

National
curriculum

En

2003

New perspectives on spoken English in the classroom

Discussion papers



Guarding standards

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Printed in Great Britain.

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Introduction

In the decade or so since the English national curriculum was produced, there has been a firm emphasis on raising standards in reading and writing. As a result, many teachers now have clear ideas about ways of teaching literacy and about how to plan for the development of their pupils' reading and writing.

By comparison with work in writing, there seems far less confidence about how to teach or plan for progression in speaking and listening. What is it that pupils need to know in order to improve as speakers and listeners? How can opportunities for learning about talk be built into the curriculum? To what extent might the development of spoken language be fostered in subjects other than English? Again in contrast with literacy, it seems hard to find a shared language for describing talk, other than noting the often negative ways in which it doesn't look like writing.

These and similar questions have been put to the QCA English team in the context of our monitoring over recent years of the English Order of 1999. We have sought answers to them in a number of ways, not least by talking with a wide range of colleagues in universities, teacher education, the DfES, OFSTED, and the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies.

It seems timely to bring the results of some of those enquiries to a wider audience. This collection of edited papers stems from two major initiatives in the field of speaking and listening. The full versions of all the papers are available for reference on the QCA website at www.qca.org.uk

In 2001, QCA hosted a seminar entitled 'Spoken English and grammar in the classroom', the keynote speaker at which was Professor Ronald Carter of the University of Nottingham. The theme of the conference was the nature and purpose of spoken language, focusing on the patterns and types of talk that distinguish it most sharply from writing. Ron Carter's paper addressed this theme, showing how recent collections of naturally occurring speech had revolutionised our understanding of spoken language. Other participants offered a variety of points of view on whether there was a 'grammar' of spoken language, how this might be described and what the classroom implications of such descriptions might be, as well critiquing some assumptions about the role of talk in education.

The seminar led to exploratory work with classroom teachers who developed some lesson sequences around selected key features of talk drawn from Ron Carter's paper. A second phase of classroom investigations is currently in progress, and these will inform a broader publication designed to foster more effective talk in the classroom and to assist pupils and teachers in making the complex transition between spoken and written forms.

In the same period, another QCA seminar was held for teachers and academics, this one led by Professor Robin Alexander and based on his work reported in *Culture and pedagogy: international comparisons in primary education*.¹ The focus of this seminar was the nature of spoken exchanges between teachers and pupils, contrasting the short

¹ Alexander, RJ, *Culture and pedagogy: international comparisons in primary education*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2000.

question and response sequences typical of English classrooms with models in other countries where pupils were encouraged to speak more extensively, explaining their ideas to the whole class. Subsequently, these ideas about ‘whole-class dialogue’ have been taken forward by QCA and the National Strategies, leading to the production of a video and accompanying guidance materials.

As a way of engaging a broader group on innovative thinking about teaching and learning talk, QCA brought both strands of the work together for a conference in June 2002, organised collaboratively with the English subject associations (English Association, National Association for Drama, National Association for Language Development in the Curriculum, National Association for the Teaching of English, National Association of Advisers in English and United Kingdom Reading Association). Subsequently, the subject associations have undertaken to develop themes relevant to their own agendas, through action research, publications and conferences.

How to use this document

The edited papers tackle questions about spoken language in the classroom from diverse perspectives – some focus on the grammar and structure of talk, some on the role of language in shaping identity and gender, while others set down challenges to the current status of spoken language in education more generally.

Very likely, readers will want to make their own selection for case reading or reference. As a possible guide to reading – and ideally to discussion of – the papers we have grouped them in relation to key questions. These questions are placed at the start of each paper or pair of papers to which they refer. Clearly, different groupings or pairings of the papers are possible, depending on the interests and needs of readers.

Teaching about talk – what do pupils need to know about spoken language and the important ways in which talk differs from writing?

Ron Carter proposes a number of distinctive grammatical features of spoken language that might be profitably taught in an explicit way in key stages 1 to 4. What does attention to these specific features of spoken language demonstrate about the value of concentrating on talk as a system, that is not looking at it primarily from the perspective of written language?

Do we now have a ‘good enough’ description of the grammatical features of spoken English to suggest it should be taught?

What should be the main reason for such teaching:

- to improve pupils’ spoken language performance?
- to develop their understanding of speech/writing differences and thus improve writing performance?
- because it is intrinsically interesting?

Caroline Coffin’s paper considers similar questions in relation to a particular model of linguistic description. She too considers some of the functional ways in which speech and writing differ.

- Would it help teachers to plan the curriculum if they knew the different generic forms in the spoken and written language needed for learning?
- Can we begin to use ideas about distinct genres in talk to indicate possible lines of progression?

The grammar of talk: spoken English, grammar and the classroom

Ron Carter, School of English Studies, University of Nottingham

Introduction

In this paper the notion of ‘the grammar of talk’ tries to capture both the specific grammar of spoken English and grammar as a metaphor for structural and generic organisation. One key argument running through the paper is that the study of grammar should go beyond invented, decontextualised and sentence-level examples and that considerable benefits can accrue to language and literacy development from such a standpoint. A main aim is to present recent research findings in the analysis of spoken and written grammar, focusing on those patterns and tendencies which most sharply distinguish spoken forms. Another key argument in this paper is that speakers

and writers make choices and that those choices depend on the kinds of meaning which speakers make and, crucially, on the evolving interpersonal relationships and identities co-constructed between speaker and listener. Nonetheless, there is no suggestion that there is a narrow or neat one-for-one fit between forms of language and particular meanings, nor that speakers might not select a highly formal grammar of talk in informal social contexts and vice versa.

Writing

For many centuries, dictionaries and grammars of the English language have taken the written language as a benchmark for what is proper and standard in the language, incorporating written and often literary examples to illustrate the best usage. Accordingly, the spoken language has been downgraded and has come to be regarded as relatively inferior to written manifestations. Both in the teaching and learning of English and modern foreign languages and in educational institutions and in society in general, oral skills are normally valued less, with literacy being equated almost exclusively with a capacity to read and write. In this respect, the similarity of the words 'literature' and 'literacy' is revealing.¹ What is written and what is literate is accorded high cultural status. Even dramatic performances are often valued and studied primarily as written text.

Many societies also value what is permanent over what is ephemeral. The capacity of the written language to generate enduring records of human achievement or of sacred significance, even when these records may have originated in oral discourse, is central to ascriptions of its value. At least until the advent of the tape recorder and of sound and visual recordings, speech is seen in social and cultural terms as much more temporally bound and is only 'recordable' as part of individual or folk memory. In a related way, the works of good writers have been identified for centuries and exemplars of excellence, such as Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* or Sir Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici*, held up for imitation. Similarly, classical rhetorical models have been available to demonstrate highly formal, often pre-planned and public oratorical and debating skills. By contrast, there are few available models of the good conversationalist or of what is agreed to be successful practice in less formal conversational exchanges. Even when spoken language has been preserved, it is in the form of a transcribed 'text' which, as we will see shortly, provides its own kind of distortion of the communicative complexity of the original source and is often laid out in such a way as to highlight and discredit its 'formless' character.

Speaking

Perhaps the greatest single event in the history of linguistics was the invention of the tape recorder, which for the first time has captured natural conversation and made it accessible to systematic study.²

The spoken language has also been largely under-described and under-theorised within linguistic science. Examples of language for analysis have been based on the assumption that language consists of sentences and that, because of the essentially detached and context-free nature of written texts, context can be more or less removed from the equation. The history of linguistics in the twentieth century has been largely a history of the study of detached written examples with all the characteristic features of spoken discourse dismissed as peripheral to the enquiry.

¹ See Carter, R, *Keywords in language and literacy*, Routledge, London, 1995; Carter, R, *Investigating English discourse: language, literacy and literature*, Routledge, London, 1997; and Williams, R, *Keywords*, second edition, Fontana, London, 1983.

² Halliday, MAK, *An introduction to functional grammar*, second edition, Arnold, London, 1994, page xxiii.

Linguists working within alternative traditions have taken a different path, especially in the last 30 years or so, and there has been a growing recognition of the importance of spoken language. Halliday, for example, argues that the potential of the language system is much more richly realised in spoken than in written discourse. For Halliday it is the essentially unconscious nature of speech, the fact that the system is so mobile and in a constant state of flux, alert to context, responsive to the smallest and most subtle changes in its contextual environment which makes it so fascinating.³ Spoken language thus represents language ‘at full stretch’, so much so that even the most detailed, faithful and sympathetic transcription cannot hope to capture it.

The speech–writing continuum

There are, of course, many links between speech and writing. There are many written messages, such as text messages on mobile phones, e-mails or communications on computer chat lines, that work in a manner closer to spoken language. Most formal, public speeches, for example, are carefully crafted, written-to-be-spoken texts, even if they are often written to sound spontaneous and natural. Generally, different models have grown up for analysing spoken and written language and it is widely agreed that there is no simple, single difference between speech and writing.⁴

The most useful way to conceive of the differences is to see them as scales along which individual texts can be plotted. For example, casual conversations tend to be highly involved interpersonally (detachment or distancing oneself by one speaker or another is often seen as socially problematic). Public notices, on the other hand, tend to be detached, for example stating regulations or giving warnings. Note, however, we have to say ‘tend’; we cannot speak in absolutes, only about what is most typical. Speech is most typically created ‘on-line’ and received in real time. Writing most typically is created ‘off-line’, that is composed at one time and read at another, and there is usually time for reflection and revision (an exception would be real-time e-mailing by two computers simultaneously on-line to each other – one of the reasons why e-mail is often felt to be more like talk than writing). What is more, written discourses tend to display more obvious degrees of structure and organisation, whereas talk can appear rather loose and fragmented, though this may be merely a perception of the researcher, and probably does not correspond at all to how the ‘insiders’ to a conversation experience things. These and other possible features of variation enable us to plot the characteristics of different types of discourse as ‘more or less’ typically written or typically spoken.

Computer corpora

In the latter part of the twentieth century there were very rapid advances both in audio-technology and in the development of tape recorders and there are now extensive collections available of people speaking in both formal and informal contexts. Major collections of data include:

- the British National Corpus (BNC), which now totals 10 million words of spoken British English;
- the five-million-word Cambridge and Nottingham Corpus of Discourse of English (CANCODE) held at Nottingham University; and
- the spoken component of the 400-million-word Collins Birmingham University International Language Database (COBUILD) corpus held at the University of Birmingham.

³ Ibid, pages xxi to xxiii.

⁴ This point has been put well by Halliday, MAK, *Spoken and written language*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1989; and, more recently, by McCarthy, M, ‘Discourse’, in Carter R and Nunan, D (eds), *The Cambridge guide to teaching English to speakers of other languages*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001.

The spoken examples collected in these corpora are obtained in naturally occurring everyday contexts, such as service encounters, workplace exchanges and family conversations, often involving intimate exchanges and personal narratives. The examples are sometimes collected without the knowledge of the participants, but are not used without their permission. People recorded in modern British corpora come from different regions of the country and careful preparation ensures a balance between the gender, age and social class of the speakers, a representativeness which means that the data recorded cannot be simply dismissed as examples of 'non-standard' dialects. The data collected on tape are transcribed and made computer-readable so that very fast and sophisticated computer programmes can then identify frequent or salient structures alongside the actual contexts in which they are used.

Inevitably, the presence of such forms causes difficulties for our descriptions of English grammar and leads to questions about what it is now possible to call 'standard' English. Such forms are standard in so far as they are used standardly by all speakers even if these same forms do not appear or only very rarely appear in 'standard' published grammars of English.

A sample stretch of talk

A conversational transcript immediately raises the problem of the frequent occurrence of units that do not conform to the notion of well-formed 'sentences' with main and subordinate clauses. Conversational turns often consist just of phrases, or of incomplete clauses, or of clauses with subordinate clause characteristics but which are apparently not attached to any main clause, though they clearly carry a sizeable share of the communicative load. Example 1 comes from CANCODE data and shows some of the kinds of units frequently encountered in a spoken corpus. Problematic areas for a traditional grammar are italicised.

Example 1 (speakers are sitting at the dinner table talking about a car accident that happened to the father of one of the speakers)

<Speaker 1> I'll just take that off. *Take that off.*

<Speaker 2> *All looks great.*

<Speaker 3> [laughs]

<Speaker 2> Mm.

<Speaker 3> Mm.

<Speaker 2> I think your dad was amazed wasn't he at the damage.

<Speaker 4> Mm.

<Speaker 2> It's not so much the parts. It's the labour charges for

<Speaker 4> *Oh that. For a car.*

<Speaker 2> Have you got hold of it?

<Speaker 1> Yeah.

<Speaker 2> *It was a bit erm.*

<Speaker 1> Mm.

<Speaker 3> Mm.

<Speaker 2> *A bit.*

<Speaker 3> That's right.

<Speaker 2> I mean they said they'd have to take his car in for two days. And he says All it is is s straightening a panel. *And they're like, Oh no. It's all new panel. You can't do this.*

<Speaker 3> *Any erm problem.*

<Speaker 2> *As soon as they hear insurance claim.* Oh. Let's get it right.

<Speaker 3> Yeah. Yeah. *Anything to do with*

<Speaker 1> *Wow.*
 <Speaker 3> *coach work is er*
 <Speaker 1> *Right.*
 <Speaker 3> *fatal isn't it.*
 <Speaker 1> *Now.*

Here we may observe the following general phenomena.

- Punctuation is marked by the taking of turns rather than by a transition from one sentence to another. These turns are not neat and tidy, however. The speakers regularly interrupt each other, or speak at the same time, intervene in one another's contributions or overlap in their speaking turns.
- The speakers co-construct each other's discourse. There is back-channelling ('Mm' and 'Yeah'), in which speakers give supportive feedback to each other.
- There are aborted or incomplete structures ('It was a bit erm' and 'A bit'). 'Incomplete' structures can be collaboratively completed by others or simply left as understood ('That's right').
- This conversational extract involves more than one speaker, but the same features of conversational management apply whether the talk is multi-party or two-party.

The notion of sentence does not apply easily to the data.

- There are indeterminate structures. (Is the second 'Take that off' an ellipted form of 'I'll just take that off'? Is it an imperative? Is 'All looks great' well formed? What is the status of 'And they're like'? For example, 'like' appears to function here to mark direct speech.)
- Ellipsis is common ('fatal, isn't it?'). Ellipsis occurs when words are omitted because it is assumed that they can be understood from context or from shared knowledge between speaker and hearer.
- There are phrasal utterances, communicatively complete in themselves, but not sentences ('Oh that. For a car' and 'Any erm problem').
- There are 'subordinate' clauses not obviously connected to any particular main clause ('As soon as they hear insurance claim').
- There are words whose grammatical class is unclear ('Wow' and 'Now'). For example, 'Now' seems to be organisational or structural, functioning to close down one section of the conversation and to move on to another topic. Such 'discourse markers' connect one phase of the discourse with another.

These phenomena, normal in everyday talk, raise questions about the nature of basic units and classes in a spoken grammar, and the solution would seem to be to raise the status of the word, phrase and clause to that of (potentially) independent units, to recognise the potential for joint production of units, and to downplay the status of the sentence as the main target unit for communication. But the fact that well-formed sentences exist side-by-side with a variety of other types of units raises further questions too, which include:

- What status does the traditional notion of S(subject)V(verb)O(object) clause structure have in conversational data?
- Are the 'ellipted' utterances of conversation really just a reduced and partial form of the 'real' or 'full' grammar?
- Or are the well-formed sentences of written texts elaborated versions of the sparse and economical basic spoken structures, elaborated because they have less contextual support in writing and, therefore, necessarily must increase the amount of redundancy?

There is by no means a simple answer to these questions, but one's stance towards them can have major implications for what is considered correct or acceptable in a grammar. External evidence points us towards a socially embedded grammar, one whose criteria for acceptability are based on adequate communicability in real contexts, among real participants. It is evidence that cannot simply be dismissed as 'ungrammatical'; only a decontextualised view of language would sanction such a view.

Basic forms of spoken grammar

Here are some of the most common examples of specifically spoken grammar forms. They are not selected at random but on the basis of an examination of the extensive computer corpora of spoken English outlined above. They are standardly spoken by users of British English throughout different regions, occupations and contexts of use by speakers of different ages, gender and social class and occupation.

- Forms which are termed 'heads' occur at the beginning of clauses and help listeners orient to a topic:

The white house on the corner, is that where she lives?

That girl, Jill, her sister, she works in our office.

Paul, in this job that he's got now, when *he* goes into the office *he's* never quite sure where he's going to be sent.

A friend of mine, his uncle had the taxi firm when we had the wedding.

His cousin in Beccles, her boyfriend, his parents bought *him* a Ford Escort for his birthday.

- Forms which are termed 'tails' occur at the end of clauses, normally echoing an antecedent pronoun, and help to reinforce what we are saying:

She's a very good swimmer *Jenny* is.

It's difficult to eat, isn't it, *spaghetti*?

I'm going to have steak and fries, *I am*.

It can leave you feeling very weak, it can, though, apparently, *shingles*, can't it.

- In an 'ellipsis', subjects and verbs are omitted because we can assume our listeners know what we mean:

Didn't know that film was on tonight. (*I*)

Sounds good to me. (*It, that*)

Lots of things to tell you about the trip to Barcelona. (*There are*)

A: Are you going to Leeds this weekend?

B: Yes, I must. (*go to Leeds this weekend*)

Ellipsis in spoken English is mainly situational, affecting people and things in the immediate situation.

- 'Discourse markers' are where particular words or phrases are used to mark boundaries in conversation between one topic or bit of business and the next (for example, items such as 'anyway', 'right', 'okay', 'I see', 'I mean', 'mind you', 'well', 'right', 'what's more', 'so' and 'now'). Thus, people speaking face to face or on the phone often use 'anyway' to show that they wish to finish that particular topic or return to another topic (for example, '*Anyway*, give Jean a ring and see what she says'). Similarly, 'right' often serves to indicate that a speaker is ready to move on to the next phase of business (for example, '*Right*, okay, we'd better try to phone and see what they have to report').
- In casual conversation in English there is evidence that positioning is even more flexible, brought about by the exigencies of real-time communication. For example, 'adverbials' may occur after tags and 'adverbs' (not normally considered amenable to final placement in written text) regularly occur clause-finally:

Spanish is more widely used isn't it *outside of Europe*?

I was worried I was going to lose it and I did *almost*.

You know which one I mean *probably*.

(Speaker is talking about his job) It's a bit panicky, but I've not got any deadlines like you have *though*.

It should be a lot easier playing Poland after Germany, shouldn't it, *in a way*?

The ordering of elements in the clause is likely to be different in spoken and written texts because of the real-time constraints of unrehearsed spoken language and the need in speech for clear acts of topicalisation to appropriately orientate the listener and, as here, to soften and qualify what has been said.

- 'Vague language' includes words and phrases such as 'thing', 'stuff', 'or so', 'or something', 'or anything', 'or whatever' and 'sort of'. Vague language softens expressions so that they do not appear too direct or unduly authoritative and assertive. When we interact with others, there are times when it is necessary to give accurate and precise information; in many informal contexts, however, speakers prefer to convey information which is softened in some way, although such vagueness is often wrongly taken as a sign of careless thinking or sloppy expression. Therefore, a more accurate term should be 'purposefully vague language'.
- 'Deixis' describes the 'orientational' features of language and includes words and phrases which point to particular features of the immediate situation. Deictic features occur in both written and spoken language, but are more common in spoken English where they function in particular to locate an utterance spatially. Examples are words such as 'this', 'these', 'that', 'those', 'here' and 'there'. Deictic words are especially common in situations where joint actions are undertaken and where things can be seen by the participants (for example, 'Could *we* just move *that* into *this* corner *here*?') Temporal deictic words such as 'now' and personal pronouns such as 'I' and 'we' are also common. They indicate the extent to which a speaker is close to or involved with something at the moment of utterance; they refer to who is speaking and who is included or excluded from the message. The following example contains deictics which orientate the listener interpersonally and in time and space:

Then I'd like to pop in to *that* little shop *over there*.

Looks like *that's* the right *one* for *them*.

Deictic words are likely to co-occur with ellipsis. Both features assume shared knowledge.

- In most standard written grammars modality is described mainly in terms of modal verbs (for example, 'may', 'might', 'can', 'could', 'must', 'should' and 'ought to'). In spoken English, however, the picture is more varied and 'modal expressions' play a part in making sure, in particular, that utterances don't sound too assertive or definite. Like 'vague language', these modal expressions help to soften what is said. They include words and phrases such as 'possibly', 'probably', 'I don't know', 'I don't think', 'I think', 'I suppose' and 'perhaps'. In the following example, students are talking to each other in a group. They all know each other well and are talking informally about how they have changed since coming to university.

A: But you don't notice so much in yourself, do you? *I don't think so, on the whole*.

B: *I don't know*. I *definitely* feel different from the first year. *I don't think* I look any different *or anything*.

A: You're *bound* to keep changing really, all your whole life, *hopefully*.

B: *I don't know*, I *think* it's *probably* a change coming away, *I suppose*.

