Classroom Talk

Evidence-based Teaching
for Enquiring Teachers

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Rupert Knight

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Rupert Knight

Contents

Meet the series editor and authors

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Foreword

Our education system is arguably one of the most complex in the world and ever evolving. Teaching professionals face competing demands on a daily basis as they strive to maintain high standards of teaching and learning in a system which is in a constant state of flux. However, among such complexity there has been one enduring theme of the 'self-improving school', and at grass-roots classroom level it is teachers who bear the weight of constantly looking for ways to improve pupil learning. We have, so far in this series, argued that in order to improve outcomes for pupils, educators should be critically engaging with research both as consumers and producers to provide them with the evidence to reflect on their practice.

In this latest addition to the series Evidence-based Teaching for Enquiring Teachers Rupert Knight examines issues around classroom talk. Rupert is an Assistant Professor at the University of Nottingham and has a special interest in classroom talk and collaboration. He argues that classroom dialogue is a powerful medium through which both pupil and teacher learning can take place. What is arguably a taken-for-granted activity between teachers and their pupils is in fact a far more complex interaction than we might imagine. Through a series of questions around three distinct areas of classroom dialogue, Rupert encourages us to consider the social, cultural and political dimensions of how we use our spoken language in classrooms. He goes on to examine in detail how pupils receive and construct knowledge, the effect of language on relationships between teachers and their pupils, and the different types of language most commonly used in schools.

The importance of oracy in education is now a re-emerging theme, which brings to the fore a whole body of academic research and publication in this field. This is highlighted by the Oracy All Party Parliamentary Group (Oracy APPG, 2019) who have raised concerns about the importance of oracy in state education. The view is that spoken language use in schools is currently undervalued and potentially underdeveloped. In response an inquiry was set up to examine the quality of this provision. Alongside quality issues the inquiry investigated the value of oracy in terms of development of language skills to enhance pupil achievement, social mobility, well-being, employability and any potential barriers to accessing oracy education.

In these times of change it is important for educators to have access to a range of evidence which can inform and direct practice. Furthermore, this evidence should be easily accessible to a range of educators: teacher professionals,

trainee teachers, school mentors and university academics as well as educators more widely. Rupert's book provides a highly readable and informative introduction to classroom talk, providing links to academic research and school case studies that encourage teachers to reflect on their own approach to classroom talk and how important dialogue is for learning. This, during a period of emerging government interest in this area of education, makes Rupert's book a very timely publication.

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Senior Lecturer in Education, University of Derby

Reference

Oracy All Party Parliamentary Group (2019) Speak for Change (new inquiry). [online] Available at: www.oracyappg.org.uk (accessed 18 July 2019).

Chapter 1
Introducing and mapping debates around classroom talk

1.1 Chapter overview

This chapter will outline:

1.2 what is meant by classroom talk and the scope of the book;

1.3 why an evidence-informed approach is important;

1.4 how you can make sense of research in this field;

1.5 key debates and questions to be explored.

1.2 Introduction: what is meant by classroom talk and what is the scope of this book?

Take a walk along a school corridor, pause outside a classroom door and listen. There are voices, but whose voices? What are they saying and why? Perhaps a teacher is introducing a new concept to a class and asking questions to check understanding or provoke new thinking. Perhaps the voice heard is not the teacher's at all, but that of a pupil answering or asking a question. Perhaps pupils are talking to one another independently of the teacher. Sometimes there is consensus, sometimes debate and disagreement. Tuning in and trying to discern the meaning and dynamics of this complex mixture of spoken language might give rise to a number of questions. A first set relates to participation and the learner's role in this process. Are pupils passive recipients of knowledge, or active participants in the construction of understanding? The stance taken on this determines particular classroom routines and consequently patterns of spoken interaction. A second set of questions concerns the purpose and content of this interaction. To what extent is learning predetermined by the teacher, with pupils guided along a set path? To what extent, in contrast, are pupils invited to engage in open, authentic dialogue? Is talk between pupils purely social and a distraction from learning, or can peer talk be productive for learning? Finally, questions might be raised about the form of spoken language employed in all of these scenarios. Are there modes of speech that are more cognitively or socially desirable than others and, if so, should talk be an object of learning in its own right? Some positions taken by teachers on these questions

may be strongly value-related and embedded in the purposes of education more widely. From this starting point, the aim of this book is to consider the evidence around what is known – and not known – about classroom talk.

Moving beyond the mere ubiquity of talk in classrooms, it is important to question why it is particularly worthy of your attention. After all, while spoken language is the medium through which much teaching and learning takes place, its purposes and conventions are often very different from talk in everyday life. There are three broad arguments, each with its own strand of research, that have been made for a focus on classroom talk.

