month overall and two months for children eligible for free school meals (FSM). The fact that FSM children did so well highlights the importance of dialogic teaching in areas of socio-economic disadvantage (see also O'Connor, Michaels and Chapin 2015).

2.6. The results of these (and other) studies highlight the importance of spoken language in education and invite us to re-imagine what we can achieve through good quality state schooling:

Schools can actually *make people more intelligent*. They can do it without “throwing away” traditional content – mastery of languages and texts, skills of mathematical reasoning, scientific knowledge, and other domains that have served as markers of the well-educated for centuries. Dialogic teaching and learning can take place in any field of knowledge where students can bring their own ideas to bear on authentic questions and tasks.

(Resnick and Schantz 2015: 346)

2.7. In addition to gains in academic achievement, participating in classroom dialogue can:

- help pupils develop their oral language skills, gain confidence and build relationships (by becoming more patient and attuned to others' perspectives);
- initiate pupil-citizens into democratic participation by cultivating norms of rational deliberation and by facilitating pupils' acquisition of argumentation and public speaking skills;
- help to re-energise disengaged pupils and empower marginalised groups by affording young people the opportunity to make their voices heard.

Despite evidence of the positive effects on young people, it is still rare to find dialogic talk in the classroom. In the next section, I review some of the reasons for this.

3. What are the barriers to provision of a good quality oracy education?

3.1. The National Curriculum emphasises that spoken language is important to pupils' development across the curriculum. However, there is a tendency within the statutory requirements and guidance to conflate two different kinds of talk in a way that is unhelpful: talk as performance and talk for learning. In relation to talk as performance, pupils are required to develop the skills necessary to give speeches/presentations and participate in structured debate. Within these formal (and semi-scripted) speech events, it makes sense that pupils should 'control their speaking ... consciously and ... use Standard English' (DfE 2014). However, when it comes to talk for learning, the aim is to think aloud and contribute spontaneously to an evolving argument. This kind of talk necessarily involves hesitation, lack of fluency, half-formed statements and emergent ideas, and for the sake of equitable participation, it is crucial that pupils feel able to respond, question, challenge and elaborate their thinking using whatever language they find most comfortable, which for many will be their local dialect. There is no reason why this thinking aloud should be done in Standard English, because it is possible to express complex ideas in a variety of linguistic forms and styles.

3.2. The obligation to use Standard English in informal classroom discussion (which is an official requirement at KS3) will likely discourage some pupils from participating. The move by some schools to ban

the use of local dialect forms and the fillers/discourse markers characteristic of spontaneous speech (e.g. 'like') will (inadvertently) make it more difficult for some pupils to exploit the power of talk for learning.

3.3. Teachers' perceptions of pupils (and pupils' perceptions of themselves) can also be a barrier to dialogue. Research has shown that teachers often believe that only *some* pupils – usually the high achievers and those from privileged social backgrounds – are capable of participating effectively in academically challenging discussion, and this has an impact on the kinds of questions they ask pupils and the level of structure and control they apply (Snell & Lefstein 2018). The result is that dialogic teaching is often limited to pupils who are already high achieving (e.g. Nystrand et al 1997).

3.4. Pupils themselves may feel that they are not "clever" enough or do not "know enough" to participate in classroom discussion. A recent study of participation in biology lessons in a US High School found that students viewed discussion as a *display* of knowledge, rather than the site where knowledge is negotiated and understanding enhanced (Clarke 2015). As a result, around half of the students remained silent over a six-week observation period, because they did not feel that had the "right" answer. This underlines the point that harnessing the power of talk for learning requires more than a change at the interactional level (e.g. by introducing dialogic talk moves); there needs to be a corresponding shift in perspective, from valuing a correctly stated "right answer" to valuing the thinking process.

3.5. Where a dialogic environment is cultivated in the classroom (i.e. where pupils and teacher adopt an open and critical stance toward knowledge claims, pupils are empowered to express their own voices, and the classroom community is characterized by inclusive and reciprocal participation norms), research has shown that virtually all pupils participate (e.g. Alexander 2018; O'Connor, Michaels & Chapin 2015).

3.6. The structural conditions of schooling militate against many critical features of dialogue. Lessons typically take place in small rooms occupied by large groups. In crowded classrooms, making space for everyone often necessitates pupils' sitting in rows or clumps, thereby constraining opportunities for all to communicate directly with one another in whole class discussion. Moreover, the size of the group – between 24-30 pupils – makes broad participation in every discussion near impossible.