Modal expressions help to encode shifts in stance to what we say. They are a particular feature of the face-to-face nature of spoken communication. So, an

utterance may start definite, but then be softened before the utterance is completed or an utterance may start tentatively and then become more definite before being softened again.

I suppose it must be sort of difficult to phone or whatever.

I feel they maybe should resign really.

We maybe ought to perhaps have a word with him about it?

- Spoken English is for the most part spontaneous, on-line communication with only limited planning and thinking time. This is particularly marked in clause structure in spoken English by the way in which clauses are chained together in a sequence with one clause unit added to another in a linear and incremental way. Speakers do not normally have time to construct over-elaborate patterns of main and subordinate clauses. Much more common are ‘chains’ of clauses linked by coordinating conjunctions (such as ‘and’) or by simple subordinating conjunctions (such as ‘cos’ or ‘so’) which, in fact, often function to coordinate rather than subordinate information in a dynamic and listener-sensitive way. In the following example the speaker is talking about her friend, Melanie, who was looking for a part-time job:

Well, no, Melanie’s actually still a student *and* she still has ten hours of lectures a week, *so* she works in McDonald’s in her spare time, *cos* she needs the money, *and* she works in McDonald’s in Hatfield.

In the following example, the speaker is describing a motor accident in which she was involved:

I was driving along talking to Jill *and* we’d, like, stopped at some traffic lights *and* then – bang – there was this almighty crash *and* we got pushed forward all of a sudden.

When they do occur, subordinate clauses stand alone and function to highlight or to reinforce a topic or function as a signal that another speaker may want to take a turn, thus keeping a dialogue ‘open’:

I can’t angle it to shine on the music stand, and the bulb’s gone, *which doesn’t help*.

Such clauses often occur after a pause, after feedback from a listener or to elaborate on what someone has just said. The clauses also comment on what has been said, often introducing an evaluative (positive or negative) viewpoint. In the following example ‘Which is great’ reinforces the topic:

A: Well actually one person has applied.

B: Mm.

A: *Which is great*.

B: *Though it’s all relative, of course*.

- A final example, from *The Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English*,⁵ reinforces a number of the above observations. It also shows how in spoken English clauses can be simply juxtaposed.

Sure we got there um at seven actually around six fifteen and class starts at seven and I went up in this building that was about five or six stories high and I was the only one there and I was the only one there I was. And I yeah I was thinking gosh you know is this the right place or may be everyone’s inside waiting for me to come in there’s nothing said you know come on in knock on the door and come in or anything like that.

⁵ *The Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English*, Longman, 1999, page 1079.

Conclusion

It would be a mistake to assume that these forms of grammar, though common in spoken English, are exclusive to spoken English. For example, the relative immediacy of forms such as e-mail communication, advertising copy, and some notes, letters and memos means that informality is often the preferred style and that a relative symmetry of relationship is deliberately constructed by such choices.

At the present time, there may also be a broader cultural explanation for the phenomenon of spoken forms entering written discourse. In the twentieth century, discourse has become more democratic. As society has become less formal and ceremonial in such domains as dress and social behaviour, so too the language has changed to more informal and symmetrical modes. People speak to each other more as equals and it is inevitable that they should also increasingly write in similar ways to each other, especially in contexts such as advertising or e-mail communication where it is important not to talk down. As collections of recorded spoken data such as the BNC develop and expand, so more evidence of this kind will come to light and so our descriptive grammars and dictionaries are being rewritten in support of such evidence.

This paper has attempted to prepare some ground and to offer material for discussion. It argues for the importance of greater knowledge about grammar and that such knowledge should go beyond single written sentences. It would be naïve to suggest that the forms of grammar described here represent the whole story by any means. For example, in discussions of spoken grammar how far is it possible to proceed without more detailed prosodic information and description?

Among the key questions for classroom exploration of the differences and distinctions between spoken and written language and of the organisation of different genres of talk is how might greater knowledge of the forms of spoken grammar assist in the construction of more effective and higher quality writing? Here, in particular, more work on clause patterning in spoken and written English would begin to lay a basis for analysis.

Although the focus is on spoken grammar, it would also be naïve to suggest that successful talk or the competence to move from informal to formal modes and back again is simply a matter of grammatical knowledge. There are many ways in which successful written and, especially, spoken communication goes beyond language – as effective teaching recognises.

Spoken English and the question of grammar: the role of the functional model

Caroline Coffin, Open University

Introduction

Given the nature of spoken text, the first requirement of an appropriate grammar is its ability to account for stretches of language (including recurring types of text or genres), in addition to clause level patterns. Second, the grammatical model needs to be part of a wider theory of language that recognises the functional nature and educational purposes of spoken text. The model also needs to be designed in a sufficiently comprehensive way so as to account for grammatical forms in speech and writing (as well as, to some extent, visual forms) and to elucidate the differences between them. Finally, although concepts and terminology must be principled and systematic, they need to be accessible and useful in relation to educational objectives.

In broad terms, the choices of grammars that have been drawn on for educational purposes, both English medium and ESL/EFL contexts are:

- traditional grammar;
- structural grammar;
- transformational generative grammar; and
- functional grammar.

These four paradigms should not be seen as discrete descriptions. Traditional grammar, for example, is the starting point for functional grammar. Functional grammar is best viewed as a semantically rich elaboration of traditional grammar and should be seen as complementary rather than as a replacement. Structuralist approaches to language have also influenced functional grammar in their concern with describing patterns of spoken language as they occur within particular communities.

Two underlying principles of functional grammar that are particularly relevant to its consideration as a framework for understanding spoken English and for defining areas for teaching are:

- the notion of varieties of spoken English – the grammatical patterns of spoken English language vary according to the particular social context in which they are produced; and
- the notion of choice – functional grammar emphasises the semantic effect of using one form rather than another.

Functional grammar and educational priorities

Functional grammar can be termed an ‘extravagant’ grammar with a very full and detailed theoretical framework and metalanguage. Therefore, within a pedagogic context, selections have to be made that are accessible and relevant to teacher-educators, teachers and pupils. In the case of teachers, an explicit understanding of grammar would be valuable in relation to:

- educational diagnosis;
- syllabus and materials design and selection of texts and tasks; and
- teaching and learning – teacher talk.

Educational diagnosis typically focuses on ‘conceptual’ problems. A consideration of linguistic competence is rare. Learning a new curriculum area, however, is largely a

process of learning the language or discourse of the subject.¹ Therefore, professional understanding of grammatical structure can help teachers to recognise the linguistic basis of learners' difficulties and the ways in which their grammatical repertoires may need to be extended. For example, developing resources for creating field-specific taxonomies or learning to distinguish in which contexts one type of genre is more likely to be highly valued than another type (for example 'argument' as opposed to 'narrative').

Identifying the grammatical 'gaps' and needs of students can inform the design and implementation of syllabi, as well as the selection of appropriate texts and tasks. In terms of text selection, an understanding of the mode continuum can enable teachers to consciously select spoken texts which vary in challenge and accessibility. The more aware teachers are of linguistically difficult structures, the greater the possibility for them to monitor and make accessible oral texts/presentations. For example, in the case of video programmes that are formal in style, a 'pre-listening' activity could serve to unpack difficult or dense structures.

An area of research, the importance of which is increasingly recognised, is classroom talk, particularly teacher talk.² According to Mercer, language is our most important pedagogic tool in that it can provide learners with the intellectual guidance and support necessary for making intellectual achievements that would not be possible to accomplish alone. Underpinned by the theories of the Russian psychologist Vygotsky and the American educational psychologist Bruner, recognition of the pedagogic function of teacher talk, is increasingly influencing contemporary pedagogic practice.³

Basic concepts underpinning functional grammar

Within the framework of functional grammar, the linguistic and the social are brought together in a coherent and systematic manner. As illustrated in Figure 1, language is theorised as being in a dialectical relationship with both the wider cultural context and the specific situational context in which it is produced. Figure 1 shows how the cultural context is related to the types of text that have developed as 'cultural tools' to achieve particular social purposes (such as 'bartering in a market' or 'giving instructions'). The social context, on the other hand, is related to choices made at the level of vocabulary and grammar (the lexicogrammar). Choices at this level depend on the nature of the activity or the subject-matter of the text (the field), the social relations between interactants (the tenor) and the medium or channel of the interaction (the mode).

¹ Christie, F and Martin, JR, *Genre and institutions, social processes in the workplace and school*, London, Cassell, Open linguistics series, 1997; Rothery, J, *Exploring literacy in school English, write it right: resources for literacy and learning*, Sydney, Disadvantaged Schools Program Metropolitan East Region, NSW Department of School Education, 1994; and Wignell, P, Genre across the curriculum, *Linguistics and education*, volume 6, 1994, pages 355 to 372.

² Christie, F, *On pedagogic discourse*, Melbourne, Institute of Education, University of Melbourne, 1994; Iedema, R, Save the talk for after the listening: the realisation of regulative discourse in teacher talk, *Language and education*, special issue, volume 10, Avon, Multilingual Matters Ltd, 1996; Mercer, N, *The guided construction of knowledge: talk amongst teachers and learners*, Clevedon, Multilingual Matters, 1995; Mercer, N, 'Language for teaching a language', in C Candlin and N Mercer (eds), *English language teaching in its social context*, Routledge, London, 2000.

³ Feez, S, *Text-based syllabus design*, New South Wales, AMES, Macquarie University, 1998; Mercer, NM, Wegerif, R and Dawes, L, Children and the development of reason in the classroom, *British educational research journal*, 25(1), 1999, pages 95 to 112; and Rothery, J, 'Making changes: developing an educational linguistics', in R Hasan and G Williams (eds), *Literacy in society*, Harlow, UK, Addison Wesley Longman, 1996.

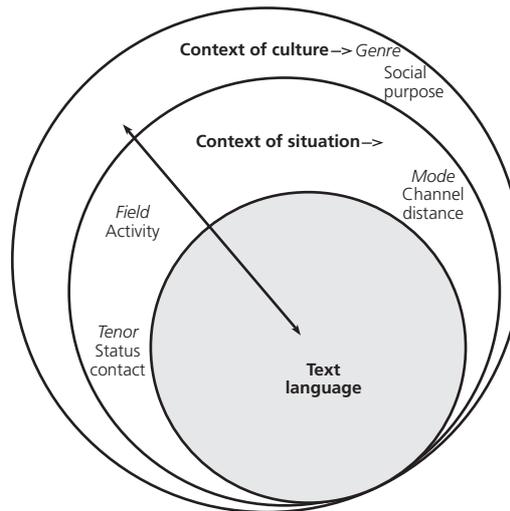


Figure 1: A functional model of language

With reference to the notion of social purpose and genre, the functional model posits that in every culture different kinds of spoken or written texts are used to achieve different social purposes. Each of these texts or ‘genres’ has a distinct structure. Therefore, genres can be defined as staged, goal-oriented social processes. They are referred to ‘as social processes because members of a culture interact with each other to achieve them; as goal oriented because they have evolved to get things done; and as staged because it usually takes more than one step for participants to achieve their goals’.⁴

Applying the grammar to a sample of spoken language

The level of genre

The following example⁵ of a narrative genre has each of its main stages identified and labelled. The purpose of a narrative genre is to tell an entertaining story in which an unusual, problematic event needs to be resolved. The main stages a narrative text moves through in order to achieve its purpose can be described as ‘orientation’, ‘complication’ and ‘resolution’, with ‘coda (personal evaluation)’ and ‘evaluation’ as optional stages.

Text 1

- Orientation Anne: Years ago I was, when I was married, about I don’t know how long ago about 10 or 12 years ago I lived in Mosman and I had a really nice neighbour called Stan. Sometimes he used to cut the grass outside our place and sometimes we’d cut the grass outside his place.
- Complication And one weekend, I was away when this happened, but he’d told me about it much later. This weekend Stan cut the grass outside the front and was clipping along the edges of our garden with a little axe.

⁴ Martin, JR, Christie, F and Rothery, J, ‘Social processes in education’, in B Stierer and J Maybin (eds), *Language, literacy and learning in educational practice*, Clevedon, UK, Multilingual Matters, 1994, page 233.

⁵ Source: de Silva Joyce, H and Burns, A, *Focus on grammar*, Sydney, National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research (NCELTR), Macquarie University, 1999.

Jane: Mmm
 Anne: And a funnel web spider jumped out and ...
 Jane: A funnel web!
 [Story continues]
 Resolution Anne: No the doctor called the ambulance and they put him, took him straight to the North Shore [hospital] and ...
 [Further dialogue moving towards conclusion]
 Anne: He was terribly lucky.
 Jane: Ohhh.
 Coda Anne: I mean I would never have reacted that way would you?
 Jane: My God, doesn't it give you the creeps?
 Anne: Yes, absolutely dreadful.

Context of situation

At a grammatical level, 'field' has consequences for:

- the kinds of participants in the text;
- the processes that they are involved in; and
- the circumstances that surround them.

For example, in Text 1, the participants are primarily human and 'specific' (as opposed to abstract or generic) and the circumstances exclusively concerned with time and place (as opposed to cause). In the orientation stage, the processes include relational and mental ones, whereas in the peak of the complication stage most processes are material/action. These different patterns are illustrated below. Participants are in bold, processes are underlined and circumstances are in italics.

Years ago I was, when I was [relational] married, about I don't know [mental] how long ago *about 10 or 12 years ago* I lived in Mosman and I had [relational] a **really nice neighbour called Stan**. Sometimes he used to cut the grass *outside our place* and sometimes we'd cut the grass *outside his place*.

Tenor is related to the grammar in terms of mood, modality and appraisal choices (among others). Mood is concerned with the patterns of clause type, such as interrogative, imperative and declarative. Modality refers to the set of linguistic resources for expressing the writer's assessment of probabilities. Appraisal refers to a set of resources for expressing particular judgements and valuations of phenomena. The coda stage of Text 1 draws on all these resources. Below modality is in bold, appraisal underlined and mood choice annotated in italics.

Anne: I mean I **would never** have reacted that way **would** you? *polar interrogative/tag*
 Jane: My God, doesn't it give you the creeps? *polar interrogative*
 Anne: Yes, absolutely dreadful. *minor*

What is the role of metalanguage – is it necessary?

The rich metalanguage of functional grammar outlined briefly above provides teachers with both a valuable resource and a practical problem. It is valuable in that it provides a shared language for professional exchange and development and is a means for making clear and explicit statements about students' language use (thus eliminating ambiguous and vague comments such as 'a bit muddled', 'it didn't really hang together' or 'too colloquial'. The problem is the time needed to learn the metalanguage and the issue of how much of it is useful and helpful to share with students.

Various approaches have been taken when applying functional grammar to educational contexts. In contexts where metalanguage has been explicitly taught to children it has generally been found that they experience little difficulty in acquiring terms (for example, 'genre', 'process', 'theme', 'participant' and 'circumstance'):

Children can indeed learn functional grammar. My students (*year 6 – approximately age 10 and 11*) have all been comfortable with the use of technical terms to describe language, seeing no real difference between this work and the technicality of other curriculum areas such as science.⁶

In Australian educational contexts, it is generally held that metalanguage needs to evolve in a meaningful way rather than being marked out or taught for its own sake:

Any metalanguage is developed as a tool to facilitate the exploration and greater understanding of something, and needs to be appropriate to the task and directed towards it.⁷

Most typically, the metalanguage of functional grammar is used where the term has no corresponding term in traditional grammar or where the technical term is particularly descriptive, for example 'circumstance', 'process', 'participant' and 'theme'. In some cases, labels which are more functionally descriptive or meaningful to the audience replace less transparent terms (for example, the use of 'pointer' instead of 'determiner' or 'describer' instead of 'epithet').

More recently, there has been an attempt to maintain traditional terms whilst providing teachers with a systematic and functional description of language.⁸ How effective this is has yet to be evaluated.

Conclusion

This paper has illustrated some of the ways in which a functional model of grammar can contribute to an exploration of the grammar of spoken English, the nature of talk in the classroom and what pupils should and can be taught about the language features of spoken English.

⁶ French, R, Teaching children functional grammar: a year 6 experience, *Interchange*, number 27, 1995, page 24.

⁷ Painter, C, *Into the mother tongue: a case study in early language development*, London, Pinter, 1985, page 43.

⁸ Derewianka, B, *A grammar companion for primary teachers*, Newtown, Sydney, Australia, Primary English Teaching Association, 1998.

Is there a case for considering talk as part of the oral heritage and as a performance skill?

Roger Hewitt's paper suggests that the national curriculum treats spoken language very differently from the written language. The reading programmes of study focus on the development of pupils' reading skills and on what pupils should read. A wide range of text types and genres is specified at each key stage and within that range there is a detailed prescribed literary heritage. Whilst national curriculum requirements set a range of purposes and contexts for speaking and listening, there is no specification of an oral heritage.

- Is there a case for an oral heritage in the national curriculum? What might it look like and how might it be taught?

Drama is also a national curriculum requirement in key stages 1 to 4. While schools are not required to work with professional drama practitioners to help them in their curriculum coverage, the assumption in official publications is that there are clear benefits in doing so.

- What is it about working in role, enacting and performing that promotes pupils' spoken language development? What specific contribution can professional drama practitioners make to this work?

Speaking and listening: notes on the possibilities for grammar on leaving the Moebius strip

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Introduction

If, in the reading component of the national curriculum, pupils were primarily directed towards the written work of other pupils, and school reading and writing became a loop of pupil production from which pupils could not escape, their knowledge of language would be unnecessarily limited. This paper will argue that since the mid-1980s, from the work of the Department of Education and Science's Assessment of Performance Unit (APU) on speaking and listening, through Kingman and Cox, this is exactly how the concept of speaking and listening within the English secondary curriculum has developed. This trajectory has severely cramped the possibilities available for the formal exploration of spoken language in the classroom. It will be shown that if explicit teaching about oral literature were to be introduced as a necessary and substantial part of the speaking and listening curriculum, there could be benefits to pupils' understanding of grammar and their knowledge of language more widely. At present, however, widespread ignorance, even at tertiary level, of the nature and scope of oral literature remains a major obstacle to the achievement of this end.

The definition of the scope of speaking and listening as articulated in the English component of the national curriculum is derived from what had been established mainly during the 1980s. That work took place especially through the tests and surveys carried out by the APU, the development of the ‘oral communication’ component in the GCSE English examination and then through its endorsement and considerable refinement within the Cox Report.¹ This approach placed especial emphasis on the social, transactional and cognitive dimensions.

This approach, it will be remembered, stood in stark contrast to the two prevailing older traditions that it superseded, what might be called the ‘augustan’ and ‘romantic’ approaches to speaking and listening. The first of these has origins in the classroom activities of the nineteenth and early-twentieth century, which readily divide into the ‘aesthetics’ of oral performances (the recitation of dramatic and poetic texts from the canon of English literature) and the ‘discursive’ tradition of the school, house or class debate, and the solo ‘talk on a chosen topic’, where the emphasis was on logic of argument and clarity of expression. The (usually doomed) pupil was seen as an acolyte in a high culture of oratory, underwritten by its extension into the universities, the law courts and parliament.

The second and younger tradition was one which, through the 1960s and 1970s, came to supplant the augustan tradition. Its emphasis was less on a great tradition existing *outside* the individual voice of the pupil, and far more on the expression of the individual in a social context that was more often assumed to be disconnected from powerful institutions and high culture and rooted instead in ‘community’. Here we find an emphasis on expressive forms such as popular narrative and the folk song, and on oral communication as an activity taking place within face-to-face situations drawing on a shared community culture.

Neither of these earlier versions of speaking and listening were totally absent from the model that emerged during the 1980s, although there were heavy casualties and some elements came to exist only as rhetorical shadows of their former selves.

As was observed at the time,² and as the APU team itself observed,³ the basic theoretical approach of the APU’s assessment procedures was grounded in a concern for ‘function’, and centred on ‘appropriateness’ of utterance in relation to both ‘purpose’ and ‘audience’. It stressed not notions of ‘clarity’ and so on, conceived in the abstract, but of socially interacting individuals using language in ‘real ways’ in ‘real’ situations. Behind this lay the work of Dell Hymes and, more obliquely, the socially located, functional approach of Michael Halliday, together with a host of other writers in applied, socio and psycho linguistics.

In its foundational work, the APU’s emphasis on ‘function’ and the ‘social’ emphasis involved through the specification of the ‘orientation to listener’ were both important in marking out the social dimension alongside other dimensions of oral communication. This took the overarching form of a Hymesian concern with the uses of language and their contexts and was also evident in the GCSE oral communication syllabus outlines, generated by the various regional exam boards.

¹ Department of Education and Science, English for ages 5–16, proposals of the Secretary of State for Education and Science and the Secretary of State for Wales (‘the Cox Report’), London, Department of Education and Science and the Welsh Office, 1989, paragraph 15.17.

² McClure, M, ‘Assessing spoken language: testing times for talk’, in N Mercer (ed), *Language and literacy from an educational perspective*, volume 2, Milton Keynes, Open University Press, 1987.