1. The psychological or cognitive argument: the idea that learning and development are shaped heavily – though not exclusively – by social interaction. For example, Mercer and Littleton (2007) explain that cognitive development and learning are mediated by cultural and social activities such as talk and that learning can be thought of as the joint construction of understanding through a process of dialogue;

2. The sociological argument: an interest in principles such as identity, inclusion and communicative rights, whereby authentic pupil voice and ownership of learning have a place in classrooms. For example, Lefstein and Snell (2011) provide a critique of typical classroom discourse structures in terms of their promotion of a narrow, uncritical acceptance of knowledge and authority;

3. The communicative competence argument: the idea that capability with spoken language is an essential skill for success in education and beyond. For example, Bruner (1978) notes that such competence goes beyond a grasp of syntax and semantics and depends on the sophisticated social use of dialogue. For some, this includes valuing the richness of informal language, while for others this has been about the use of 'correct' standard forms.

In this book, therefore, you will be able to evaluate arguments for classroom talk not only on the basis of pedagogy and academic achievement, but also in light of cultural, social and political considerations. The case for talk is neatly previewed by Alexander's (2012) summing up of the understanding of the role played by high-quality talk in the following:

- contributing to children's development, thinking and learning as a form of pedagogy;
- closing equity gaps due to social disadvantage;
- enhancing employability and social and economic well-being;

- promoting democratic involvement in learning and student voice;
- helping teachers to assess pupils' understanding formatively.

Nevertheless, such arguments are by no means universally accepted or enacted. Within the UK, for example, the effects of what Sahlberg (2016) calls the Global Education Reform Movement have been felt. They include increased standardisation of teaching and a focus on prescribed content transmitted in a risk-averse, often teacher-led, mode. Meanwhile, the national curriculum's (DfE, 2013) spoken language strand within the English curriculum positions talk largely as a skill to underpin reading and writing. This calls to mind Alexander's (2014) vivid report of a government minister's caution, during a curriculum review, about the danger of being seen to *'encourage idle chatter in class'* (p 357). In order to explore the case for talk rigorously, therefore, a careful review of the evidence-base is required.

The scope of this book is primarily the evidence on *promoting the use of high-quality talk by pupils as a means of learning*. This means that some forms of classroom talk necessarily fall outside this boundary, but this is not a reflection of their importance. For example, teacher exposition through explanation and modelling is a central part of any educator's repertoire, but will be discussed only in so far as this relates to more interactive forms of talk. Similarly, the all-important social relationships formed through informal peer talk will be considered largely for their value in promoting academic learning. In this book, then, the focus is on spoken interaction at classroom level, across age phases, as a mode of thinking and a means of jointly constructing understanding.

1.3 Why is an evidence-informed approach important?

A detailed account of current approaches to, and benefits of, the use of evidence to inform education is provided by Philpott and Poultney (2018) in this series. It is fair to say, however, that the relationship between research and teaching has sometimes been an uneasy one, with claims that there has historically been a mismatch between the knowledge required by teachers and that generated by researchers (Cain, 2015). In recent years, there has been a renewed interest in connecting teachers more directly with evidence. This arises in part from arguments for greater teacher autonomy, linked to a research-literate teaching community, active as both informed *consumers* and *producers* of evidence (BERA, 2014). This argument is strongly associated with the vision of a 'self-improving' school system, championed in England, for example, in government reforms (DfE, 2010). While there is much to admire in this school-led stance, it might also be seen as a product of the shift in some parts of the world towards

standardisation, measurement, comparison and competition mentioned in Section 1.2.

Some have also called into question an impoverished, 'what works' view of what constitutes evidence and how it might be used. Biesta (2016), for example, draws attention to the emphasis on effectiveness and argues that this term has little meaning unless it is clear what an action is effective *for*. There are many potential value systems and purposes for education, beyond simply improving attainment, rendering a single response impossible. Others have called into question the privileging of 'scientific' approaches to research, such as randomised control trials (RCTs). Attractive for their promise of an experimental, controlled trial of an intervention, potentially establishing causation, they may potentially fail to take into account context and experience. Connolly et al (2018) reflect these concerns and others in their systematic review of RCTs in education, but also conclude that this approach can make an important contribution to understanding if used appropriately. A further issue raised with a simplistic effectiveness view is that it may encourage shortcuts and a superficial use of evidence. Meta-analyses involve an aggregation of outcomes from previous studies and the calculation of an effect size for an intervention. They provide an opportunity to compare and even rank strategies at scale (eg EEF, 2018a; Hattie, 2009) but the feasibility of meaningfully comparing disparate research studies around a broad theme and determining a single effect size have been questioned (Wrigley, 2018).

Rather than view these issues as obstacles, they might instead be seen to suggest three implications for teachers.