3.7. In discussions with Year 5 and 6 teachers, standardised testing comes up frequently as an impediment to dialogue. Some teachers are forced to confront the tensions between their desire to enact dialogic teaching and the urgent need to raise their pupils' test scores. In one school, the shift towards test preparation was apparent in a marked shift towards more traditional recitation, in which the aim is not to talk, think and develop ideas together, but to arrive at the answer desired by the test-makers. SATs revision lessons in this school were clearly marked by a high incidence of closed questions (of the type pupils are likely to encounter in the tests), while in the post SATs revision period, there were fewer closed questions and a higher incidence of more dialogic teacher moves, such as open questions and probes, which elicit extended pupil responses (Segal, Snell & Lefstein 2017). The near absence of open questions during SATs revision is significant because recent research has shown that these questions are key to the positive outcomes associated with dialogue (see Howe et al. 2019). Other studies have similarly shown that a culture of high-stakes testing is associated with increasingly teacher-centred pedagogy (Osborne 2015: 404)

3.8. Where schools are under pressure to raise standards they may feel that they cannot devote time to improving talk for learning. However, the studies cited above have shown that talk itself can raise achievement, including on standardised tests.

3.9. Developing dialogic talk in the classroom is not a 'quick fix' to improving learning outcomes. It requires a significant investment in teacher professional development. Teachers need time and support to develop the complex set of skills required to orchestrate academically productive discussions. Where this is not available, it will not be possible to realise the full potential of talk in the classroom.

4. How can we overcome barriers and exploit the potential of talk for learning in UK schools?

4.1. We cannot simply mandate that teachers engage their students in academically challenging discussion. Teachers will need specific education about dialogue, what it looks like, why it is important, and how to conduct it. This will include descriptions and models of teacher talk moves, ground rules for classroom communication and guidance on how to explicitly teach pupils to engage in dialogue with each other (see e.g. Robin Alexander's *Towards Dialogic Teaching*; Sarah Michaels and Cathy O'Connor's *Talk Science Primer*; and Lyn Dawes, Neil Mercer' and Rupert Wegerif's *Thinking Together*). It should also include attention to design of curriculum, tasks and other aspects of pedagogy that shape dialogue.

4.2. Teachers also need time and space to reflect on their own and others' practice. While it is important that teachers develop a repertoire of strategies and talk moves, they must also develop the sensitivity, flexibility and judgement to decide how to use that repertoire in any given moment, because a method that works in one context will likely unfold differently, and with different effects, in a different set of circumstances. These skills can be honed through guided reflection on video recordings of real classroom practice. This approach involves teachers sharing their practice with colleagues in order to learn from one another's challenges, problems, dilemmas and breakthroughs (see Lefstein & Snell 2014).

4.3. Teacher professional development should also include 'knowledge about language' (as advocated some time ago by the Language in the National Curriculum Project). It is important that teachers and pupils gain an awareness of the full potential of spoken language, including an understanding of regional, social and stylistic variation; the relationship between speech and writing; the dynamics of interactional turn-taking; and the language of argumentation and persuasion.

4.4. Pupils should have the opportunity to learn about their local dialect and its relationship to Standard English, and be encouraged to reflect on their language choices and abilities (including the ability all children have to meaningfully switch between standard and non-standard dialect forms, Snell 2013). Speaking always involves making choices, and understanding the impact of these choices gives us control, enabling us to style ourselves linguistically in multiple different ways. Valuing the dialects and languages pupils use at home and making them a legitimate object of study is likely to develop pupils' confidence and make them more likely to participate in class discussion.

4.5 Finally, teachers should be allowed to try out and develop these new ways of teaching in a 'safe space' that is free from evaluation and accountability measures, at least initially. In the long term, the frameworks/criteria through which pupils, teachers and schools are evaluated will likely need to change to take account of the importance of talk for learning across the curriculum.

(3,169 words excluding references)

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¹ All views expressed are my own. I am not submitting evidence on behalf of the University of Leeds.

² In this summary I draw upon the important work of Robin Alexander in the UK and Sarah Michaels, Catherine O'Connor and Lauren Resnick in the US, as well as my own research with Adam Lefstein (see list of references).