³ Assessment of Performance Unit, *The framework for the assessment of language*, Windsor, NFER-Nelson, 1986, page 2.

Several of the characteristically APU emphases were subsequently visible in the language of a number of sections in the Cox Report, notably in its frequent use of such terms as ‘effective speaking and listening’, ‘purpose/a range of purposes’ and (the most characteristic of all) ‘appropriate’. The functional focus of the work of the APU was also evident in the Cox Report. Describing the ‘range of communicative purposes for the spoken word’, the Report mentioned that it may be used ‘to persuade; to explain; to instruct; to entertain’. Nevertheless, in considering the archaeology of today’s speaking and listening terminology, it is important to look not just at the presence of these elements in the Cox Report, but at their configuration within the text as a whole. Here we find a rather more complex narrative, for weaving its voice in alongside the social voice of functional speaking and listening is that of ‘cognition’ and individual intellectual process – the Vygotsky/Bruner input to oracy theory. There is also a high degree of fit with some aspects of the earlier Augustan emphasis on precise articulation, fluency of argument, and the clear expression of facts and ideas, although denuded of its patrician foliage. Indeed, the placement of this emphasis in key and binding paragraphs of the Report is evidence of its fundamental concern with the notion of speaking and listening.

The chapter on speaking and listening⁴ opens with two quotations. One, from Andrew Wilkinson, is a statement stiff with the language of function and social context. The second, from a ‘Project report by children aged 10 to 11’, is an implicit vindication of the cognitive benefits of collaborative, oral classwork. These two messages, the social and the cognitive, perform an enchanting dance through the text: now one of them is to the fore, now the other. As it happens, within the pageant of paragraph headings through which the dancers move, it is always the cognitive one who is caught in the spotlight when the crucial recommendations, targets and programmes form the stage, while the social one peeps on from the wings.

Following the ‘Introduction’, which provides several reasons why speaking and listening are important but which singles out cognitive reasons for first mention, the Report moves on to its exposition of the social/transactional divide. This is a most important section for several reasons. Foremost, it here becomes ultimately clear that the expressive orality so central to the romantic oralists is never to make an appearance on this stage. Furthermore, providing a second layer of insulation against expressive orality, here too any broader social presence is expelled from the final formula. By ‘social language’ the Report meant only talk in which personal relations were foregrounded, and definable purposes, such as the conveying of information, were less important. By ‘transactional’ the Report meant spoken language in which content mattered most: ‘it is information-related or transactional in its functions’.⁵ The definition of speaking and listening offered in the final Cox Report was very close to that of the earlier Primary Report⁶ in the way it prioritised intellectual activity over social function. However, the distinction between ‘social’ and ‘transactional’ language was new and played an important strategic role within the final text.

Section 15.9, headed ‘Social and transactional language’, concludes with a fundamentalist appeal to transactional truths: ‘Communication will have failed if the listener does not discover which platform the train leaves from or how to load the programme into the computer’; and with a glimmer of evangelical transactionalism: ‘An adequate transactional competence should be a real achievement of lasting value’.

⁴ Ibid, Chapter 15, Speaking and listening.

⁵ Ibid, paragraph 15.11.

⁶ Department of Education and Science, *Preliminary report of the Working Party into English: the primary level*, London, Department of Education and Science, 1989.

While various aspects of ‘the social’ were fundamental to the rhetoric and political synthesising of the Report, its presence was essentially as a handmaiden to the transactional and cognitive inputs and it is these that have come to constitute the core of contemporary speaking and listening. The integration of ‘the social’ into the transactional and cognitivist text, however, was one of the Report’s great political achievements – brought about largely by a sleight of hand executed through the politically pliable and ever-willing language of sociolinguistics. It fitted well with the discourse of the new managerialism, especially that concerned with workplace group deliberation that was in the ascendant during the Thatcher/Reagan period. In its ultimate deference to utilitarianism and apparent consensus, however, it is equally adaptable to a more contemporary (Third Way) climate. It is not surprising, therefore, to see this cluster of concepts and terms not only surviving into the present but now in full-throated confidence in the Order⁷ and in the 1999 QCA publication *Teaching speaking and listening in key stages 1 and 2*.⁸

The advantages of the official contemporary speaking and listening syllabus are many. Its aims are unambiguous and plainly practical. Furthermore, its targets can be clearly indicated and pupils’ progress is susceptible to easy testing/assessment. The edifice of key concepts and terms is now well established and understood. However, it is still reasonable to ask how the discourse about speaking and listening really reflects significant oral usage, or indeed what this now familiar creature actually is. It is certainly more constrained and limited than the objectives of reading and writing, on which boundaries are not imposed. Furthermore, the terms of speaking and listening interlock in such a way as to tie speaking and listening intimately together as pupil activities in a way that is not true of reading and writing. New and varied language experiences are introduced to pupils through reading practices that open up their linguistic horizons without limit. By contrast, listening practices indicated in the national curriculum do no such thing. On the contrary, they are severely limited, extending predominantly towards greater mutual understanding and cooperation in group discussions and greater comprehension of what is entailed in giving and receiving information. Reasonable objectives enough, but do they open the potential for complexity and variety in the spoken word? In my view, the established discourse of speaking and listening constitutes a ‘restricted code’ of terms, cramping what is possible and deflecting energies away from some other areas of activity that may be additionally fruitful. What appears to be a two-sided activity, turns out to be the one-sided Moebius strip in which pupils speaking and pupils listening ‘morph’ into one.

In looking to how a formal engagement with language structures could be explored further within the speaking and listening curriculum, I believe a convincing argument can be made for opening up a seam that would have linked well with some aspects of expressive orality. In particular, I mean the more-or-less unmined seam of oral literature. There is, of course, a long and respectable academic literature on the subject. The Russian Formalists were particularly prominent in examining the structure of oral texts and it is evident that some of the best-known analyses of oral literature have been greatly concerned with the formal/structural attributes of texts and groups of texts. To bring some aspects of these approaches into the classroom would be far from impossible. Furthermore, they would be capable of extending in a number of directions, both towards the grammatical analyses of the briefest of utterances, and out to the movement of narrative motifs and genre across continents.

⁷ QCA and DfES, *The national curriculum for English, key stages 1–4*, London, QCA and DfES, 1999.

⁸ QCA, *Teaching speaking and listening in key stages 1 and 2*, London, QCA, 1999.

When a comparison is made between the scope of the reading expected in key stages 3 and 4, the expected listening experiences of pupils seem punitively thin. On the one hand, we have Shakespeare, Marlowe, Goldsmith, Wilde, Austen, Defoe, Wyatt, Eliot and so on; on the other hand, 'live talks and presentations', 'recordings' (for example radio, television and film) and 'discussions in which pupils respond right away'. Indeed, some of the suggested reading matter (for example Greek myth and Arthurian legends) could more properly be studied within the context of an oral literature component of speaking and listening. The furthest that speaking and listening is permitted to stray from the transactional/cognitive loop is in the area of drama, and even here pupils seem to be steered primarily towards their own work. When a richly seamed mountain of oral poetry, heroic epic, domestic narrative, mantic poetry, ballads, blues, raps, calypsos, praise poems, worksongs, historical chronicles and political satire is available, some of it of the utmost compositional complexity and emotional and intellectual depth, it seems a travesty that it is only ever touched on in the classroom fleetingly and without proper context.

Although oral literature once tended to receive primarily recondite scholarly attention (the Chadwicks' *The Growth of Literature*⁹ and Bowra's *Primitive Song*¹⁰ may be the best-known historical collections), the gap between such works and popular non-academic collections of 'folk-tales', ballads and 'oral traditions' has been in-filled considerably by much excellent and accessible work that would be capable of informing an oral literature segment within the English syllabus. There are many resources that could be instrumental in furthering an interest in language form, but here I shall give examples from three of the most obvious areas.

Oral composition and formulae

The early controversies over whether the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were written by a single author or produced within an oral tradition and later written down provides the background to the formal discoveries of Milman Parry and Albert Lord regarding epithets and their place in Homeric hexameters, and the compositional value of verbal formulae. Notwithstanding some technical controversies about oral and written composition, Lord's justifiably famous account of Yugoslavian epic composition in *The Singer of Tales*¹¹ provides a vivid and unforgettable portrait of the oral poet within which a wide range of oral genres may be recognised. English language examples of this process are readily available – the most obvious of which include forms certainly accessible to pupils at key stages 3 and 4.

Song forms emerging in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century in the southern United States, particularly the blues, whose early development and varied regional elaboration coincided with the advent of recording, are well documented and available. These constitute one of the clearest examples of the nature of oral composition, the establishment of a community of oral performers wittingly and unwittingly generating, exchanging and transforming formulae, and of the interplay between written and oral composition. Examinations of the organisation of phrases within the stanzaic forms that constitute the blues and the role of formulae within these would provide both insight into the history of one popular form of oral expression and into formal constraints on oral language composition more widely.

⁹ Chadwick, HM, *The Growth of Literature*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1932.

¹⁰ Bowra, CM, *Primitive Song*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1962.

¹¹ Lord, Alfred B, *The Singer of Tales*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1960.

These processes could equally well be applied to other accessible forms involving an interplay of oral and written features. In terms of contemporary cultural production, rap is the most obvious candidate. (Interesting structural comparisons might also be made here between certain common rap forms and the late-fifteenth-century poetry of Robert Skelton, especially short, unequal line lengths, iteration of single rhymes and an absence of stanzaic form.) In terms of a purely British oral tradition, however, attention could be paid to Old English poetry – most obviously *Beowulf*, which has been shown to exemplify formulaic composition – and the English and Scottish ballads,¹² which also display the same features but were situated at a juncture of oral and written production similar to that of the blues.

Narrative grammars

Since Propp's *Morphology of the folktale*,¹³ innumerable narrative grammars of different corpi have been produced. However, for simplicity, that grammar produced for narratives of personal experience by Labov and Weletzky has proved one of the most popular and adaptable with a broad spectrum of researchers in the human sciences.¹⁴ The extent of its usage seems to expand with each year, and this may have much to do with its easy comprehensibility and flexibility; this may bode well for its adaptability for classroom purposes. It relies on the identification of just five elements – 'abstract, orientation, complication, resolution, coda'. The collection of, say, family narratives by pupils, and their analysis with the use of this schema, may produce in pupils an interest in the process of formal narrative analysis itself and lead onto some familiarity with, for example, a simplified grammar of fictional oral narrative texts. Even a small set of examples from Propp, or some other fairly exotic source, could prove both entertaining and intellectually challenging. This in turn could provide a context for a discussion of how units within any chunk of language are to be identified. The problem of how to segment and identify elements in a corpus of narratives is identical to the difficulties faced by the descriptive linguist and phonologist in the isolation of phonemes. This inevitably also involves an understanding of the place of semantics in formal description.

Dialect

The place for 'dialect poetry' should also be within an oral literature component of the speaking and listening curriculum. Here the ways in which writers (certainly novelists and poets) have attempted to represent the spoken word can betray much about the operation of multiple codes, but the relationship of dialect forms specifically to oral aesthetic/narrative production can provide a more natural context. There has long been an interest in 'dialects' in classroom teaching, but its relationship with oral literature can certainly serve to sharpen pupils' sense of how formal elements are nested. The National Sound Archive constitutes one enormous resource with regard to dialect recordings, as with so much else that can be associated with speaking and listening. So does Cecil Sharpe House.¹⁵ This is, perhaps, one concern of the expressive oralists that has survived.

¹² Jones, JH, 'Commonplace and memorization in the oral tradition of English and Scottish popular ballads', *Journal of American Folklore*, 1961, volume 74.

¹³ Propp, V, *Morphology of the folktale*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1968; and Propp, V, *Theory and history of folklore*, volume 5 of *Theory and History of Literature*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1984.

¹⁴ Labov, W and Weletzky, J, 'Narrative analysis: oral versions of personal experience', in J Helm (ed), *Essays on the verbal and visual arts: proceedings of the 1966 Annual Meeting of the American Ethnological Society*, Washington University Press, 1967, pages 12 to 44; and Maranda, P and Maranda-Kongas, EK (eds), *Structural analysis of oral tradition*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania, 1971.

¹⁵ Cecil Sharp House is the headquarters of the English Folk Dance and Song Society.

The late 1970s were something of a growth point for an interest in dialects – particularly in the context of the validation of class and ethnic minorities. Formal analysis was often regarded as anathema within that movement, yet contradictions in the push for the recognition of ‘community languages’ sometimes also emerged. Thus, the linguist/creolist Ian Hancock argued of the Caribbean context:

Without a doubt, the study of Creoles, and especially Caribbean Creoles, should be made an integral part of the West Indian educational curriculum. Assignments should be given and graded just as rigorously as those given in English; and just as creolisms in English are corrected by the teacher, attention should also be brought to the intrusion of anglicisms into Creole.¹⁶

While such a disciplinary approach to Creole may have made many uncomfortable, Hancock was not alone in his vigilance.

As this last quotation also makes clear, the discussion of dialects is almost impossible without reference to processes of standardisation. Certainly, were we to think in terms of a language/literature divide within speaking and listening, dialects could sit quite comfortably under either or both, and there may be no special gain with regard to the teaching of grammar from dealing with it under the heading of ‘oral literature’. Indeed, by placing it there its relationship to wider structures of oral production could be illustrated, and the default equation of standard English with literary production could be put in context. Furthermore, the historical class and regional multiculturalism of Britain would also become more evident and provide part of the substructure for other insights into the nature of multicultural Britain.

Conclusion

It is not my contention here that the insertion of an oral literature component into speaking and listening should be done simply because it offers good opportunities for the exploration of grammar. It clearly does, but I also believe that the present scope of speaking and listening is far too constrained in comparison with reading and writing. Developmental research could be commissioned and expert advice taken on the potential for incorporating oral literature in the English national curriculum. If special attention were paid to the possibilities it might provide for grammatical instruction, I would anticipate that that could be achieved with no loss of its intrinsic aesthetic and intellectual appeal.

¹⁶ Hancock, I, ‘Standardization and ethnic defence in emergent non-literate societies’, paper given at Conference on Languages Without a Written Tradition and their Role in Education, Thames Polytechnic, 31 August to 3 September 1984.

Extending the repertoire of talk – what are some of the ways in which talk impacts on children’s learning?

Robin Alexander’s international research into classroom talk has highlighted very different patterns of pupil–teacher interaction. Compared with some other countries, in England there is a strong tendency for teachers to dominate and say more than their pupils. When pupils are invited to speak, their contributions are mostly expected to be short answers to teacher questioning. Evidence from other countries shows young pupils speaking more extensively and explaining ideas in a sustained way. During this time, the teacher offers prompts or scaffolding, but does not attempt to take over, rephrase or involve others, focusing instead on drawing out a pupil’s ideas and their implications. Other pupils listen and support this dialogue, accepting that the pupil speaking was representing them all.

This research was originally discussed at a QCA seminar in 2001 and led to a collaborative project between QCA and the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies to develop guidance materials for teachers. Some of the key questions raised by Robin Alexander’s research are as follows.

- What is special about the sort of talk that is being described here?
- What is the value or importance for teaching and learning?
- Is it a form of talk or feature of talk that teachers can readily identify and describe?
- How does the model of ‘whole-class dialogue’ relate to the programmes of study for speaking and listening? Does it, for example, suggest:
 - a clarification or addition to statutory requirements?
 - potential guidance on ways of implementing these?
 - a need to refocus or change the emphasis of some existing requirements?

Following the seminar in 2001, participants were invited to respond to Robin Alexander’s presentation, and responses from Tony Edwards, Neil Mercer and Jill Bourne are incorporated in this publication. Tony Edwards’ paper reflects specifically on some of the constraints and possibilities for talk in English classrooms.

- What do pupils need to know in order to learn to use dialogue productively in class?
- To what extent does work on this aspect of talk contrast with, complement, extend or underpin development of reading and writing?

Talk in teaching and learning: international perspectives

Robin Alexander, University of Cambridge

Introduction

This paper draws on material from a comparative study of primary education in England, France, India, Russia and the United States.¹ Classroom talk featured prominently in the study not just because of its ubiquity as a teaching tool and its undoubted impact on children's learning and understanding, but also because the main aim of the study was to explore the relationship between culture and pedagogy, and language is at the heart of both. The analysis of classroom talk in these five countries allowed me to engage with the cultural values and meanings which were being expressed, mediated and negotiated through teaching, and with some of the more familiar and practical questions about the educational impact of modes of classroom interaction.

During the QCA conference, participants viewed one Russian and one American video clip from the project's database of 130 hours of videotape and 160 lessons. Both extracts involved the teaching of language to 6- and 7-year-olds, but beyond that they had little in common. They were not meant to exemplify 'best' practice, but provided contrasting educational paradigms and served an anthropological intent rather than a prescriptive one. We witnessed two very different views of the place of spoken language in learning; of the way spoken and written language should be taught; of the knowledge about language that children are deemed to need; of the relationship of talk to reading and writing; of classroom relationships, rules, routines and rituals; of the handling of space and time; and of the structure and organisation of lessons.

The place of talk in the curriculum

We need look no further than Calais for one of the most striking contrasts of all. At this end of the tunnel we have England's persistently atavistic account of the educational 'basics' as reading, writing and calculation, but emphatically *not* speaking. At the other end, French schools celebrate the primacy of the spoken word. On the one hand literacy, on the other language. In fact, *l'alphabétisation* in France is no less important an objective than literacy in England, but while literacy is defined here as a 'basic skill', in France *l'alphabétisation* is embedded in a more comprehensive account of language which belies the word's narrow focus and confers not just instrumental skills but also identity. Language teaching in France reflects a confident nexus of linguistic skills, literary knowledge, nationalistic values, civic virtues and high cultural aspirations.

This is a familiar enough observation about French education, and it is generally advanced to support the view that English schools do not attend as closely to spoken language as they should. Yet it is also worth noting a less Francophile contrast: between the presumption of linguistic and therefore cultural unity in France's *école de la République*, which tends to keep a lid on the educational implications of pluralism and multiculturalism until from time to time the accumulated pressure explosively vents itself, and the characteristically British (and American) unease about linguistic and cultural hegemony, minority culture and the politics of language teaching. Those who are concerned with raising the status and quality of talk in English classrooms are

¹ Alexander, R.J., *Culture and pedagogy: international comparisons in primary education*, Oxford, 2000, and Malden, MA, Blackwell, 2001.

right to attend to this parallel agenda, though it ought to be possible for us not to be paralysed by it.

Oracy and literacy

What is the relationship of the national curriculum's En1 (speaking and listening) to En2 (reading) and En3 (writing)? Has it been properly articulated? Have we indeed got beyond the view that in English classrooms 'talk has more often served as the medium of instruction rather than as its object'?² How far do we still subscribe to the 'literacy myth',³ which attributes an immense and impressive array of personal qualities and social and economic advantages to literacy, relatively few of which can be empirically substantiated; or to the 'grand dichotomy'⁴ between literate and non-literate cultures, which portrays writing not only as sharply different from speech but also superior? Alas, much of the political, media and public discourse in England makes it clear that both the literacy myth and the grand dichotomy are alive and well, and that oracy is at best a poor relation. That being so, the well-intentioned find it hard to work against the grain. Why, for instance, have some of the profoundly important initiatives in this area, going back to the 1960s, had such a short shelf-life?

Russian teaching illustrates a view that oracy and literacy are inseparable, that talk is *both* a medium of instruction (the main one, in fact) *and*, within a comprehensive definition of literacy, its object. Official documentation in France constantly underlines a similar position: 'L'apprentissage de la langue orale et celui de la langue écrite' proclaims the Ministry of Education in Paris, 's'articulent étroitement'.⁵ The American data also seem to signal the importance of talk, but for a different purpose. Here, the focus is more on the social function of talk in developing the pupil's confidence, and on its democratisation through appropriate classroom transactions – caring, sharing, 'teacher conference', 'peer conference' and 'author's chair' – than on its content, about which little is said or done.

So the dichotomising tendency prominent in England is by no means universal. Here, Ron Carter's suggestion that speech and writing should be viewed as a continuum is a helpful corrective.⁶ It is also worth recalling Shirley Brice Heath's observation that for most adults 'there are more literacy events which call for appropriate knowledge of forms and uses of speech events, than there are occasions for extended reading and writing.'⁷ For most people, then, literacy is characteristically applied within the context of speech, and speech provides the cues for its appropriate use. Brice Heath also suggests that there is not a single speech-to-writing continuum, but *two* continua, the oral and the written, and that they overlap.⁷ That makes sense when one contrasts the colloquial, conversational register of both talk and writing in American and English classrooms, and the formal, speaking-as-if-written talk that one hears in Russian – and certainly in French – classrooms.

² Cameron, D, Schooling spoken language: beyond 'communication', *New perspectives on spoken English in the classroom: conference papers*, London, QCA, 2002.

³ Graff, H, *The legacies of literacy: continuities and contradictions in Western culture and society*, Bloomington IN, Indiana University Press, 1991.

⁴ Goody, J, *The interface between the written and the oral*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993.