1. The need to take an informed and critical stance when presented with research evidence, particularly of the easily digestible, 'what works' variety. Research summaries and meta-analyses, for example, can be very useful tools but the story behind ranked interventions needs to be understood;

2. The importance of going beyond a view of effectiveness as improved attainment to consider the wider purposes of education. This links to the three lines of argument, with their three aims, discussed in Section 1.2;

3. The value of exploring the research around a subject in some depth and achieving a nuanced and reasonably balanced perspective on the topic. This is largely the purpose of this book and indeed this whole series.

1.4 How can you make sense of research in this field?

Navigating the research field

Substantial research interest in classroom talk dates largely from the 1970s. While there are important antecedents, such as the thinking from the 1920s and 1930s of Lev Vygotsky, even this work became widely known only after its translation into English from the 1960s onwards. The interdisciplinary nature of this research field makes it a complex one to navigate and some of the impetus has come from outside education. Early seminal studies, therefore, include those from a linguistic perspective, concerned chiefly with the structure of language use, rather than its meaning (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975) and those using a more ethnographic approach, exploring context and relationships (Edwards and Furlong, 1978). Since the 1980s, much of the work has coalesced around two key approaches, characterised by Mercer (2010) as *linguistic ethnography* and *sociocultural research*. The linguistic ethnography tradition explores the interaction of language with social and cultural context, while sociocultural researchers focus chiefly on dialogue and collaboration as a tool for learning. From the 1980s onwards, a notable body of work has been the detailed analysis of talk conducted by sociocultural researchers in an attempt to develop analytical frameworks (eg Mercer, 1995). This has led to a degree of consensus around typical forms of naturally occurring classroom talk. Since then, another important focus has become the use of this understanding to articulate and trial more productive models of talk, sometimes in the form of teaching structured repertoires such as collaborative reasoning (eg Clark et al, 2003) and sometimes as broader approaches to pedagogy, such as dialogic teaching (eg Alexander, 2017).

The limitations of research in this field and the possible ways forward are considered more fully in Chapter 7, but it is clear that, within this diverse body of research, there exist certain patterns of emphasis. Howe and Abedin's (2013) systematic review of research on classroom dialogue finds, for example, a field dominated by Western and particularly UK and US research, with the proportion of UK research increasing in recent years. The same review notes a curricular emphasis on Science especially, but also Mathematics and English. The evidence base is also skewed in its age focus towards primary and early secondary pupils. In discussing the relative lack of research in secondary classrooms, Higham et al (2014) suggest various possible reasons, including the greater capacity in primary education for engaging with new pedagogies in a sustained and holistic way. Finally, Howe and Abedin (2013) note a preponderance of small-scale qualitative research – unsurprising, given the focus on close examination of dialogue. What is beginning to emerge now, however, according to Resnick and Schantz (2015) is a body of experimental studies, more rigorously testing models

of classroom talk and starting to provide evidence of transfer to other contexts. The research map which follows attempts to represent some key milestones in this research field chronologically, including some examples of important publications mentioned in this book.

A classroom talk research map and timeline

1960s onwards

Systematic research, usually quantitative and focused on categorizing observable features rather than on meaning. Often associated with teacher effectiveness.

* Flanders (1961)
* Galton et al (1980; 1999)

Researching spoken language competence

(eg oracy and different 'registers').

* Wilkinson (1965)
* Bernstein (1971)
* Heath (1983)
* Mercer et al (2017a)

1970s onwards

Linguistic research, based on analysis of transcripts to discern language structure and functions.

* Sinclair and Coulthard (1975)
* Mehan (1979)

Sociolinguistic research, based on analysis also focusing on the function and meaning of languaage.

* Barnes and Todd (1977)
* Edwards and Furlong (1978)

Social constructivist research on learning through scaffolding and contingent teaching.

* Wood et al (1976)
* Bruner (1978)

1980s onwards

Ethnographic and sociocultural research with an interest in context and the development of analytic frameworks (eg exploratory talk).

* Edwards and Westgate (1994)
* Mercer (1995)
* Wells (1999)

Researching the impact of productive models of talk (eg exploratory talk; reciprocal teaching; collaborative reasoning; accountable talk).

* Palinscar and Brown (1984)
* Mercer (2000)
* Clark et al (2003)
* Michaels et al (2008)

2000s onwards

Dialogic teaching research, with a focus on classroom culture and community to promote effective learning.

* Nystrand et al (2003)
* Mortimer and Scott (2003)
* Alexander (2017)

Experimental research designs and an interest in transfer of learning

* O'Connor et al (2015)
* Sun et al (2015)
* Alexander (2018)

1.5 What are the key debates and questions?

As might be expected from the preceding discussions about the nature of evidence and the diverse, multi-disciplinary perspectives informing the study of talk, this is a complex and contested field. In this section, a dialogue of contrasting views is offered as a way of introducing some of the key debates explored in the chapters that follow. On the left are justifications for classroom talk and on the right are possible counter-arguments.

Index

T

V

W

Z