Exploratory talk (Mercer, 2008)

Exploratory talk is where pupils listen critically but constructively to each other’s ideas. The objective of this interaction is to reach an agreement. In tasks, students must explore the different possible answers. This usually takes place in pupil-led collaborative group work. Pupils exchange ideas with a view to sharing information to solve problems. Relevant information is offered for joint consideration. Proposals may be challenged, but if so, reasons are given and alternatives offered. Agreement is sought as a basis for progress. Knowledge is made publicly accountable and reasoning is visible in talk.

In exploratory talk:

- everyone listens actively
- people ask questions
- people share relevant information
- ideas may be challenged
- reasons are given for challenges
- contributions build on what has gone before
- everyone is encouraged to contribute
- ideas and opinions treated with respect
- there is an atmosphere of trust
- there is a sense of shared purpose
- the group seeks agreement for joint decisions.

How to make it happen?

- The unspoken rules of talk must be made explicit. Pupils need to develop shared rules for group talk and role-taking so they can collaborate.
- Teachers’ questioning must stimulate pupils to higher-level thinking skills. It needs to create cognitive conflict!
- A stimulating question can be set up by using open-ended activities like ‘Odd one out’, ‘What’s the link?’, a Continuum line, etc.
- Afterwards, the exploratory talk needs to be formalised into written notes or feedback. This provides an opportunity for metacognition.
- Teachers may need to explicitly model this type of talk, for example:
  - How to disagree without offending others (that’s an interesting idea but...)
  - Turn taking without being aggressive (could I just make a point here...)
  - Signposting a change of topic (have you considered....?)

All text © The National Literacy Trust 2018
T: 020 7587 1842 W: literacytrust.org.uk Twitter: @Literacy_Trust Facebook: nationalliteracytrust

The National Literacy Trust is a registered charity no. 1116260 and a company limited by guarantee no. 5836486 registered in England and Wales and a registered charity in Scotland no. SC042944. Registered address: 68 South Lambeth Road, London SW8 1RL
Hedging ideas and speculating by using modal verbs to express tentativeness, probability, possibility, (say, ‘could you be mistaken?’ instead of, ‘you are wrong’).

Exploratory talk often involves unstructured, incomplete, and tentative sentences. Students’ spoken utterances can seem incomplete (they are still meaningful, but are not meaningful outside the spoken context). They may finish each other’s comments, interrupt, compete to take a turn, argue, disagree with or extend what is said. Some overlapping of speakers takes place.

Modal expressions (i.e. ‘possibly’, ‘probably’, ‘maybe’ and ‘perhaps’), will help students negotiate what they mean in a non-assertive way. This enables speakers to adjust their points of view and develop meanings together.

**Dialogic talk (Alexander, 2005)**

Dialogic teaching features a teaching ethos in which pupils feel secure in speaking, sharing ideas and even making mistakes because they accept that this is how they learn. Dialogic talk enables speakers and listeners to explore and build on their own and others’ ideas to develop coherent thinking. The aim is to achieve a **common understanding** through structured, cumulative questioning and discussion.

Dialogic talk involves teacher–pupil interactions that are:

- **collective**: teachers and children address learning tasks together whether as a group or as a class
- **reciprocal**: teachers and children listen to each other, share ideas and consider alternative viewpoints
- **supportive**: children articulate their ideas freely, without fear of embarrassment over ‘wrong’ answers; and they help each other to reach common understandings
- **cumulative**: teachers and students build on their own and each other’s ideas and chain them into coherent lines of thinking and enquiry
- **purposeful**: teachers plan and steer classroom talk with specific educational goals in view.

This type of talk is **not** IRF (initiate-respond-feedback) where the teacher initiates question or statement, a pupil responds and the teacher gives feedback.