⁵ Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale, *Programmes de l'école primaire*, Paris, Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale, 1995.

⁶ Carter, R, *Investigating English discourse: language, literacy and literature*, London, Routledge, 1997.

⁷ Heath, Shirley Brice, 'Protean strategies in literacy events: ever-shifting oral and literate traditions', in D Tannen (ed), *Spoken and written language: exploring orality and literacy*, Norwood NJ, Ablex, 1982.

Teaching, learning and social relations: the framing values

The cultural differences noted thus far relate to how talk is valued as the *object* of instruction. Let us turn now to talk as the *medium* of instruction, that is to say from talk in the curriculum to talk in teaching.

Just as we can detect the contrasting historical resonances of class and revolution in inherited English and French attitudes to talk in the curriculum, overlaid in the case of England by more recent preoccupations with pluralism and identity, so in the generic character of oral pedagogy we see other values, no less fundamental, emerging and diverging.

The values that shape teaching everywhere start with a view of how people should relate to each other.

- *Individualism* puts self above others and personal rights before collective responsibilities. It emphasises unconstrained freedom of action and thought.
- *Community* centres on human interdependence, caring for others, sharing and collaborating.
- *Collectivism* also emphasises human interdependence, but only in so far as it serves the larger needs of society, or the state.

In the classroom, a commitment to individualism manifests itself in freedom of choice, individualised learning tasks, diverging rather than uniform learning outcomes, and a view of knowledge as personal and unique rather than imposed from above.

Community is reflected in an emphasis on collaborative learning, often in small groups, the development of caring and sharing rather than competition, and the affective rather than the cognitive. Collectivism is shown in common knowledge, common ideals, a single curriculum for all, and an emphasis on national culture rather than pluralism and multiculturalism and on learning together rather than in isolation or in small groups.

In my 'five cultures' data these values were highly pervasive at both school and classroom levels, and could be traced right through to patterns of teaching and classroom organisation, in which context it seems to me not at all accidental that so much discussion of teaching methods should have centred on the relative merits of whole-class teaching, group and individual work. In France this debate can be traced back to arguments at the start of the nineteenth century about the relative merits of *l'enseignement simultané*, *l'enseignement mutuel* and *l'enseignement individuel*.⁸ As a post-revolutionary instrument for fostering civic commitment and national identity as well as literacy, *l'enseignement simultané* won. Only recently, in conjunction with the decentralising movement of the 1980s and the rising tide of individualism, has its hegemony begun to be questioned.

Individualism, community and collectivism are – as child, group and class – the organisational nodes of pedagogy because they are the social and, indeed, political nodes of human relations. Compare this, for example, with Shweder's contrast of 'holistic, sociocentric' cultures such as India, and Western cultures with their concept of 'the autonomous distinctive individual living in society'.⁹ Note too the American survey that found that only Britain was within striking distance of American respondents' insistence that freedom is far more important than equality and that personal welfare far outweighs responsibility to society (German respondents voted a

⁸ Reboul-Sherer, F, *Les premiers instituteurs, 1833–1882*, Paris, Hachette, 1989.

⁹ Shweder, RA, *Thinking through cultures*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1991.

balance of both sets of commitments).¹⁰ Or even consider the cultural conditions which make it possible for a British head of government to assert, as Margaret Thatcher famously did during her period of Reaganite infatuation, that ‘there’s no such thing as society: there are only individual men and women, and there are families’. Such a sentiment would be inconceivable in France or Russia. But in the United States, there is much talk of nation, less of society: an important distinction. Poor Britain, being a muddled historical confection of rampant England and suppressed Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, finds it difficult to conceive of either.

Beyond these three primordial values is a second set. They are overtly rather than subliminally educational and can be characterised as six contrasting versions of teaching.

- *Teaching as transmission* views education primarily as a process of instructing children to absorb, replicate and apply basic information and of skills.
- *Teaching as induction* sees the task of education as providing access to, and passing on, the culture’s stock of high-status knowledge, for example in literature, the arts, humanities and the sciences.
- *Teaching as democracy in action* reflects the Deweyan idea that teachers and pupils jointly create knowledge and seek understanding rather than relating to one another as the authoritative source of knowledge and its passive recipient.
- In *teaching as developmental facilitation*, the teacher is guided by principles that are psychological (and indeed Piagetian) rather than cultural or epistemological. The teacher respects and nurtures individual differences, and waits until pupils are ready to move on rather than pressing them to do so.
- In contrast, the Vygotskian principle of *acceleration* demarcates the difference between education and ‘natural’ development by having the teacher, not the child, set the pace of learning. The teacher seeks to outpace development rather than follow it.¹¹
- The idea that teaching is no more and no less than *technique* suggests that whatever view is taken of children, knowledge and society, the important issue is the efficiency of teaching as achieved through the economic use of time and space, graduated tasks, regular assessment and clear feedback.

English primary education traditionally leans towards individualistic and communal values and practices, whereas the collective principle is much more prominent in French and Russian pedagogy (and indeed in much of Continental Europe). English primary teaching is an uneasy and unadmitted mixture of transmission (the abiding legacy of the elementary system), developmentalism (the progressive reaction against this) and induction (imported from the grammar/public school tradition via the first version of the national curriculum). Although Deweyan ideas about democratic education infiltrated the Hadow and Plowden reports and Vygotsky’s work is used to legitimate ‘social constructivist’ and ‘dialogic’ teaching, Vygotsky’s principle of acceleration makes little headway here because it is seen to conflict not just with developmentalism but also individualism. The same can be said for the Comenian principles of structure, economy and pace, which have underpinned continental teaching for 350 years, but have had little impact on teaching in England.

¹⁰ Wattenberg, B, *The first universal nation*, New York, The Free Press, 1991.

¹¹ Vygotsky, LS, *Mind in society*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1978.

The individual, the group and the class

Let us consider where values such as these inform classroom talk. First, the collective ambience of Russian and French classrooms is mirrored in the very public nature of teacher–pupil exchanges there, which contrast with that quintessential and prominent mode of interaction in English classrooms, one-to-one monitoring, with its private, intimate and often whispered exchanges. Talk being very much a collective and public affair in the Russian and French classrooms, children are expected to talk clearly, loudly and expressively and learn very early to do so. They expect to hear and be heard.

Although there is one-to-one monitoring in these settings, the dominance of whole-class interactions means that the full gamut of teacher–pupil exchanges are in the public domain, whether children and teachers like it or not. In English classrooms, public exchanges tend to focus on the need to provide answers which will be judged *correct*; while problems and mistakes tend to be dealt with privately and discreetly, in one-to-one monitoring. Teachers will strive to avoid exposing children to the embarrassment of making a public mistake, and if they do, their feedback may be decidedly ambiguous (‘Ye-es’, meaning ‘No, but I don’t want to discourage you by saying so’). In Russian classrooms, problems and mistakes are no less open to collective scrutiny than are correct answers. Sooner rather than later, then, children learn that the difficulties they encounter are genuinely grist to the pedagogical mill. Teachers will ask children having difficulty with a maths problem, say, to bring it to the board so that all can join in the task of identifying the nature of the problem and how it can be addressed. This reduces that fear of giving a wrong answer, and the high premium set on providing only the right answer, which is such a prominent theme in British and American classroom research.

But this also means that Russian teachers have to formulate their questions with some care if they are not to expose children, in this very public interactive context, to needless risk. In Doyle’s terms, teacher questions must minimise ambiguity.¹² Maurice Galton takes this idea further in his contribution to this publication.

In Russia and France the commitment to ‘the class’ is reflected in the proportions of class/group/individual interactions and in the way talk is pitched. In Russia, especially, the ideal is collective, public learning. In contrast, although talk in English and American classrooms is individualised, the fact that it takes place in what is in other respects a collective setting makes for ambiguities. In English whole-class teaching, children talk to the teacher (sometimes barely audibly); in Russia they talk to the rest of the class. However, in England and the United States the group is also important, and American teachers in particular made some use of collaborative tasks. However, again, contradictions surface between children working everywhere as groups but rarely in groups.¹³ As one English teacher warned her class: ‘I don’t mind if you cooperate, as long as I can’t hear you.’ In Russia, significantly, there was no group work of any kind.

Conversation and dialogue

Talk in the Michigan classrooms had a markedly conversational ambience and tone. The teachers themselves defined it thus, usually by reference to democratic pedagogy and the importance of ‘sharing’, whereas Russian teachers explicitly distinguished conversation from dialogue and highlighted their role in fostering the latter.

¹² Doyle, W, Academic work, *Review of educational research*, 53(2), 1983, pages 159 to 199.

¹³ Galton, M, Simon, B and Croll, P, *Inside the primary classroom*, London, Routledge, 1980.

Yet was what we recorded in American and English classrooms conversation in the strict sense, that is a form of discourse in which control is ‘locally managed’?¹⁴ In fact, as in so many aspects of the American and English teaching that we observed, conversational talk was hedged by ambiguity and dissonance, and talk might be conversational in lexis and syntax but not in conduct and control (it had the appearance but not the actuality of equal communicative rights) or dialogic in form but not in meaning. Both dissonances, one might suggest, hamper the discourse of learning. In contrast, in the French classrooms talk could be conversational in tone, but it was never other than firmly directed by the teacher, and subject-specific referents kept it on its intended epistemic track.

However, the critical question here concerns not so much the *tone* of the discourse as where it leads. I am going to suggest a stipulative distinction between conversation and dialogue, at least in the classroom context (for most dictionaries treat the words as synonymous). Where conversation is – or purports to be – locally managed, classroom dialogue is teacher managed. Where the end point of conversation may not be clear at the outset, in classroom dialogue, for the teacher at least, it is. Conversation may go nowhere. Equally, it may spectacularly open up the unexpected. Classroom dialogue in contrast steers a safer course. Where conversation may consist of a sequence of unchained two-part exchanges, as participants talk at or past each other (though I stress it *can* be very different), classroom dialogue explicitly seeks to chain exchanges into a meaningful sequence. This, I admit, is an overtly Bakhtinian version of dialogue. Here it is the act of *questioning* which differentiates conversation from dialogue, and the critical issue is what follows from *answers*: ‘If an answer does not give rise to a new question from itself, then it falls out of the dialogue’.¹⁵

One of the most significant demarcation lines in my international discourse data, then, is between those questions and responses which are chained into meaningful and cognitively demanding sequences, and those (as in many of the Indian lessons) which are blocked by the repetitive initiation–response exchange of rote, by the ambiguities and vagaries of quasi-conversation (as in the United States), and/or by an emphasis on participation at the expense of continuity and cumulation (as in England).

In their exegesis of Bakhtin’s concept of dialogue in the context of small-group discussion, Barnes and Todd identify six features: a shared acceptance of difference of perspective; a commitment to mutual attention; speculation and the use of hypothetical cases; tentativeness in offering views and the absence of prior roles and authority by right; mutual support; and lack of closure.¹⁶

On this basis, much of the interaction we see in English primary classrooms may be neither conversation nor dialogue. Whether it is conversational or more formal in lexis and syntax:

- interactions tend to be brief rather than sustained;
- teachers ask questions about content, but children may ask questions only about points of procedure;
- closed questions predominate;
- children concentrate on identifying ‘correct’ answers;
- there is little speculative talk or ‘thinking aloud’; and
- the child’s answer marks the end of an exchange and the teacher’s feedback formally closes it.

¹⁴ Edwards, AD and Westgate, DPG, *Investigating classroom talk*, London, Falmer Press, 1992.

¹⁵ Bakhtin, MM, *The dialogic imagination*, Austin TX, University of Texas, 1981.

¹⁶ Barnes, D and Todd, F, *Communication and learning revisited*, London, Heinemann, 1995, pages 157 to 174.

In these respects, such talk may lack the formal structures of classic ‘recitation’ teaching,¹⁷ but in its fundamental asymmetry it is much closer to recitation than to either conversation or dialogue.

Classroom talk: social or cognitive?

Deborah Cameron and Roger Hewitt have both expressed concern about the way some writing and discussion of spoken English polarises the ‘social’ and ‘cognitive’ purposes of classroom talk.¹⁸ Yet in my study this is a distinction which the teachers themselves made, and it was clearly manifested in their teaching. The need to build children’s social confidence is certainly a major theme in the primary pedagogical tradition that was dominant between the 1960s and 1990s and for many older teachers it remains one of their bedrock beliefs, and at a more banal level you can track this emphasis in assessment and reporting protocols from that period. These highlight ‘confidence’ and ‘participation’ as the main judgemental criteria. It is this concern which makes for that particularly English mix of classroom talk which is warm, determinedly inclusive, engaging but cognitively undemanding; and which prefers habitual, bland and eventually phatic praise to focused feedback, for fear that children might be discouraged by the latter. The tendency was even more marked in some of the Michigan classrooms with their ubiquitous posters listing ‘101 Ways to Praise a Child’ (‘Neat!’, ‘Wow!’, ‘Nice job’, ‘Beautiful sharing!’, ‘Way to go!’, etc). It is also worth asking what the constant reiteration of the words ‘confident’ and ‘confidence’ in the national curriculum En1 framework (‘eg pupils talk and listen with confidence’) signals about the perceived balance of the social and the cognitive.

The cognitive dimension of talk has been greatly sharpened by importing and domesticating the work of Vygotsky, Bruner and to a lesser extent Luria; and if there is now a tendency to emphasise the cognitive potential of talk at the expense of the social, then this must be understood as a necessary corrective. But of course this, like the polarising of oracy and literacy, is a false and damaging dichotomy. First, because at a common-sense level there is little point in promoting cognitively rich talk if children are too inhibited or reserved to participate in it. Second, because to do so is actually to miss the very point that Vygotsky was making, which is that learning is fundamentally a *social* process. The problem is that some have tended to ignore the Marxian, collectivist context of Vygotsky’s work and have reconfigured it in terms of the individualist, ‘lone scientist’ tradition of British Piagetianism.¹⁹

I am frequently struck by how often viewers of my video clips see the Russian teaching as intimidating. That, I think, is an ethnocentric judgement, based on a very English reaction against whole-class teaching, strong teacher direction, blackboards, bells and all those perceived resonances of Victorian elementary schools. True, Russian (and French) teachers do not use the special teacherly voices, circumlocutions (‘Somebody’s using a big voice...’) and other oblique control devices deployed by many English early years teachers (and I have to say I find that quite refreshing). Yet I see no more evidence of timid or inhibited responses among Russian than English primary pupils. In fact, by making talk and learning strongly collective activities, Russian teachers effectively reconcile the social and the cognitive.

¹⁷ Dillon, JT, *The practice of questioning*, London, Routledge, 1990.

¹⁸ Cameron, D, *Schooling spoken language: beyond ‘communication’* and Hewitt, R, ‘Speaking and listening: notes on the possibilities for grammar on leaving the Moebius strip, *New perspectives on spoken English in the classroom: conference papers*, London, QCA, 2002.

¹⁹ The ‘lone scientist’ phrase is Jerome Bruner’s, from Bruner, JS and Haste, HE (eds), *Making sense: the child’s construction of the world*, London, Routledge, 1987.

Communicative competence

Although in the real world communicative competence may be defined by reference to the Gricean maxims of quantity, quality, relation and manner,²⁰ in classrooms the unequal power relationship of teacher and taught produces a very different set of rules, where pupils listen, bid for turns, spot ‘correct’ answers and use other coping strategies which anywhere outside a school would seem bizarre.²¹

As this has much in common with ideas first put forward in the United States by Philip Jackson nearly 40 years ago,²² one might suppose that this is how classrooms inevitably are. But my own data show that the rules of communicative competence can be subverted either by genuine discussion of the kind advocated by the National Oracy Project²³ or by a version of whole-class teaching rather different from classic British recitation. Indeed, we have become so used to the latter that it is sometimes assumed that only through small-group discussion can dialogic teaching be promoted.

Again, France and Russia provide useful correctives and counterpoints. The English tradition emphasises the importance of equal distribution of teacher time and attention among all the pupils, and participation by all of them in oral work, in every lesson. So with only one teacher and 25 to 35 pupils in a class, it is inevitable that bidding and the gamesmanship of ‘guess what teacher is thinking’, and above all giving the ‘right’ answer, become critical to the pupils getting by and maintaining face. But in Russia, in a given lesson, only a proportion of pupils are expected to take part, and some of those will be pupils who have made mistakes and talk about them to the class. This is because instead of eliciting a succession of brief ‘now or never’ answers from many children, the teacher will construct a sequence of much more sustained exchanges with a smaller number. Since the focus is collective, on the class as a whole, the child talks to the class as much as to the teacher, and is in a sense a representative of the class as much as an individual. This reduces the element of communicative gamesmanship; but it also – crucially – may be a much more powerful learning tool.

Towards dialogic teaching

The differences provoke an important question, namely from what pattern of exchange do pupils learn more: questioning involving many children, brief answers and little follow up, or questions directed at fewer children that invite longer and more considered answers which in turn lead to further questions? In the one scenario, children bid for turns if they know the answer, or try to avoid being nominated if they do not; in the other, they listen to each other. In the English approach, communicative competence is defined by whether, having been nominated for or bid for what is probably one’s sole oral contribution to the lesson, one provides the answer which the teacher judges to be correct, acceptable or relevant. In the Russian approach (which is also replicated across a wide swathe of Central and Eastern Europe) communicative competence is judged by how one performs over the whole transaction rather than whether one gives the ‘right’ answer; and on the *manner* of the response – clarity, articulateness, attention to the question – as well as its substance. In this respect, it is closer to Grice than to Edwards.

²⁰ Grice, HP, ‘Logic and conversation’, in P Cole and J Morgan (eds), *Syntax and semantics*, volume 3, *Speech acts*, New York, Academic Press, 1975.

²¹ Edwards, AD, ‘Teacher talk and pupil competence’, in K Norman (ed), *Thinking voices: the work of the National Oracy Project*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1992.

²² Jackson, PW, *Life in classrooms*, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968.

²³ As collected in Norman, K (ed), *Thinking voices: the work of the National Oracy Project*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1992.

To enhance the learning potential of classroom talk we should attend to the psychological dimension of the differences I have sketched out. The extended, low-stakes exchanges where children speculate and develop their thinking, where teacher questions probe and scaffold understanding rather than merely test it, and which pivot on the constructive handling of answers as much as the careful conceptualising of questions, come closer to meeting the conditions for cognitively challenging talk.

Like Barnes, I am drawn to Bakhtin's version of dialogue and so to 'dialogic teaching'. Jerome Bruner has also demonstrated 'the use of language in the growth of concepts and the developing structure of the mind' and the importance of the specific kind of interaction that bridges old and new understandings and is 'premised on a mutual sharing of assumptions and beliefs about how the world is, how the mind works, what we are up to, and how communication should proceed'.²⁴ Gordon Wells uses 'dialogic inquiry' to encapsulate his update of Vygotsky's ideas for today's classrooms.²⁵ His idea of teaching as the promoting of a 'community of inquiry' is close to Neil Mercer's use of 'interthinking' to show how talk in learning is not one-way linear 'communication' but a reciprocal process where ideas are bounced back and forth to take children's thinking forward.²⁶ Similarly, Barnes and Todd stress the importance of encouraging 'joint enquiry' through which learners can construct shared meanings from the different frames of reference which each of them brings to the common learning task.²⁷

Bakhtin's axiom about answers and questions, quoted earlier, should give us pause for thought, for if we accept that dialogue is a necessary tool of learning then we may need to accept also that the child's answer is not the end of a learning exchange (as in many classrooms it tends to be) but its true centre of gravity. Important though questions are – and they certainly need to be conceived with care – we could profitably pay rather greater attention to children's answers to our questions and to what we can do with those answers. Put more bluntly, if we want children to talk to learn – as well as learn to talk – then what they say actually matters more than what teachers say. So it is the qualities of continuity and cumulation which transform classroom talk from the familiar closed question/answer/feedback routine of the classic initiation–response–feedback exchange into purposeful and productive dialogue where questions, answers, feedback (and feedforward) progressively build into coherent and expanding chains of enquiry and understanding. And, as Carol Feldman argues, thematic continuity and the constant interplay between the familiar and the new are prerequisites for development and growth in thought as well as language.²⁸

From all this we can crystallise four criteria, or conditions perhaps, for dialogic teaching. Dialogic teaching should be:

- *collective*: pupils and teachers address learning tasks together, whether as a group or as a class, rather than in isolation;
- *reciprocal*: pupils and teachers listen to each other, share ideas and consider alternative viewpoints;

²⁴ Bruner, JS, 'The transactional self', in JS Bruner and HE Haste (eds), *Making sense: the child's construction of the world*, London, Routledge, 1987.

²⁵ Wells, G, *Dialogic inquiry: towards a sociocultural practice and theory of education*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

²⁶ Mercer, N, *Words and minds*, London, Routledge, 2000.

²⁷ Barnes, D and Todd, F, *Communication and learning revisited*, London, Heinemann, 1995.

²⁸ Feldman, CF, 'Thought from language: the linguistic construction of cognitive representations', in J Bruner and H Haste (eds), *Making sense: the child's construction of the world*, London, Routledge, 1987.

- *cumulative*: pupils and teachers build on their own and each others' ideas and chain them into coherent lines of thinking and enquiry; and
- *supportive*: pupils articulate their ideas freely, without fear of embarrassment over 'wrong' answers, and they help each other to reach common understandings.

Extending the repertoire of teaching talk

Across different countries we find teachers drawing on a basic repertoire of three kinds of teaching talk:

- *rote* (teacher–class): the drilling of facts, ideas and routines through constant repetition;
- *recitation* (teacher–class or teacher–group): the accumulation of knowledge and understanding through questions designed to test or stimulate recall of what has been encountered previously, or to cue pupils to work out the answer from clues provided in the question; and
- *instruction/exposition* (teacher–class, teacher–group or teacher–individual): telling the pupil what to do, and/or imparting information, and/or explaining facts, principles or procedures.

These provide the familiar and traditional bedrock of teaching by direct instruction. Less universally, we find some teachers, but by no means all, also using:

- *discussion* (teacher–class, teacher–group or pupil–pupil): the exchange of ideas with a view to sharing information and solving problems; and
- *scaffolded dialogue* (teacher–class, teacher–group, teacher–pupil or pupil–pupil): achieving common understanding through structured and cumulative questioning and discussion which guide and prompt, reduce choices, minimise risk and error, and expedite 'handover' of concepts and principles.²⁹

Only discussion and scaffolded dialogue are likely to meet the criteria of dialogic teaching set out above, and while I am not arguing that rote should disappear (for even this most basic kind of teaching has its place), I would certainly suggest that teaching which is limited to the first three kinds – drilling, questioning for recall and telling – is unlikely to offer the kinds of cognitive challenge which children need or which a broad and balanced curriculum requires.

Conclusion

I have stressed that the form and character of talk in classrooms reflects underlying assumptions and beliefs about the nature of teaching and learning and the place of language, and especially spoken language, in the curriculum as a whole. It is also shaped by more general ideas about how the individual should stand in relation to others and to society as a whole.

Talk, like teaching, being a cultural artefact, it is not surprising that the purposes, form and character of classroom talk are very different in countries which are as culturally, politically and economically disparate as England, France, India, Russia and the United States. And, given how central language is to culture we should be doubly cautious in importing the practices we admire.

Indeed, it is the principles that underpin those practices in which we should be primarily interested. Thus, there is no point in advocating the kind of focused,

²⁹ Taken from Alexander, RJ, *Culture and pedagogy: international comparisons in primary education*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2000, pages 526 to 527.

structured, disciplined, and indeed dialogic but teacher-led classroom talk we see in Russia, if we fail to understand how strongly this is underpinned by a powerful and pervasive collective ethic, by unambiguous teacher authority, by a commitment to epistemic structure, by a view of learning as accelerated development, and by an account of pupils' progress which focuses more on effort than on fatalistic assumptions about innate ability, and if we fail to understand how this view of teaching reflects a culture in which both education and the power of talk in education are highly prized.

Plainly, it makes little sense to try to bolt such a view of oracy onto an Anglo-American educational tradition which celebrates individualism, differentiated learning tasks and divergent learning outcomes; which until very recently, at the primary stage anyway, has resisted structure, boundary and predictability in the curriculum, in the use of time and space, and in language itself, as somehow incompatible with children's unique potentialities and ways of making sense; which yet remains influenced by the determinist legacy of the IQ, intelligence testing and 'innate' ability; and which has seen the function of talk more in relation to the development of confidence than cognition, and the role of the teacher as a negotiator, facilitator or co-learner rather than an authority. If we are impressed by such practices as we see them elsewhere, we should try first to discover the assumptions, values and pedagogical principles which shape them. Having done so we can then examine how far these assumptions, values and principles are desirable in our very different cultural context, how far they are compatible with, and can accommodate to our own, and how far our own ideas are capable of being changed. Out of this accommodation will come not a slavish imitation of this or that Russian, French, Indian or American practice, but something new, and something which will stand a chance of making a long-term difference.³⁰

³⁰ Readers may wish to know of two initiatives which are currently applying some of these ideas. (i) QCA, NLS and NNS, together with advisers from Barking and Dagenham LEA and myself, are producing a teacher support pack (video plus handbook) on teaching through dialogue. This will be disseminated to all primary schools in the spring of 2003. (ii) North Yorkshire LEA has made the improvement of 'talk for teaching and learning' central to its Educational Development Plan and has initiated an ambitious five-year programme which aims to improve the quality of classroom talk and harness its cognitive power to the task of raising standards across the curriculum. Every teacher in the scheme (so far, over 40 schools are involved) is using video on a regular basis to identify baselines and targets for individual professional development programmes and to monitor progress.

Purposes and characteristics of whole-class dialogue

Tony Edwards, Open University

Introduction: some reflections on the English context

The difficulties of defining dialogue begin with the question of how many can take part before it turns into something else. In ordinary conversation, the managing of turns is a shared responsibility, and competition for ‘having one’s say’ in groups larger than, for example, half a dozen makes a diversion into parallel conversations very likely. Most classroom talk, in contrast, involves a centralised communication system. Teachers direct the talk by doing most of it themselves, combining lengthy exposition with many questions, allocating the right or obligation to answer those questions and evaluating the answers. The transmission of knowledge creates very unequal communicative rights to those who ‘know’ and those who do not. This is why the sequence of (teacher) initiation – (pupil) response – (teacher) evaluation has emerged from so many research studies as the ‘essential teaching exchange’¹ In whole-class questioning, it carries risks that a single right answer will be taken as representing a class-wide understanding and a single wrong answer as a common failure to get the point.

A great deal of teaching is unavoidably a passing on of information and skills. However, it benefits from being complemented by classroom talk that is organised very differently for specific curriculum purposes. It is this ‘something else’ to which whole-class dialogue contributes, provided it goes well beyond those class discussions which involve few departures from teacher direction and little reduction in teacher talk.² It replaces the usual hunt for answers which the teacher already knows into collaborative searches for solutions or understanding. It blurs those sharp boundaries around school knowledge that largely exclude reference to what pupils know unless they have already been taught it, or at least screens such references for educational relevance. It can provide more opportunities for learners to talk their way into understanding rather than receiving, more and less effectively, an already defined version of what they are now supposed to know.³ Dialogue differs from most classroom discussion in so far as the talk is exploratory, that is teacher and pupils see the possibility of conclusions unexpected, and certainly unplanned, when the talk began.

If the potential educational advantages are substantial, why is whole-class dialogue apparently uncommon? It may well be less unusual than classroom research indicates because orderly teacher-centred talk was, until quite recently, so much easier to record audibly and then present in play-script form unpunctuated by gaps and guesses. Robin Alexander and his colleagues show a technically advanced and imaginative capacity to capture many learner voices in classrooms which were not ordered in traditional ways.⁴ But there are powerful managerial and educational reasons why departures from teacher-directed exposition and questioning are unusual.

An absence of untoward noise is still commonly taken as evidence of good classroom control. Opening out the interaction risks disorder. For example, open questions elicit

¹ Edwards, A and Westgate, D, *Investigating classroom talk*, London, Falmer Press, 1994, pages 44 to 54 and 124 to 133.

² Dillon, J, *Using discussion in classrooms*, Buckingham, Open University Press, 1994.

³ Barnes, D and Todd, F, *Communication and learning revisited: making meaning through talk*, Portsmouth NH, Boynton Cook, 1995; and Mercer, N, Wegerif, R and Dawes, L, Children’s talk and the development of reasoning in classrooms, *British educational research journal*, 25, 1999, pages 95 to 111.

⁴ See, for example, Alexander, R, *Culture and pedagogy: international comparisons in primary education*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2000, pages 450 to 461.

unpredictable responses which are difficult to assess. It is managerially safer to ask the kinds of questions which entitle the teacher (who knows the answer) to respond immediately, thereby exercising the right to speak every other turn, or at least to take a very high share of turns. There has also been a long, well-publicised, war of attrition against progressive teaching that has caricatured it as a *laissez-faire* indulging of pupils' uninformed opinions. The national curriculum, literacy and numeracy programmes and the high-stakes testing of their outcomes have tended to strengthen the framing of classroom communication. With a great deal to get through, the pace of transmission is likely to be fast. This privileges the teacher's talk, producing not only a great deal of exposition but also a predominance of questions to which the answers are likely to be short and readily 'marked'.

The extent to which whole-class dialogue departs from such normal practice means that it makes unusual pedagogic demands on teachers and learners. Perhaps first among its demands on teachers is that they are willing not to do what they may often take for granted for so much of the time. For example, teachers ask so many questions that innumerable researchers have counted them, timed them, mapped their distribution, categorised them and tried to measure their cognitive level. The pressures to evaluate the consequent answers are so pervasive that there is much to be gained from sometimes replacing them with statements that invite rejoinders, elaboration or disagreement or that even admit perplexity. Dialogue is certainly unlikely to follow either closed questions or those half- or 'pseudo-open' questions which are progressively closed down in ways which make it obvious that an answer is already there for pupils to hunt down. Teachers are extraordinarily skilled not only at redirecting questions in the interests of 'getting on', but also at translating answers into something directly helpful to the lesson's progress that pupils no longer recognise as their own. These are skills to be temporarily put aside. Teachers also need the nerve to tolerate pauses between turns without feeling that any silence is an awkward silence, and that the responsibility for ending it is theirs. A pause at strategic points in the discussion of no more than five seconds (longer than most pauses in whole-class interaction) may be enough to draw in another pupil contribution or encourage the previous speaker to elaborate on what was said. Intervening to answer questions or provide information useful for getting past a sticking-point requires not only the self-restraint not to take the discussion over, but also the willingness to listen to what is being said rather than merely listening for whatever best promotes the teacher's pedagogic agenda.

Corresponding demands are made on pupils. They are usually well practised in listening for clues in how the teacher introduces a question and responds to initial answers. Experience may well have taught them that the clues are often so prolific that even a wild guess will lead the teacher to answer the question for them. They may have much less experience of listening to one another. Indeed, the distance between whole-class dialogue and customary classroom talk is wide enough to make explicit rules of engagement helpful so that the differences are seen as deliberate departures. Doing so applies the notion of a distinctive 'speech event' to whole-class dialogue, recognised by the participants as having its own way of contributing appropriately. Notable examples of recommending clear procedural rules designed largely to curb teachers' usual directing role are the Nuffield Humanities Project and the National Oracy Project, both vulnerable to ill-informed attacks as a progressive descent into 'anything goes'.

Criteria for recognising dialogic talk

Having emphasised the distinctiveness of whole-class dialogue, I end with some criteria for recognising it when it happens. These are offered cautiously, because how classroom talk is used to organise relationships and meanings is too skilful and complex to be treated as a transparent medium. Most obviously, participation is shared around, not monopolised by the teacher and a few confident, willing pupils. Some pupil contributions may be lengthy and most are followed by another pupil. Teacher interventions may well be decisive pedagogically, but are likely to be infrequent and their placing in the interaction unpredictable. Getting and keeping 'the floor', and ensuring that interruptions are constructive not disruptive, are managed as shared responsibilities. Any skewing of communication so that some pupils or a group of pupils remain persistently silent is recognised as a problem and confronted openly. Such normal teacher tasks as clarifying where a discussion has got to or summarising what has actually been learned from it are also shared around. Teacher and pupils take explicit account of what others have said, so that their speech is responsive as well as expressive. Thinking time can be taken without the speaker's turn being lost and re-allocated. Pauses are more frequent, and often longer, than is possible from the driven momentum of most classroom talk. Thinking aloud is encouraged, that is talking one's way into meaning rather than remaining silent until some sort of answer has been formulated.

Conclusion

There is no implication in that brief profile that a consensual conclusion should eventually be reached. Indeed, the sharpest contrast between whole-class question-and-answer, and whole-class dialogue, is that different and even competing ideas can be kept in play without being subjected to one participant's authoritative arbitration. Making good educational use of it raises an obvious question about what to do if the dialogue appears to the teacher to be achieving nothing other than confusion, or is threatening a conclusion (citizenship lessons come to mind) that the teacher is likely to feel an educational or civic obligation to challenge. Contrary to hostile caricatures, whole-class dialogue does not demand that all such responsibility be discarded. It does embody more problem-posing and less solution-giving; a view of learning as enquiry as well as induction into what is already known, and as a social, truly interactive process; and a clear recognition of the educational value of drawing attention from time to time to the grounds for opinions and conclusions, and to how new knowledge can be constructed.

How can planning for different kinds of spoken interaction in the classroom take account of the ways interpersonal relations change the form and content of talk?

Janet Maybin and Maurice Galton suggest that pupils are constantly seeking to balance 'risk and ambiguity' in the way they use language in school both with their peers and with teachers. Their papers show how language impacts on interpersonal relations in the classroom.

- What have we to learn about the way pupils try out contrasting discourse styles and the voices they adopt when considering how language is used in lessons?
- Would knowing more about how to use talk to move between different types of discourse help pupils take greater risks as learners?
- If we agree that conversation makes certain kinds of thinking possible – mathematic, scientific or imaginative – where ideas are more tentative and ambiguous, what are the features of language that teachers and pupils need to use to make such conversational dialogue possible?

'What's the hottest part of the Sun? Page 3!' Children's exploration of adolescent gender identities through informal talk¹

Janet Maybin, Open University

Introduction

On the school coach on the way to their weekly swimming lesson, a group of 11- and 12-year-olds are swapping anecdotes about travel and holidays. A few of the boys have been on aeroplanes and jostle verbally to tell their stories. Martie momentarily holds an audience of around six children sitting nearby with his story of an encounter with an airhostess.

Martie Do you like getting off the seat?

Darren No.

Martie I love getting off the seat. I was sitting in the middle of the floor and reading a book and the hostess come.

Darren /I did that once.

¹ The full version of this paper has been published in Sunderland, L and Litosseliti, J (eds), *Gender identity and discourse analysis*, Amsterdam, John Benjamins, 2000.

Martie /And the hostess come, and she said, she was, she was REALLY nice if you know what I mean, and as she came past she had this trolley with all the dinners on it and she went [high-pitched ‘neep neep’ horn sound, laughter] and all I done is, I went [low-pitched sound of car engine] and I moved to the side as she went past. [groan] Her legs, man [groan, short pause]. I was going to eat the dinners, man.

Boy Chicken.

Darren /And you can leave what you want.

Martie’s story comes from an ethnographic study of informal language practices in two middle-school classes of 10- to 12-year-olds in a working-class housing estate about 50 miles from London.² My data includes 60 hours of continuous recordings of children’s talk throughout the school day and 20 hours from interviews with friendship pairs, collected using a radio microphone and small tape recorders over two terms, during which time the children got used to my presence and lost interest in the fact that they were being recorded. I wanted to find out how these children used informal talk (and literacy) to explore and negotiate new knowledge and identities, as they moved from childhood into adolescence. This transition point is particularly significant in relation to gender, which becomes more culturally marked in sexual terms. In many ways children have to recast themselves, their activities and their relationships in ways which are moving towards more adolescent conceptions of being male or female. Many of these 10- to 12-year-olds moved easily back and forth between the worlds of childhood and adolescence, depending on context and their own purposes. Martie’s account nicely illustrates the ambivalence which this dual identity creates, where a boy can play on the floor like a child but can also look up an airhostess’s skirt and admire her legs. Physical attractions are discussed in the same breath as the meals on the plane, and a child’s delight that you do not have to eat all the food on your plate. The dialogue between the horn and the engine noise, as Martie presents it with his suggestive deep-throated purr, is similarly ambivalent and can be interpreted either as a child’s game or as a flirtatious joke. This holding of two alternative interpretative frames is common in the children’s talk, often allowing them the possibility of switching frame to save face and offering alternative points of engagement for their audience.³

In this paper I shall examine how these 10- to 12-year-old children are beginning to explore and take on various kinds of gendered identities within their informal talk. I shall suggest that some of the subject-matter of children’s talk, especially within their stories and anecdotes, is directly concerned with trying out ways of inhabiting and performing their gender. I shall also suggest that the language practices themselves, for example the competitive exchange of anecdotes in a public arena, collaborative storytelling in a more private context, ‘chatting up’ a prospective boyfriend or girlfriend or a brief exchange in the cloakroom, offer different overlapping potential resources of meaning for boys and for girls. I use the term ‘language practices’ to include what children do with language in actual concrete examples and also to acknowledge the way in which language is intimately bound up with social practice.

² Maybin, J, Story voices: the use of reported speech 10–12-year-olds’ spontaneous narratives, *Current issues in language and society*, 3(1), 1996, pages 36 to 48; Maybin, J, ‘Children’s voices: talk, knowledge and identity’, in J Cheshire and P Trudgill (eds), *The sociolinguistics reader*, volume 2: *Gender and discourse*, London, Edward Arnold, 1998, pages 278 to 294; and Maybin, J, Framing and evaluation in 10–12-year-old school children’s use of appropriated speech, in relation to their induction into educational procedures and practices, *TEXT*, 19(4), 1999, pages 459 to 484.

³ Goffman, E, *Frame analysis*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1974.

While a considerable body of research has focused on the gendered use of various features of the linguistic system and different conversational strategies,⁴ there is now increasing interest in the way in which context and social processes, in quite subtle and complex ways, give meaning and function to form.⁵ In the course of their involvement in everyday activities, children invoke and are positioned within different discourses. I use the term ‘discourse’ here to mean patterns of language use which encode particular kinds of knowledge as authoritative and particular kinds of values, hierarchical relationships and subjectivities as unquestionable.⁶ In one sense, children are being inducted into dominant discourses which involve particular kinds of gendered subject positions. But they are also often exploring and challenging these and alternative positions through their use of language to pursue personal interactive goals and through listening to and questioning each others’ accounts of personal experience. Perhaps because I am focusing on pre-adolescent children, I see the taking on of aspects of gendered identity as a piecemeal, provisional affair, carried on in fleeting moments across a wide range of language practices. While I am in no doubt that children acquire important knowledge about gender and their own gendered possibilities within conversations where gender is apparently at the margins of relevance and awareness, I shall focus here on instances in their talk where it is, however briefly, more explicitly foregrounded.

Throughout my data, the children’s talk tended to return again and again to a number of central themes. These concern questions around children’s changing relationships with parents and other authority figures, the imperatives and boundaries of friendship, family relationships and moral issues of justice, care and cruelty. Individual dialogues concerning a theme build up together into a ‘long conversation’, stretching over days and weeks, as children revisit the same theme in various ways, on separate occasions and in different settings.⁷ Gender is often explored in the context of talk around these themes. In the rest of the paper I shall look at a number of extracts from children’s conversations in some detail to examine how they use specific language practices to explore issues relating to gender and identity, and how they invoke, manage and are positioned within different kinds of discourses. The examples quoted illustrate the kinds of subject-matter, language practices and exploration of identity that are found across the data.

Taking on voices, invoking discourses

When Martie introduces sexual innuendo into the account above, he positions himself firmly as a heterosexual male, inviting the listener into his perspective (‘her legs, man ...’). Children’s stories to each other during the school day are often told within the context of fast-moving exchanges and a competitive jostling for conversational

⁴ Coates, J, ‘One-at-a-time: the organisation of men’s talk’, in S Johnson and U Meinhof (eds), *Language and masculinity*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1997; Goodwin, M, *He-said-she-said. Talk as social organisation among black children*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1990; and Holmes, J, ‘Storytelling in New Zealand women’s and men’s talk’, in R Wodak (ed), *Gender and discourse*, London, Sage, 1997.

⁵ Cameron, D, *Feminism and linguistic theory*, second edition, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1992; Cameron, D, ‘Performing gender identity: young men’s talk and the construction of heterosexuality’, in S Johnson and U Meinhof (eds), *Language and masculinity*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1997; Eckert, P and McConnell-Ginet, S, ‘Constructing meanings, constructing selves. Snapshots of language, gender and class from Beltn High’, in K Hall and M Bucholtz (eds), *Gender articulated: language and the socially constructed self*, London, Routledge, 1995; and Gal, S, ‘Language, gender and power’, in K Hall and M Bucholtz (eds), *Gender articulated: language and the socially constructed self*, London, Routledge, 1995.

⁶ Fairclough, N, *Discourse and social change*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1992; and Foucault, M, ‘The order of discourse’, in R Young (ed), *Untying the text: a post-structuralist reader*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981.

⁷ Maybin, J, Story voices: the use of reported speech 10–12 year olds’ spontaneous narratives, *Current issues in language and society*, 3(1), 1996, pages 36 to 48.

space, especially among the boys, so narratives have to immediately grab and hold the audience's attention. Martie's story is successful partly because it plugs into a powerful male-gendered discourse about fancying attractive females. As well as presenting an active gendered position for himself (Martie is the one doing the fancying), this story of flirtation also positions its audience along gendered lines. The boys are invited to collude with the gendered perspective of the narrator ('she was REALLY nice if you know what I mean'), and the girls are positioned as passive spectators for this public performance of male heterosexuality.