**How to make it happen?**

- Set up classroom ‘ground rules’ to create an ethos of talk (collective, reciprocal and supportive talk cannot happen without them)
- Use why and how questions that involve more than simple recall
- Expect answers that are justified and built upon rather than merely ‘received’
- Use ‘no hands’ methods so everyone will be ready to talk
- Facilitate more – direct and control less
- Use *pose-pause-probe-bounce* questioning to make student-teacher exchanges that are cumulative and chain together into deepening lines of understanding and enquiry
• Teach talk as you would teach the writing sequence:
  ➢ set a clear context
  ➢ make talk ‘visible’ by using listeners to record or providing transcripts
  ➢ unpick specific spoken language features
  ➢ scaffold first attempts with paired rehearsal and speaking
• Provide feedback that encourages but also informs, diagnoses and thereby propels pupils’ thinking forward.

Recent research into oral language

1. Dialogic teaching trial, EEF/York University 2015-6


In a randomised control trial of dialogic teaching teachers from schools in Birmingham, Bradford and Leeds worked on using classroom talk to increase pupils’ engagement, learning and attainment. The trial took place in 76 primary schools with higher than average proportions of disadvantaged pupils. For many teachers, dialogic teaching required a transformation in classroom culture, but it was a challenge that teachers and pupils in this project came to accept.

Using standardised tests, the independent evaluation by Sheffield Hallam University found that after just 20 weeks, the Year 5 pupils who received the intervention made, on average, two months’ more progress in English and science than the control group. The intervention also boosted mathematics results by two months for pupils qualifying for free school meals.

Professor Alexander said:

“We have known for many years that talk is necessary for the development of children’s thinking, learning and understanding, as well as for their capacity to communicate…

These results… must finally force sceptics to accept that oracy is vital not only in its own right but also for learning and attainment across the entire curriculum…

The fact that children on free school meals did so well underlines its particular importance in contexts of social disadvantage. The results also confirm that good teaching really does make a difference and that evidence-informed professional development raises standards.”

2. Oracy Curriculum Culture and Assessment Toolkit, EEF 2015

The University of Cambridge and School 21 in Newham, London carried out a developmental project in 2013/14. The project involved developing an Oracy Skills Framework, which sets out the physical, linguistic, cognitive, and social-emotional oracy skills required by students
for education and life. Other project components which were informed by this framework were:

- a dedicated Year 7 oracy curriculum comprising weekly oracy lessons
- oracy in every lesson
- building a whole-school oracy culture
- an Oracy Assessment Toolkit.

During the final stages of the project the components were brought together to create an 'Oracy Curriculum, Culture and Assessment Toolkit' that can be adopted by other schools. See, Voice 21 (http://voice21.org/), for guidance and resources for schools.

Cambridge University developed the Oracy skills framework: http://www.educ.cam.ac.uk/research/projects/oracytoolkit/oracyskillsframework/
This enabled School 21 teachers to diagnose and evaluate spoken language and make it explicit so pupils could practise and improve it. The teachers developed an Oracy Curriculum which was deemed to be particularly effective in developing persuasive and presentational talk.

The evaluation team from Sheffield Hallam University concluded that more work was needed in developing exploratory talk more fully across the curriculum. They also found that the evidence of impact was inconclusive, largely because the framework and curriculum had only been applied in one school and that a randomised, control trial would be needed to provide a stronger evidence base. In recent years, Voice 21 have continued to develop and refine their teaching and training about talk for learning in a range of schools through their Oracy improvement programme. See Improving Oracy Voice 21.

External evaluation of the current oracy improvement programme suggests that it was well received across the pilot schools. Teachers felt it could be implemented in most school contexts, given the necessary support from senior leadership. They also reported improvements in pupils’ oral language skills, although they could not demonstrate the impact this had on academic attainment.

References


IRF is learning by rote (i.e. drilling of facts and ideas through constant repetition); recitation (questions designed to test or stimulate recall of what has been previously encountered, or to cue students to work out the answer from clues provided in the question); or instruction/exposition: telling the student what to do, and/or imparting information, and/or explaining principles. This does not promote extended talk, interaction or collaboration as it is teacher led.