The way in which this conversation was dominated by the boys was echoed in other stories of self-display told in public arenas. The girls in my study related plenty of stories that depicted themselves as powerful, but these were told mainly in more private contexts. They also took on active roles in more private heterosexual encounters. During the three days I was recording 10-year-old Julie, she asked friends a number of times about whether they were going out with particular boys. 'Going out' with a boyfriend or girlfriend was an important topic of conversation among the children and particular individuals were paired together as boyfriend and girlfriend until one was 'dumped' or 'chucked' by the other. This pairing, however, seemed to happen largely at the discursive level, with one child asking another (often through a mutual friend) whether they wanted to be their girlfriend or boyfriend and possibly exchanging notes and cards or presents, but not actually engaging in any other kinds of courting behaviour. Conversations provided an arena to rehearse cultural courtship patterns, to tease each other about emerging or imaginary sexual interest and to acquire and exchange knowledge about how heterosexual relationships are 'done'.

In the following example, recorded while the children were eating their sandwiches together at lunchtime, Julie is attempting to engage the interest of David, a boy she expressed interest in a number of times over the three days I was recording her. As in Martie's story about the airhostess, two alternative frameworks of interpretation are set up within her interaction.

- 1 Julie Do you know where I live? Right if you go along Redlea the only blue door, that's where I live. The only blue door in Redlea.
 David Only?
 Julie Right, if you can't get through, go to my next door neighbour's, that side(...), go
 5 through her place, jump over the fence and go down my path.
 David Which number do you bang on?
 Julie One three four. And if you can't get through, go to, go round to number one three two, go through the fence, over the wood (...)
 David You got a bike?
 10 Julie Puncture (...) got lost. I got skates. I can hold onto the back of your bike and go ooooooh! [pause] Do you really go out with thingy [pause] Ma-
 David Who?
 Julie Mellie.
 David No.
 15 Julie What, did she chuck you? Why? [pause] Do you think Warren will mind if I move onto your table?
 David No. It's my table. I was the first one on it, so I own it.
 Julie You don't, the school does. What's the hottest part of the Sun? What's the hottest
 19 part of the Sun? [pause] Page 3!

The conversation starts off in a child's world of knocking on each other's doors after school to go out and play. David responds to Julie's invitation by asking if she has a bike, and at this point Julie suggests that David should pull her along behind his bike

on her skates (lines 10–11). She immediately follows this with a question about whether David is going out with Mellie (pretending initially to forget her name, which she had discussed shortly before in a conversation with girlfriends). This question retrospectively reframes her previous invitation, and her enquiry about whether Mellie has chucked David (line 15) could now be seen as an enquiry about whether he is ‘available’ as a boyfriend, especially as it is immediately followed by the suggestion that Julie sits with David in class (line 15–16). This last request is skilfully deflected towards Warren (‘Do you think Warren will mind if I move onto your table?’), thus guarding against loss of face through a direct refusal from David, and mitigating what might be otherwise regarded as an overly direct approach. David’s more childish idea of ‘owning’ tables is quickly refuted by Julie in similar terms, but she immediately follows this up with a joke which depends for its humour on ‘hot’ photographs of naked female models in the *Sun* newspaper (lines 18–19).

In one sense, Julie is using language as a resource and drawing on both childhood and teenage discourses to negotiate her relationship with David, whose response will to some extent determine which meanings are carried forwards (and he seems singularly uninterested in or unaware of the flirtatious connotations of the interaction). The way Julie sets up and manages this ambiguity is an intrinsic part of her attempt to accomplish particular conversational purposes. But these discourses are also themselves shaping the choices of meanings available. The words ‘go out with’, ‘chuck’ and ‘hot’ all have specific cultural connotations, and invoke particular kinds of gender relations. Thus, although language may be a resource, it is not a neutral one but instead pushes Julie towards taking up particular positions and values. The ambiguity and provisionality of her approach allows Julie a way of trying out and testing these positions and values with the opportunity at any point of moving back into the safer discourses of childhood.

Troublesome stories

While the examples of data discussed so far all came from my continuous recordings of children’s talk among themselves, the example in this section comes from my informal interviews with friendship pairs, where I raised a number of themes from the continuous recordings that I wanted to explore further with the children, for example their leisure-time activities and literacy practices, their involvement in gangs and clubs and the practice of swapping. I also encouraged them to pursue any subjects that they raised themselves. In their talk during the interview, children’s narratives were longer and provided a kind of suspended discursive space where speakers could explore an issue in more detail. The friends (who were all same-gender pairs) tended to support each other’s narratives and some told stories collaboratively. In this relatively private context, the boys in my study were just as likely to share the conversational floor, or mirror each other’s accounts, as the girls. Whether this apparently female conversational style⁸ is the result of the immaturity of the children, or the intimacy of the context, I am not sure. Certainly, boys in my data tended to use the same range of collaborative language strategies as girls when they were talking with friends in relatively private conversations. There was, however, a distinctive difference in terms of the topics which boys and girls chose to introduce into the conversation during my interview with them. Like Holmes⁹ in her study of New Zealand men’s and women’s conversational stories, I found that the boys wanted to talk about things, activities and

⁸ Coates, J, *Women talk. Conversations between women friends*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1996; and Coates, J, ‘One-at-a-time: the organisation of men’s talk’, in S Johnson and U Meinhof (eds), *Language and masculinity*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1997.

⁹ Holmes, J, ‘Storytelling in New Zealand women’s and men’s talk’, in R Wodak (ed), *Gender and discourse*, London, Sage, 1997.

accomplishments, while the girls talked about people, relationships and feelings. Therefore, the children's explicit exploration of gender and identity was done in the interviews largely around these different kinds of topics.

The behaviour of others was also explored at some length by Michelle and Kim (both 11 years old), who told me a series of linked stories about people being treated unfairly in various incidents in school and at home. These included a number of stories about Michelle's father, who had moved out when Michelle was 5 years old, but who kept coming back and abusing her mother. In the extract below, Michelle recounts one violent incident where her father's toughness and violence are portrayed through the voice she creates for him (marked by a gruff, vehement tone on the tape), and his and her mother's anger are contrasted with her own level-headed 'Mum, just go in there and I'll stay with ya' (line 18), which resolves the situation.

- 1 Michelle He's jealous you know you can get men jealous but they're allowed to go with
2 someone else but if they find out their wife's got someone else and they've left ...
3 Cause my mum- she, she had some boyfriends and he, he caught her out once and he
4 done her really badly, smashed all the pipes in her stomach.
5 Janet What, what, your dad?
(author)
6 Michelle Cause he can be nasty when he wants to ... We've got a massive telly in our front
7 room and all furniture we've got new and it, my mum run out once cause he whacked
8 the phone right round her face- she just run out the back, so did I cause I'm more- I
9 love my dad, I love them both but I'm close to my dad, but, if he lays a hand on her
10 I'm on my mum's side, do you know what I mean? So I run out with her- and em, we-
11 we sat down outside the front with Ann and all that [laughs] this man thought he was
12 well hard, the other boys called him out the house, he sat out there, and when my dad
13 come out and he [dad] goes 'You try to stick up for my wife, I'll have you all on', you
14 know, beat 'em all up [laughs] and all the men walked in their house and shut the
15 door. So my dad goes to my mum 'Right, see you later, I'm going to smash your telly'
16 and he pretended to smash that he goes 'I'll see you later I'm going to smash your
17 furniture in half' [laughs]. And my mum was kind of going 'If you don't get in here I
18 will do it' and all that. I said 'Mum, just go in there and I'll stay with ya' so I walked
19 in there with them and he didn't touch her at all.
20 Kim /He won't touch her with- if Michelle's there because ...
21 Michelle /Yes cause I'm his favourite ... I'm closest to my dad, like all girls mostly are, cause
22 my mum's closer to her dad.

In this extract, the danger and violence of the situation are given impact and immediacy through the voices of Michelle's parents. Her father's three utterances: 'You try to stick up for my wife, I'll have you all on' (line 13), 'Right, see you later, I'm going to smash your telly' (line 15) and 'I'll see you later I'm going to smash your furniture in half' (lines 16-17) and her mother's angry 'If you don't get in here I will do it' (lines 17-18) build up the tension and suspense to make Michelle's own successful intervention all the more remarkable. The incident is strongly coloured by male violence, by Michelle's father, the neighbour who thinks he is 'well hard', and the boys who call him out, perhaps hoping for a fight. Michelle's mum is also angry, but the force of her speech is mitigated by 'kind of' (line 17). Michelle momentarily tries on her father's strength and violence and her mother's anger and fear through her reproduction of their voices.

Conclusion

In this paper I have examined some of the ways in which the move from childhood into adolescent gender identities is mediated within children's informal talk. The content of their conversations, their engagement in different language practices, and the ways in which they invoke and are positioned within discourses, all contribute to their explorations of gendered behaviour and identities.

The children's different language practices offer a range of possibilities for the expression and negotiation of gender identities. Some language practices may be more available to one gender than the other, for example I have suggested that the public competitive exchange of anecdotes of self-display tended to be dominated by boys. A more significant difference between boys and girls seems to be their positioning in relation to culturally available discourses of masculinity and femininity. It is through negotiating these discourses, whether represented in jokes about page 3 of the *Sun* or in folk wisdom about the different sexual rights of men and women, that the children are beginning to explore the possibilities and limitations of readily available expressions of gendered identity. They do not, however, take on these identities in a straightforward and unquestioning way. Rather, their negotiation and exploration of gendered relationships and behaviour involves the complex manipulation of different interpretative frames and the invoking and reproduction of voices from written texts, songs, adults and other children. Children draw on available discourses to pursue their own purposes, and are simultaneously positioned and constructed within them. Frequently falling back on the safer and more familiar discourses of childhood, these 10- to 12-year-olds are nevertheless beginning tentatively to try out new ways of inhabiting their gender, drawing on the culturally available resources around them, and their own experience and imagination.

Transcription conventions

Comments in square brackets clarify unclear references or paralinguistic features, for example [laughter].

(...) indicates words on the tape which I can't make out.

/ indicates where another speaker interrupts or cuts in.

Learning to think through conversation

Maurice Galton, University of Cambridge

Introduction

Research in the UK and the United States tells us that the main pattern of classroom discourse consists of what has been termed ‘direct instruction’. This mode of instruction, according to Rosenshine¹ involves a review of what was previously taught by engaging pupils in a rapid question and answer session. The teacher then introduces new knowledge and works through some examples with the whole class before setting practice assignments, which pupils work at individually. The latter activity is what American researchers call ‘seat work’. Numerous research studies show that direct instruction is most appropriate when the objective of the lesson is to teach explicit procedures, explicit concepts or a body of knowledge. In particular, direct instruction works best when the objective is to teach English grammar, vocabulary, simple mathematical or scientific concepts and procedures, etc.²

However, when the skills to be taught cannot be broken down into explicit steps, unlike when teaching English punctuation or the steps in converting a fraction to a decimal in mathematics, then direct instruction is not as appropriate according to Rosenshine’s findings. More challenging tasks such as solving complex mathematical problems, critical analysis of a story or poem, writing creatively or designing a scientific experiment to test a hypothesis all need a different approach.

The latter activities all involve knowledge of ideas and an understanding of certain principles. As we develop conceptual understanding, we learn to classify and process information more efficiently, but an important part of this understanding is the increase in our knowledge about language and its uses. According to Patricia Alexander and her colleagues,³ as we become more competent in using this ‘discourse knowledge’ we improve our ability to communicate our understanding of a principle or an idea to other people. In reaching the point where it can be said that a person ‘understands’, we therefore construct and reconstruct our ideas through talk with others. In the classroom these conversations usually (but not exclusively) take place either with the teacher during a class discussion or with peers during collaborative group work. In the course of this discussion we also learn the rules which govern these conversations. Shulman⁴ describes this process as the acquisition of ‘strategic knowledge’ because it allows us to determine what it is legitimate to say in any given domain or discipline and what breaks the rule. We can then begin to monitor our thinking by recognising and correcting errors. As we become more expert in doing this, we are able to conduct these conversations in our own heads without the support of another adult or our peers.⁵ We are then able to ‘self-regulate’ our learning and have become ‘metacognitively wise’.⁶ Metacognition, or knowledge of one’s own thinking processes, is thus an essential part of developing conceptual understanding. In the context of the national curriculum, it would mean an understanding of the

¹ Rosenshine, B, ‘Direct instruction’, in M Dunkin (ed), *Teaching and teacher education*, Oxford, Pergamon, 1987.

² Ibid, page 258.

³ Alexander, P, Schallert, D and Hare, V, Coming to terms: how researchers in learning and literacy talk about knowledge, *Review of educational research*, 61(3), 1991, pages 315 to 343.

⁴ Shulman, L, Those who understand: knowledge growth in teaching, *Educational research*, 15, 1986, pages 4 to 14.

⁵ Brown, A., Domain-specific principles affect learning and transfer in pupils, *Cognitive science*, 14(1), 1990, pages 107 to 133.

⁶ Palincsar, A, ‘The role of dialogue in providing scaffolded instruction’, *Educational psychologist*, 21, 1986, pages 73 to 98.

processes involved in thinking mathematically to solve a problem, or scientifically when comparing possible explanations for a certain experimental result, or imaginatively in English when looking for meaning within a poem or story.

Present patterns of classroom dialogue

In helping pupils to learn how to think, it is important that teachers provide a framework (or scaffold) in which children can experiment. Robin Alexander⁷ quotes Jerome Bruner's explanation that the main purpose of a scaffold is to 'reduce the degrees of freedom in carrying out some task so that children can concentrate on the difficult skill he or she is in the process of acquiring'.⁸ Alexander goes on to point out that the main way in which teachers in the UK attempt to scaffold children's efforts to develop understanding during discussion in class is through guided discovery. He observes that this often consists of open questions, combined with heavy prompts, clues and cues so that, in reality, the approach does not differ from direct instruction. Edwards and Mercer⁹ also argue that class discussion often consists of a sequence of 'cued elicitations', whereby when the teacher asks a question he or she simultaneously provides heavy clues as to the information required. Thus, many open questions end up by becoming closed in that pupils come to accept that although the question allows for many answers, there is only one which the teacher really wants from them.

The Oracle (Observational Research and Classroom Evaluation) studies¹⁰ offer evidence that this situation appears to have remained unchanged over at least two decades of primary teaching. In Oracle a question was only classified as 'open' if the teacher accepted more than one answer from the pupils. In 1976–1978 there were around 3.51 more closed than open questions being asked in primary classrooms. In 1997–1998, when the Oracle replication was carried out, the corresponding figure was 3.49. More recently, Hardman and colleagues¹¹ have investigated the nature of discourse taking place during the literacy hour. Unlike Oracle, which collected data using systematic classroom observation, Hardman and colleagues taped the discourse and were able to analyse it subsequently at leisure. Despite the differences in methodology, their ratio of closed to open questions is of the order of 3.17 in key stage 2 classes. At key stage 1 the ratio was 4.8 in favour of closed questions.

Why pupils sometimes avoid answering questions

It is clearly not an easy matter for teachers to break away from this pattern of discourse. Indeed, some studies show that teachers are often unaware of how much guidance they give.¹² This is because unlike 'direct instruction', where the teacher mostly controls the exchanges, during class discussion pupils are able to manipulate the situation for their own ends. When asked by Galton,¹³ pupils offered a range of strategies for avoiding being picked by the teacher to give an answer. They mainly achieved this result by giving an impression that they required more thinking time.

⁷ Alexander, R, *Culture and pedagogy: international comparisons in primary education*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2000, page 436.

⁸ Bruner, J, 'The role of dialogue in language acquisition', in A Sinclair, R Javella and W Levelt (eds), *The child's conception of language*, New York, Springer-Verlag, 1978, page 19.

⁹ Edwards, D and Mercer, N, *Common knowledge: the development of understanding in classrooms*, London, Routledge, 1987.

¹⁰ Galton, M, Simon, B and Croll, P, *Inside the primary classroom*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980; and Galton, M, Hargreaves, L, Comber, C and Wall, D, *Inside the primary classroom: 20 years on*, London: Routledge, 1999.

¹¹ Hardman, F, Smith, F and Wall, K, *An investigation into the impact of the National Literacy Strategy on the learning of pupils with special educational needs in mainstream primary schools*, a report to the Nuffield Foundation, University of Newcastle upon Tyne, 2001, page 48.

¹² Galton, M, *Teaching in the primary school*, London, David Fulton Publishers, 1989, page 38.

¹³ *Ibid*, page 73.

Being asked a difficult question was according to one pupil 'like walking on a tightrope'. Pupils said they often worried lest they lost face with peers in such situations. If they volunteered too many acceptable answers too quickly they could earn the reputation of a 'boff'. If they offered too few answers they might be regarded as a 'thick'. It was much safer, therefore, to persuade teachers to answer their own questions. Thus, when faced with challenge, pupils attempt to strike a bargain with the teacher. In return for not attempting to subvert the discussion (by disruption, joking or attempting to distract the teacher from the topic), pupils expect that, in turn, teachers will not expose them to humiliation by forcing them to answer so that they 'feel silly in front of friends'.¹⁴ Faced with a new class at the beginning of a new school year, a certain amount of this 'exchange bargaining' will take place until each side (pupils and teachers) are reasonably content and a 'working consensus' is established.¹⁵

Ambiguity and risk during class discussion

One explanation for this bargaining behaviour arises from an analysis of classroom tasks by the American social psychologist Walter Doyle.¹⁶ Doyle characterises the kinds of challenging situations that are an important part of 'learning to learn' according to the extent of the 'ambiguity' and 'risk' involved in the required task. The more open-ended the problem, the greater the ambiguity. Such tasks can carry risks to the pupils' self-esteem because they invite them to offer unacceptable and sometimes foolish answers. The more uncertainty surrounding the task demand, the greater the risk involved. Even though teachers frequently tell their pupils that 'We all learn by making mistakes', pupils seem very resistant to this message. Thus, during class discussion, pupils will put their hand up immediately a difficult question is asked because they know that often teachers will assume that those not responding are not paying attention and pick on them. However, they will then withdraw their hand and try to look as if they are thinking if they judge that the teacher is about to ask them for an answer. Guided discovery does lower the risk in this situation but it also lowers the ambiguity, thus limiting the capacity of the discussion to promote conceptual understanding and to develop metacognitive wisdom. In Doyle's opinion, the skilled teacher is able to manage this situation by maintaining ambiguity while at the same time lowering the risk.

There are some straightforward, well-tried strategies for achieving this goal in situations where certain pupils are reluctant to participate in classroom discourse. The technique of brainstorming accepts all contributions initially without comment and then combines or rephrases some. This means there is less chance of publicly associating specific ideas with particular pupils. Another way of sharing ideas is for the teacher to explain to the class that the problem is one which is unlikely to produce easy or quick solutions. Therefore, pupils are first invited to discuss their ideas with their two nearest neighbours for a couple of minutes before beginning a class discussion. Perhaps the most crucial way of reducing risk for pupils is for the teacher to provide appropriate scaffolding, an issue that was briefly mentioned above.

Using a range of scaffolds to support classroom dialogue

Rosenshine and colleagues¹⁷ have examined the effectiveness of using different types of scaffold to help pupils generate appropriate questions during discussion. They review a

¹⁴ Ibid, page 72.

¹⁵ Pollard, A., *The social world of the primary classroom*, London, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1985.

¹⁶ Doyle, W, Academic work, *Review of educational research*, 53(2), 1983, pages 159 to 199.

¹⁷ Rosenshine, B, Meister, C and Chapman, S, Teaching students to generate questions: a review of intervention studies, *Review of educational research*, 66(2), 1996, pages 181 to 221.

number of research studies and come to the conclusion that not all of those that appear to work best figure in the teacher effectiveness literature. These include having pupils recall the steps in their thinking when arriving at a solution to a problem or putting forward an idea, providing cue (or prompt) cards, and using checklists for pupils to evaluate the quality of their contribution. One example in the use of cues comes from King's attempt¹⁸ to provide generic question stems to guide discussion. Pupils were taught, using the method known as 'reciprocal teaching',¹⁹ the different uses of 'why', 'how' and 'what' questions by learning, for example, to differentiate between a request to 'explain why' and 'explain what'. Pairs of pupils then practised giving explanations to different question stems. King found that during subsequent discussions pupils raised more critical thinking questions and provided more elaborated explanations when compared with a control group who did not receive any training.

Conclusion: translating practice across cultures

Finally, two notes of caution are required. First, we should not fall into the trap of thinking that whole-class dialogue is the only means of promoting deep-level learning. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that cooperative learning, either in pairs or in groups, is an equally effective strategy in certain circumstances.²⁰ Teachers should make their own judgements about which approach is more suitable in a given classroom context. Second, and Robin Alexander's international comparisons of pedagogy across different cultures²¹ demonstrates this convincingly, it should not be assumed that teaching strategies that are effective in one country will always be equally effective in another. One of the key differences across different cultures, for example, is the attributions pupils use to explain failure. In Pacific Rim countries pupils often attribute failure to lack of effort on their part, whereas in the West it is more usually associated with lack of ability.²² The problems associated with classroom discourse involving the tensions between ambiguity and risk do not therefore seem so prevalent in, say, Chinese classrooms²³ and guided discovery much more effective. Therefore, teachers should master the principles that empirical research has shown promote higher-order thinking. These include using open-ended questions, allowing suitable waiting times between asking the question and persuading pupils to respond, and encouraging pupils to explain or elaborate their answers. In the classroom, however, each teacher must use his or her own judgement, based on previous experience, as to the best way of making these principles work in practice. To attempt to operate these principles slavishly is to reduce teaching to a mere technical activity. Not only is this approach likely to offer limited improvements in terms of the pupils' capacity to regulate their own learning, but it may also sap the enthusiasm of those who relish the intellectual challenge of helping children to become confident, independent thinkers.

¹⁸ King, A, Facilitating elaborative learning through guided student generated questioning, *Educational psychologist*, 27, 1992, pages 89 to 118.

¹⁹ Palincsar, A and Brown, A, Reciprocal teaching of comprehension-fostering and comprehension-monitoring activities, *Cognition and instruction*, 1, 1984, pages 117 to 175.

²⁰ Webb, N and Palincsar, A, 'Group processes in the classroom', in D Berliner and R Calfee (eds), *Handbook of educational psychology*, New York, Simon and Schuster Macmillan, 1996.

²¹ Alexander, R, *Culture and pedagogy: international comparisons in primary education*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2000.

²² Biggs, J, What are effective schools? Lessons from East and West, *Australian educational researcher*, 21(2), 1994, pages 19 to 40; and Tay-Koay, Siew Luan, Students' reports of their cognitive processes and levels of understanding during regular classroom instruction, in J Tan, S Gopinathan and Ho Wah Kam (eds), *Education in Singapore: a book of readings*, Singapore, Prentice Hall, 1997.

²³ Cortazzi, M, Learning from Asian lessons: cultural expectations and classroom talk, *Education 3-13*, 26(2), 1988, pages 42 to 49.

In what ways can a classroom rich in spoken language enhance or hinder EAL pupils' grasp of subject content?

Lynne Cameron's paper takes as its starting point that all language is rich in metaphor and indirect expressions. In particular, they are features of spoken language – speakers constantly adapt to the ways they think listeners are responding and revise what they are saying. Her data shows many ways in which these tendencies can be problematic for EAL pupils both in understanding how subject content is being mediated and how the sequence of a lesson is unfolding.

What is the solution?

- Should teachers monitor their language for form as well as content?
- Is it a matter of finding ways to make explicit some of the recurrent patterns of classroom talk?
- What could be done to draw on the knowledge about language that all pupils have as communicators to raise awareness of the metaphoric resources of English specifically?

Jill Bourne's paper adds another dimension to the potential of classroom talk to enhance EAL pupils' understanding of both lesson content and the functions of spoken language. What do pupils need to know about spoken English in order to participate well in small-group discussions?

- What scope is there for building into small-group work as well as into whole-class teaching opportunities for pupils to participate in the different kinds of talk identified by Robin Alexander: expository, interrogatory and evaluative?
- If we agree that spoken language is best suited to make the transitions from everyday to academic knowledge, from concrete to abstract experience, or between tasks with different levels of intellectual challenge, how best could lesson planning take account of this?

Talking and thinking with metaphor

Lynne Cameron, University of Leeds

Introduction

Metaphor is a basic resource that we use in language and in thinking. Capacity with metaphor begins early in infancy and develops throughout childhood.¹ Metaphor is a tool used for a range of ideational and affective purposes: it can help us to explain our ideas and feelings to other people, and to disguise or hide them. In classrooms,

¹ Cameron, L, Discourse context and the development of metaphor in children, *Current issues in language and society*, 3(1), 1996, pages 49 to 64; and Winner, E, *The point of words: children's understanding of metaphor and irony*, Cambridge MA, Harvard Press, 1988.

metaphor is used by participants in social interaction and its use constructs opportunities that may or may not be taken advantage of. This paper explores some of the most important pedagogic opportunities around metaphor use, and discusses what may help pupils take advantage of them or prevent them doing so.

The first section of the paper describes some of the reasons why metaphor may cause difficulty for the pupil and the second section looks at the role of metaphor in teacher–pupil interaction, particularly in the context of classroom management and feedback.

Why metaphor can be problematic

Learning in a subject discipline includes learning the subject-specific or technical language of the area. One problem for all learners is to recognise the difference between deliberate, one-off metaphor and technical language that is conventionalised metaphor. Technical language sometimes has metaphorical origins, for example volcanoes can be dormant, and leaves have blades and teeth. When deliberate metaphors are used, they may be mistaken for technical terms, and presumably, vice versa. This problem came to light when EAL pupils read and talked about the following sentence.

The atmosphere is like an invisible *shield* of air surrounding the Earth.²

Extract 1 below shows the discussion of this sentence with two EAL pupils, E and F. Although they could not explain their understanding clearly to the researcher (R), the shield seemed to activate two other concepts/nouns: ‘boundaries’ (line 7) and ‘crusts’ (line 9).

Extract 1 – EAL pupils discuss the deliberate metaphor *shield*

- 1 E: The atmosphere surrounds the Earth (.)
It’s like a shield.
R: Right (.) what’s that mean?
E: It’s all round the Earth the (.) shield.
- 5 R: Mmhm (.) and how’s it like a shield? (.)
What do you think of when you see shield?
F: The boundaries ???
R: Mmhm (.) the boundary lines?
F: Crusts.
- 10 R: Eh?
F: Crusts that ??? like out out.
R: The crust (.) oh the crust (.)
outside bit (.) yes (.)
like other people saying the crust of bread (.)
- 15 Okay but this is the atmosphere (.)
What’s what’s a shield?

At the time, I did not realise that perhaps F was referring to the Earth’s crust, perhaps because of his use of the plural form. Thinking about the exchange later, I was struck by how the use of the metaphor ‘shield’ created a comprehension problem for the pupils with a relatively low level of English: is shield another technical term like crust?

² Bright, M, *The ozone layer*, London, Gloucester Press, 1991.

Without knowing both content and language in the topic domain of the atmosphere and Earth, how could they tell? It would seem to be a reasonable strategy on their part to assume that shield is technical, since the text is an information text.

In addition to primarily lexical metaphors, such as the example in Extract 1, which use a word (the vehicle) and in an ‘incongruous’ context (the topic), there are what Cameron refers to as ‘linguistic metaphors’.³ A linguistic metaphor is a stretch of language that links lexical items from vehicle and topic domains. It may or may not be understood through active transfer of meaning across conceptual domains, but it allows the possibility of such transfer. In the sentence ‘the atmosphere *traps* some of this heat so that it doesn’t *escape* into space’, ‘traps’ and ‘escape’ are linguistic metaphors but may not be processed as such.

(Linguistic metaphors are dealt with further in the discussion of participation in classroom action.)

Using cues to help pupils to understand metaphor

It is helpful to think about what might indicate to a reader or listener that ‘shield’ in extract 1 was a deliberate metaphor, rather than a technical term. The immediate discourse context offers a range of cues of different types to how to interpret ‘shield’, and an absence of cues that might be expected around a technical term:

- Grammatical – shield occurs in the noun phrase ‘an invisible shield’. The indefinite article ‘an’ would probably not be used with a technical term (see ‘the Earth’s crust’ and ‘the ozone layer’).
- Lexical – ‘is like’ indicates a comparison or approximation, whereas a technical term would be more directly linked to the concept that it labels, for example ‘is called’ or ‘is known as’.
- Orthographic – technical terms are often marked when first introduced, for example through the use of bold font or inverted commas.

Skilled language users recognise and make use of these types of cues to the meaning of words in discourse.⁴ In the development of language skills that continues throughout education, both first and additional language users will be increasing their repertoire of cues. However, they may bring different repertoires to the processing of classroom discourse, since in learning a second or additional language, some cues to meaning will transfer from the first language, but many others are language-specific and have to be learnt.

Some further examples from the classroom

The empirical studies drawn on in this paper were carried out in a year 5/6 classroom in a small, rural primary school in the north of England (henceforth, School 1). The 15 pupils in the class were all first language users of English, aged between 9 and 11 years. Thirteen hours of classroom interaction were recorded and transcribed, giving 26,613 words of transcribed talk.

This paper also uses classroom discourse data collected in an inner-city secondary school in the north of England (School 2), as part of an in-service teacher education

³ Cameron, L, ‘Operationalising metaphor for applied linguistic research’, in LJ Cameron and GD Low (eds), *Researching and applying metaphor*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

⁴ Bates, E and MacWhinney, B, ‘Functionalism and the competition model’, in B MacWhinney and E Bates (eds), *The cross-linguistic study of sentence processing*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1989.

project.⁵ In this school, around 75 per cent of pupils used English as an additional language; first languages were mainly Gujarati and Panjabi. Most pupils were born in the UK, and thus had 11 years of schooling in English.

Metaphor and participation in classroom action

Analysis of the classroom discourse from School 1 showed that metaphor played a key role in the openings of lessons and activities as teachers explained to pupils what would happen and what they would do, and also in closings of lessons and activities, as they summarised for pupils what had happened. In these agenda management sequences, teachers share with pupils their goals and intentions, and identify for pupils the participatory roles they can take in the pedagogic action. Understanding the meaning and intent of these metaphorical uses of language is important for access to classroom action.

Extracts 2, 3 and 4 below show typical metaphors in agenda management sequences, from the beginning of maths, drama and 'youth award' lessons in School 2. The extracts show the prevalence of metaphorically used verbs and prepositions, largely conventionalised rather than deliberate.

Extract 2 – metaphors in agenda management, maths, year 7

- 1 T: right (.) I want to *start off* (4.0) today (.) with (.) different sorts (.) of numbers (1.0) recently (2.0) close your book (2.0)
Recently we've been *looking at* number patterns (.) haven't we? (4.0)
??? a different sort of number pattern ??? a different sort of number pattern (.)
- 5 Now the numbers that we want to *look at* to *start off with* today (.) are *square numbers*(.)

Extract 3 – metaphors in agenda management, drama, year 9

- 1 T: Now I *got ahead of myself* (.) because I thought that we (.) we'd actually (.) *had a look at* (2.0) your last (.) plays (.) but we hadn't had we? (3.0) Right (.) can we have one person (.) who can explain to us (1.0) *go over* (.) what we've done *so far* (.) with that (2.0) what were you working *on in* your groups (.) last (.) last lesson?
- 5 P: ???
- T: yeah (.) but was that (.) that wasn't actually what we were really *looking at* (.) that was just a theme to *hang it all on* (.) yeah?

Extract 4 – metaphors in agenda management, youth award scheme, year 10

- 1 T: Right folks listen carefully (.) let's *make a start*. [New pupil arrives]
Because we're going to do a *little bit of talking* today (3.0)
and we need to listen and *sort ourselves out* very carefully (1.0)
I'm going to *put on one side at this point in time* (.)
- 5 the work we've been doing organising the ring binder (.)
That's something that you will *go back to* (.)
and you will continue to do *throughout* the period of the youth award scheme
but we want to be *moving on* now to start *looking at* tackling some of the challenges (.)

⁵ Reported in Cameron, L, Critical examination of classroom practice to foster teacher growth and increase student learning, *TESOL journal*, 7(1), 1997, pages 25 to 30; and Cameron, L, Moon, J and Bygate, M, Language development of bilingual pupils in the mainstream: how do pupils and teachers use language?, *Language and education*, 10(2), 1996, pages 221 to 236.

Three features of agenda management metaphors characterised their use in the School 1 data:

- the metaphors often play an affective role, downplaying the demands of the lesson through the use of non-threatening lexis: ‘a little bit of talking’ (extract 4, line 2) and ‘looking at’ (extract 2, line 3 and extract 4, line 8); in addition, the teachers often align themselves with pupils through use of first-person pronouns, such as ‘us’, ‘we’ and ‘ourselves’;
- metaphor is used to talk about procedure mainly, but also about content; procedures and processes of teaching and learning are described in terms of ‘start off’, ‘look at’, ‘go over’, while the content is ‘square numbers’ in maths; and
- many of the procedural metaphors can be seen as expressions of the conceptual metaphor ‘a lesson is a journey’:
 - ‘start off’ (extract 2, lines 1 and 5); ‘make a start’ (extract 4, line 1)
 - ‘go over’ (extract 3, line 3) ‘go back to’ (extract 4, line 6)
 - ‘moving on’ (extract 4, line 8)
 - ‘so far’ (extract 3, line 3)

The teacher accompanies pupils on their journey, as some kind of ‘tour guide’ who directs them to ‘look at’ key ‘sights’ (extract 2, lines 3 and 5; extract 4, line 8).

The regular use of metaphors in agenda management sequences means that pupils’ opportunities to share goals, intentions and participation possibilities are often encoded metaphorically. If we turn this observation around, we can ask ‘What risks attach to this use of metaphor?’.

- The risk of not understanding the vehicle terms seems quite small because they are usually words of high frequency and likely to be familiar.
- However, the shades of vehicle meaning that come from prepositions or delexical verb plus preposition combinations may cause problems, for example the differences between ‘go over’, ‘go through’, ‘go back to’ and ‘go on with’.
- The systematic journey conceptual metaphor is probably used in all cultures and languages as a ‘primary metaphor’⁶ and is likely to be readily understood.
- A potential risk of the affective function of metaphor is that the use of non-threatening metaphors may de-emphasise the effort and engagement with content needed from pupils, and may contribute to pupils feeling that teachers have low expectations of their performance. It would be interesting to compare the metaphors of high- and low-achieving classes to see if teachers place different emphasis on the effort needed to learn and understand.

Metaphor and feedback on performance

The affective role of metaphor was also prominent in feedback sequences. Metaphors were used to give indirect comments on pupils’ performance and understanding. In typical feedback sequences, as in the examples 2 and 3 below, metaphors seem to help teachers avoid giving direct negative feedback and thus mitigate threats to face. While this pragmatic function is important in maintaining face in the classroom, preventing de-motivation and disengagement, we should consider the possibility that a message might be so well disguised that pupils are prevented from benefiting from feedback. Examples of metaphor in feedback sequences (from a year 10 youth award lesson in School 2) are:

⁶ O’Grady, J, ‘A typology of motivation for conceptual metaphor. Correlation vs resemblance’, in R Gibbs and G Steen (eds), *Metaphor in cognitive linguistics*, Amsterdam, John Benjamins, 1999, pages 79 to 100.

- 1 You're (.) really *on the ball with* this I can *see*.
- 2 She read that extremely well (.) but the obvious point when you're making a presentation to the group (.) try to *put a bit more volume behind it*.
- 3 They're *jumping* aren't they? – *jumping the gun a bit*.

Example 2 includes the two types of feedback that were found in the data: evaluative and strategic. Evaluative feedback gives pupils an evaluation or judgement of their work or performance ('extremely well'); strategic feedback offers suggestions for improvement ('try to put a bit more volume behind it'). The two sometimes overlapped (as in this example), and feedback often merged into further explanation. Both made consistent use of metaphor, and the choice of metaphors in these sequences seemed more often to reflect teachers' personal styles. Public evaluative statements seem to use strong idiomatic metaphors more than other types of teacher talk, as in examples 1 and 3.

Extracts 5 and 6 below show metaphor in strategic feedback in English and drama lessons. In both cases, the pupils had carried out a role-play exercise and the teachers were giving feedback on their performance.

Extract 5 – metaphors in strategic feedback, English, year 7

- 1 T: I think the reason you were getting *muddled up* you three is because you didn't really know (.) what you were going to say (.)
You were sort of doing very well at ad-libbing (.)
just saying what *first came into your mind* (.)
- 5 But as an expert you've got to know your facts.
So what you need to do before next lesson is to *iron everything out* decide what the question is.

Extract 6 – metaphors in strategic feedback, drama, year 9

- 1 T: *Going back* (.) *over* that (.) that interview (2.0) that hot seating (.)
at what point (.) would I have been concerned about (.) about the hot seating working?
What point (5.0) when did it start (.) to *fall apart* a bit?
- 5 P: When she said who (.) who were in hospital (.) ??? her mate.
T: When we're doing something like this (.) and trying to get something *true to life* (.) if you *cross over that border* that we did just then (2.0) then you start to lose it.

Teacher feedback on pupil performance is a key pedagogic action in classroom discourse. As it connects directly to pupils' current states of skill or understanding and offers opportunities for further development, it is important that pupils have access to feedback. Metaphors may help by defusing the threat of feedback to self-esteem, but they also need to be comprehensible, otherwise pupils may miss the learning opportunities they offer. The use of metaphorical idioms that are not particularly transparent in meaning, for example 'jumping the gun' (example 3 above), 'iron ... out' (extract 5, line 6), and deliberate metaphors that are likely to be unfamiliar, for example 'cross over that border' (extract 6, line 7), may cause particular problems. Expressing the same meaning in non-metaphorical language, as the teacher does in extract 5, line 7, would seem to be a useful precautionary strategy.

Conclusion

Different forms of metaphor tend to play different roles in classroom spoken discourse. Each type places different language and conceptual demands on pupils when

they need to understand their meaning and pragmatic force, and to use them appropriately. The analyses above, and the fuller description of pupil–pupil use of metaphor (which are on the QCA website) suggest that:

- nominal and deliberate metaphors are more often used for explaining difficult or new concepts, and interpretation requires the activation and selection of relevant domain knowledge;
- verb and prepositional metaphors occur much more frequently than other forms, particularly as conventionalised metaphors in procedural talk, with common verbs and prepositions combining to create delicate shades of meaning that may not be transparent; and
- strong metaphorical idioms, again often not transparent in meaning, are more likely in teachers' evaluative and strategic feedback.

As metaphor uses lexis from one domain to talk about or to conceptualise a different domain, it may seem to be a lexical phenomenon, but, as with any use of language, lexis and grammar combine in subtle ways to produce and give meaning. Successful interpretation requires noticing, processing and integrating various lexical, grammatical and discourse cues to meaning. Successful use requires the exploitation of language resources to convey precise meanings.

The classroom data revealed some of the support to successful interpretation of metaphors offered by discourse context:

- hedging, or tuning, markers in front of metaphors ('sort of' and 'like') can offer cues as to whether a metaphorical interpretation is needed and how the vehicle is to be mapped to the topic;
- other words and their syntactic relations to the vehicle can help select appropriate aspects of the vehicle domain to map to the topic;
- discourse cues to interpretation, for example a scientific information text should activate a scientific conceptual domain; and
- supportive teacher talk around metaphorically described concepts.

Further research is needed to explore pupils' understanding of the different types of metaphor they encounter. For example, while learners of English as a foreign language seem to find it difficult to learn and use conventionalised, frequently occurring verb and prepositional metaphors, the EAL pupils seem, from the limited amount of data I have, to experience fewer problems. However, we don't really know how accessible everyday metaphor is. Pupils' understanding of the affective dimension of metaphor also needs investigating, since indirect use of language through metaphor in classrooms may affect educational opportunities.

In a previous paper on EAL pupils and grammar,⁷ I suggested that EAL pupils, especially at lower levels of language development, may rely heavily on lexical cues to meaning, and pay less attention to or not notice grammatical cues. This reliance on lexis has also been noted in Canadian immersion contexts⁸ and, I would argue, is probably strengthened by the fact that for pupils in EAL situations similar to the secondary school in this paper, classroom discourse is their major source of English language input and the major context in which they use English. Furthermore, although they receive a large amount of input, the focus of classroom talk is usually

⁷ Cameron, L, 'Grammar and learners of English as an additional language', in QCA, *Not whether but how: teaching grammar in English at key stages 3 and 4*, London, QCA, 1999.

⁸ Harley, B, *Appealing to consciousness in the L2 classroom*, *AILA review II*, 1994, pages 57 to 68.

on content; pupils' attention is rarely drawn to the form of the language and how it contributes to precision in meaning. The secondary classroom data clearly shows that pupils have quite limited opportunities to produce English, and even fewer in which attention to precise use of language is required. Research into second-language development is increasingly demonstrating the need for learners to notice the form of language in use, both receptively and in production.⁹ (While successful understanding and use of metaphor requires attention to lexical content, it is possible that, as with other aspects of language use, EAL pupils in particular may need extra help to notice how grammatical choices can convey precise meanings at phrase and sentence levels.)

Transcription conventions

- (.) micro pause
- (1.0) pause of approximately 1 second, etc
- ? rising intonation suggesting question
- ??? indecipherable talk on tape
- T teacher
- R researcher
- P unidentified pupil

⁹ For example, Doughty, C and Williams, J (eds), *Focus on form in second language classrooms*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Whole-class dialogue in multilingual classrooms

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Introduction

In this paper I intend to consider ‘whole-class dialogue’ from the perspective of the many teachers working in classrooms that include students at different stages of learning English as an additional language. In adopting this perspective, I want to reaffirm that in improving provision for the language and learning needs of ethnic minority children, we improve teaching and learning for *all* pupils.¹

Building on existing strengths

For those active in developing effective strategies for multilingual classrooms, small-group talk has always held an important place:

- as supporting and leading into structured writing;
- together with bilingual talk where possible, for ‘negotiating meaning’ between pupils;
- as exploratory talk leading to a ‘public’ reporting back in more formal language; and
- as a means of assessment of both language skills and subject knowledge.

A number of influential projects since the 1980s have involved researchers and teachers working together to examine the way in which talk can support learning. An example of the way these projects focused teachers’ attention on the productive role of talk is the following, taken from a broadsheet produced by a Schools Council Project.² In it, four 10- to 11-year-old girls are working on a science project on mini-beasts. One of the girls in the group, Waheeda, was still at an early stage of learning English. The girls have a collection of mini-beasts to observe, and the teacher has supported their learning and focused their attention by giving the group a matrix on which to record their observations (requiring them to note down descriptions for each creature in columns headed ‘number of legs’, ‘colour’, ‘shape’, ‘how it moves’, etc). They have to decide whether each creature is an insect or not. The following is an extract from the transcript of their talk as they looked first at a snail, then at a woodlouse and, following the matrix, discussed ‘how it moves’.

Hazel: When it moves, it scurries. It curves, doesn’t it?

Farida: It can move very fast.³

In this interaction, Waheeda does not speak. However, the activity was highly engaging, and she was nevertheless an active participant. She later produced the following written work using the jointly constructed matrix.

A woodlouse has fourteen legs. The colour of the legs are white. A Woodlouse has bluey brown back. It has an oval shape. When it moves, it scurries. He has eyes on top of his back. A Woodlouse is not an insect.⁴

The teacher has underlined in her writing a sentence where she had found specific support for scientific writing from the jointly produced matrix (‘how it moves’: ‘it

¹ Swann, M, *Education for all: the report of the committee of inquiry into the education of children from ethnic minority groups*, 1985.

² Schools Council, *Language in the multicultural primary classroom, Broadsheet B: curriculum support for writing*, London, Schools Council, 1983.

³ *Ibid*, page 1.

⁴ *Ibid*, page 2.

scurries’) and the talk which had preceded it (Hazel: ‘When it moves, it scurries’). It is worth noting too that the sentence underlined is a complex sentence, unusual in early stage English writing.

What we learn from this extract is that:

- pupils take on the ‘voice’ of others in social contexts of interaction, language is always socially shared, never a personal possession;
- pupils can be active participants in learning as listeners, even when they are not themselves contributing to the discussion;
- fluent speakers of English can offer learners of English powerful models of language structure that help to take them forward; and
- learning is not always best seen as an individual process, rather there is something very productive in the concept of group learning, when the outcome is greater than the sum of individual contributions.

The question we need to explore is how such good practice in setting up planned and structured group work can be extended and built upon by the addition of attention to whole-class, teacher-led interaction and, in particular, whole-class dialogue. There is clearly an important place in the classroom for peer-group discussion and for the design of structured small-group activities which support learning, as in the example above. However, teachers also know that talk in small groups is usually informal in style unless the teacher has had a hand in deliberately modelling more formal, subject-oriented styles of talking.

We see this in the next abridged extract, recorded 18 years later, after the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy. An 11-year-old is playing at being ‘teacher’ with her 8-year-old sister at home:

- Wahida: Now we’re going to do homophones. Who knows what’s a homophone is? No one? OK. I’ll tell you one and then you’re going to do some by yourselves. Like ‘watch’ – one watch is your time watch, like ‘What’s the time? Watch. And another watch is ‘I’m watching you. I can see you’. OK? ...
- Sayeeda: ‘Son’ is the opposite of ‘daughter’...
- Wahida: Yeah
- Sayeeda: and ‘sun’ is ... um ... its shines on the sky so bright.
- Wahida: Well done! That’s one correct one. The next one?⁵

As Gregory says, these bilingual girls ‘have internalised the content of their lesson in terms of concepts, vocabulary, language structures and register. In other words, they have learned what ‘counts’ as valid classroom knowledge through the processes of classroom interaction. If we are to improve learning, it is crucial that we examine and improve teacher–pupil interaction, so that students are guided forward, not only into the use of more advanced concepts and the language they need for successful participation in different subject areas, but into productive ways of problem-solving – first collective, then independent.

Whole-class dialogue

Alexander⁶ distinguishes what he calls dialogue (or guided discussion) from the other types of classroom talk found in his international study: expository (transmitting

⁵ Gregory, E, *Work or play? The dilemma of ‘acquisition’ versus ‘learning’ in additional language teaching*, *NALDIC news* 23, National Association for Language Development in the Curriculum, 2001.

⁶ Alexander, R, *Culture and pedagogy: international comparisons in primary education*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2000.

information and explaining ideas); interrogatory (asking different sorts of questions); and evaluative (delivering a judgement on what has been said or done).

Much whole-class teacher and pupil interaction in UK classrooms is characterised by Alexander as ‘conversation’, being unplanned, casual and not directed towards a goal, with questioning more or less at random and with responses from students being immediate and ‘off the cuff’. ‘Dialogue’ differs from ‘conversation’ in that it involves a carefully sequenced set of interactions, building from the familiar and concrete, in informal language, towards the abstract, expressed in the more formal language of the subject. Students are expected to respond fully and explicitly, with each response leading to another question, pushing the dialogue on towards greater specificity. We might call the process that of constructing new concepts as shared tools to think with.⁷ Alexander⁸ describes dialogue as a set of questions and responses ‘chained into meaningful and cognitively demanding sequences’ which are goal oriented.

It is important at this point to stress that dialogue as described by Alexander may be teacher or pupil led, and is not only applicable to the whole-class context, but has an equally important place in teacher–pupil talk with small groups and with individuals. There is no claim being made that whole-class teaching has greater potential for learning than any other interactional strategy. It does, however, play a major role in most classrooms, and the aim is to improve its quality and extend its potential for learning for all pupils, including learners of English as an additional language.

Whole-class dialogue may be of particular importance for improving education for minority group students, given research findings that suggest that teachers interact with them less frequently in group and individual work than with other children.⁹ There are also concerns that early-stage English learners are being placed inappropriately for differentiated group work with children having learning difficulties, undertaking simple tasks lacking in cognitive challenge.

Despite being ‘undifferentiated’, all the features of ‘chained’, incremental and cognitively challenging whole-class dialogue outlined by Alexander¹⁰ seem to make it powerful for learners of English as an additional language. For such pupils the ambiguity of casual conversation and its random questioning patterns are even more of a handicap. The building up of concepts from the more immediate and concrete (based on recent shared experience, demonstration or visual support) towards the more abstract, with new subject terminology introduced gradually; and the repetition and/or reformulation of peer responses by the teacher, leading into the next ‘chained’ question and the predictable pattern of the interaction would seem to have the potential to involve the EAL learners, and to enable them to participate in constructing group knowledge.

In whole-class dialogue of the type described by Alexander in the Russian classroom, the class learns from listening to the interaction between one pupil and the teacher. Not every child is expected to perform. Teachers need no longer feel they have to give every child ‘a turn’ each session. Their focus is the group – the class – not each individual. However, they can use their knowledge of the class as individuals to plan

⁷ Ogborn, J, Kress, G, Martins, I and McGillicuddy, K, *Explaining science in the classroom*, Buckingham, Open University Press, 1996.

⁸ Alexander, R, *Culture and pedagogy: international comparisons in primary education*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2000, page 520.

⁹ Biggs, A and Edwards, V, ‘I treat them all the same’: teacher–pupil talk in multi-ethnic classrooms, *Language and education*, 5(3), 1992.

¹⁰ Alexander, R, *Culture and pedagogy: international comparisons in primary education*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2000.

their lessons and to decide which pupil will help the class at which point. Learners of English can remain silent and listen in some lessons. However, the teacher can equally build in suitable moments in which to ensure EAL learners also learn to take their turn in leading whole-class dialogue, For example, this could be in answering questions with a lower language demand (as in some mathematical problem-solving) or with structured support from visual aids, drawing on vocabulary or using a structure offered on the blackboard, or, where possible, with bilingual assistant support.

To be successful, the patterns of dialogic interaction will need to be made familiar, unambiguous and explicit to the students (in other words, they will have to be taught), so that all pupils know what sort of response is expected of them in the context of the lesson structure. This explicit teaching will be of particular benefit to EAL learners.

Conclusion: making whole-class dialogue accessible to all

The planned nature of whole-class dialogue would enable the teacher to focus on providing adequate visual aids, vocabulary lists, forms of bilingual support, etc, to ensure that the lesson is accessible to all students, or to organise some pre-teaching sessions for those learners who might need them. Such forward planning would also help to make the work of any extra ethnic minority achievement (EMA) teachers and assistants in the school more effective.

EAL learners need the opportunity to focus on problems which are cognitively challenging, but which have low language demands, and to focus on the language itself, with a reduction in other cognitive demands.¹¹ In dialogic questioning it would be important for teachers in multilingual classes to consider how at different times to lower the language demands for pupils or lower the cognitive challenge to focus on language and the metalanguage needed to talk about language. In many cases, both these aspects could be dealt with in the chain of questions: moving from recent experience and providing supporting language (low cognitive demand, focus on language), to problem-solving using the acquired language (high cognitive demand, lowered demands on language). Again, this explicit attention to academic language as well as subject knowledge would benefit most pupils.

However, it would be fair to say that whole-class dialogue will make language demands on learners of English who, depending on their level of English, may often need to be supported by preparatory activities of different kinds, either individually or in small groups. Nevertheless, it seems vital that EAL learners do participate in whole-class teaching episodes. They should not be withdrawn from them to work with unqualified teaching assistants, as they will lose the opportunity to benefit from subject specialist teaching (in secondary schools) or access to skilled, professional teaching (primary schools). This exclusion is likely to lead to a limited focus – the teaching of simple vocabulary and of simple facts – denying them the opportunity to take part in the ‘chaining’ from familiar and concrete experiences to the new language and conceptual framework of the subject, which is every child’s entitlement under the national curriculum.

¹¹ Cummins, J, ‘Wanted: a theoretical framework for relating language proficiency to academic achievement among bilingual students’, in C Rivera (ed), *Language proficiency and academic achievement*, Clevedon, Multilingual Matters, 1984.

Could the English curriculum more fully reflect the aesthetic and rhetorical functions of spoken language, and the role of talk in critical thinking?

For all sorts of understandable reasons, Deborah Cameron argues, the emphasis in the national curriculum speaking and listening requirements has been overly utilitarian and unnecessarily narrow. The welcome recognition and inclusion of speaking and listening in the curriculum has been at the cost of it being conceived within a communication skills approach. This emphasis has meant that some important aspects of talk – aesthetic, performative and rhetorical – have been marginalised.

- To what extent has the speaking and listening curriculum been narrowed by a communication skills approach?
- Is it possible to give greater classroom attention to the aesthetic, performative and rhetorical aspects of spoken language?

Cameron concludes that ‘Genre provides a framework in which one can examine both small details of form and large questions of meaning’ for all forms of representational practices in English. Is there a case for putting spoken language on the same footing as written language in this respect? What would a ‘generic framework’ for spoken language include?

Neil Mercer’s paper explores the concept of dialogic talk in which teachers and pupils make substantial, sustained contributions and suggests that this kind of classroom interaction is particularly effective in developing pupils’ thinking. He contrasts the co-production of sustained stretches of spoken language with teaching strategies that provide opportunities for pupils to talk with little direction or allow the teacher to dominate the classroom through monologue.

- What is the incidence, currently, of this kind of whole-class dialogue?
- To what extent has it fallen out of favour with the advent of individualised learning or returned to favour with the recent emphases on whole-class teaching?

Schooling spoken language: beyond ‘communication’?

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Introduction

The questions I want to address in this paper are quite general and fundamental ones, such as:

- What is the rationale for teaching spoken language in schools?

- What is it desirable to teach under the heading of ‘spoken language’?
- What is the particular role of English teaching in relation to spoken language?

The subtitle ‘beyond “communication”?’ hints at why I have chosen to raise, or revisit, these questions. It is my view that in recent years, the teaching of spoken language has progressively come to be linked, in the minds of policymakers, employers and the general public, and to some extent also in educators’ minds, with a particular set of assumptions about what spoken language is, and is for. Speaking and listening are put under the heading of ‘communication skills’, and it is assumed that the rationale for teaching spoken language is to develop these skills to the high levels needed by workers in a post-industrial economy. Where this can lead has been described by Edward Said, following a visit to a university in the Persian Gulf, where he found that teaching based on a ‘communication’ rationale had:

all but terminally consigned English to the level of a technical language stripped of expressive and aesthetic characteristics and denuded of any critical or self-conscious dimension. You learned English to use computers, respond to orders, transmit telexes, decipher manifests and so forth. That was all.¹

Said was describing the teaching of English as a foreign/second language; but a similar outlook on language has become increasingly influential in relation to L1 English teaching. Here I offer a critical view of this development, its consequences for language education in general and for English language education in particular. I also suggest some alternative directions for our thinking about the teaching of spoken English.

Schooling spoken language: some possible rationales

In the modern era, talk has more often served as the medium of instruction than as its object. It is only in the last 20 years in Britain that the belief that speaking and listening in L1 English teaching should be explicit objects of instruction and assessment has been fully institutionalised, in public examinations and the national curriculum. The idea that ‘communication skills’ provide the rationale for the teaching and assessment of spoken language is even more recent. It is not found, for instance, in one of the documents that played a key role in shaping the original form of the national curriculum for English, namely the 1988 Kingman Report, which contains the following observation:

In addition to encouraging the development of speech for communication, teachers need to encourage talk which can be exploratory, tentative, used for thinking through problems, for discussing assigned tasks and for clarifying thought: talk is not merely social and communicative, it is also a tool for learning.²

‘The development of speech for communication’ is presented here as something teachers will encourage as a matter of course, but subordinate (both grammatically and otherwise) to more significant things. Talk that is ‘*merely* social and communicative’ (emphasis added) is explicitly contrasted with talk that is ‘exploratory, tentative ... a tool for learning’. There is little ambiguity about which matters more, educationally speaking.

¹ Said, E, *Culture and imperialism*, London, Chatto, 1993, page 369.

² Department of Education and Science, *Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Teaching of the English Language* (‘the Kingman Report’), London, HMSO, 1988, page 43.

The Kingman sentence is recognisably influenced by arguments for ‘oracy’, in the form associated with influential figures such as the Vygotskian James Britton.³ Oracy was championed mainly on the grounds that certain kinds of talk enhanced learning. This ‘learning through talk’ argument provided both an educational rationale for focusing on speaking and listening in the classroom (see my first question above), and an implicit argument for focusing on some kinds of talk more insistently than others (see my second question). To fulfil the educational function accorded to it by the oracy movement, talk needed to be directed towards essentially intellectual objects – the stimulus for talk had to offer a certain complexity and richness. (It was not entirely obvious why the English classroom should be the privileged locus for this kind of talk (see my third question above), and in fact many advocates of ‘learning through talk’ were also advocates of language ‘across the curriculum’. I think there is a significant issue here about the distinctive contribution of English to language work, and I’ll come back to it a little later.)

A not-dissimilar rationale for focusing on spoken language may be found in the literature on second-language learning and bilingual education. Some researchers, notably Jim Cummins, have proposed a distinction between ‘basic interpersonal communicative skills’ (BICS) and ‘cognitive academic language proficiency’ (CALP).⁴ Too often, Cummins argues, bilingual learners are integrated into monolingual mainstream classes at a point when they have attained ‘peer appropriate’ levels of L2 BICS (conversational fluency), but have not yet caught up with monolingual peers on measures of CALP. The average time it takes for bilingual pupils to catch up on CALP measures, it is suggested, is five to seven years, whereas conversational fluency is typically achieved after one to two years. There are, in other words, different kinds of language proficiency, which develop at different rates and through different activities – a point which is in principle equally relevant to monolingual pupils.

Work on CALP has been most fully explored in the North American context. Here a number of factors (for instance the handling of bilingual learners’ integration into mainstream classrooms) differ from those in the UK. However, many of the linguistic features associated with CALP are significant for this paper.

The registers relevant to CALP are characterised by a high incidence of low-frequency vocabulary, grammatical complexity (for example, nominalisation and subordination), and a high degree of context-independence or ‘disembedding’. As Cummins points out, these characteristics are encountered most consistently in written text; but the BICS/CALP distinction is not simply a speech/writing distinction. In fact, certain kinds of talk may play an important role in developing CALP, because in talk it is possible to combine complex communicative tasks with a higher degree of contextual embedding than writing permits. Cummins gives the example of presenting a point of view persuasively to a group of your peers in speech, compared to writing an essay in which the same point of view is presented to persuade an absent, non-participating reader. Citing various studies, he suggests that CALP is promoted by talk which is ‘cognitively demanding but contextually supported’.⁵ He also points out that this kind of classroom interaction offers opportunities for teachers to develop learners’ language awareness or ‘knowledge about language’, for instance by recasting what learners say using alternative vocabulary or sentence structure and drawing attention to the implications of the difference.

³ Britton, J, *Language and learning*, London, Allen Lane, 1970.

⁴ In Cummins’ terminology (Cummins, J, *Language, power and pedagogy: bilingual children in the crossfire*, Clevedon, Multilingual Matters, 2000).

⁵ *Ibid*, page 69.

While the terminology and research context may be different, the argument here has obvious similarities to the arguments of oracy advocates in relation to L1 English teaching (and is in fact also informed by the work of Vygotsky). In both cases the rationale for focusing on spoken language in the classroom centres on the development of language for learning. The goal is explicitly to extend the repertoire of spoken genres and registers that constitute what Cummins calls BICS, and the intended outcomes are defined not simply in linguistic terms but in terms of educational and cognitive gains, such as the ability to grasp and manipulate abstract concepts, to reason out problems, clarify ideas and so on. This in turn has implications for *what* is taught under the heading of ‘spoken language’. It means that emphasis will be placed on genres and registers that differ in important ways from, say, ordinary casual conversation, that offer scope for ‘cognitively demanding but contextually supported’ tasks and for the development of language awareness.

However, while arguments for ‘learning through talk’ continue to command support among many educators, in recent years we have heard more about a rather different rationale for schooling spoken language. Speaking and listening, for which the generic ‘oracy’ term was typically (as in the Kingman quote above) ‘talk’, are now often discussed using the term ‘communication’; and the teaching of communication is often framed within a discourse of ‘key’, ‘core’ or ‘transferable’ skills. In this ‘skills’ frame, there is a tendency to design curricula which are ‘competence-based’. The projected learning outcome is the ability to *do* some specified thing – often a practical task with direct relevance to ‘real world’ or non-educational contexts – and what is assessed is an exemplary demonstration of this ‘competence’. This approach places more emphasis on ‘product’ than the ‘learning through talk’ approach, which is more process-oriented. It underpins, for instance, Britain’s National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), introduced in the late 1980s, where ‘communication’ is one of the areas of competence to be developed and assessed, as well as the new Key Skills Qualification which is designed for a range of students.

Placing speaking and listening under the heading of ‘communication skills’ is more than just a superficial change of terminology. By comparison with the Vygotskian approach which underpins arguments for ‘oracy’ or for ‘CALP’, the communication skills approach implies both a different rationale for instruction/assessment and, connectedly, a focus on different elements of the linguistic repertoire. In the next section I examine this point more closely.

The communication skills approach: practices and problems

Approaches to teaching spoken language that define their rationale in terms of developing ‘communication skills’ are heterogeneous, partly because of continuing uncertainty and disagreement about what exactly is meant by ‘communication skills’.⁶ Space does not permit me to describe in detail all the sources which provided evidence for the discussion below,⁷ but somewhat crudely, one could distinguish the following three main types of approach.

⁶ See Phillips, A, *Communication: a key skill for education*, London, BT Forum, 1998.

⁷ For a fuller treatment see Cameron, D, *Good to talk? Living and working in a communication culture*, London, Sage, 2000.

- Communication skills are taught for specific purposes and contexts, typically with a strong vocational orientation. For example, workplace-based communication training and NVQ syllabi may focus on quite narrowly specified work-related tasks, such as answering the phone (for office/clerical workers), dealing with customers (for retail workers) or interacting appropriately with elderly and/or disabled people (for social care workers). Though ‘communication’ may be described as a ‘key skill’, in this kind of training (a word I use advisedly) what is taught and/or assessed may not be readily transferable to a wider range of contexts. Assessment is usually competence-based.
- Communication skills are taught in a ‘key skills’ framework where transferability is emphasised. The skills which are addressed in this framework are typically defined in more general or generic terms than in the first type of approach. For example, the spoken communication element in the Key Skills Qualification⁸ focuses on the genres ‘discussion’ (one-to-one and group) and ‘presentation’ (of information orally to an audience), without specifying the context, purpose or subject-matter in detail. The ‘discussion’ skills assessed include providing relevant information, responding appropriately to others’ contributions and moving a discussion forward by summarising. Again, assessment is usually competence-based.
- Communication skills are taught in a ‘life skills’ framework, where some degree of transferability across contexts is aimed for, but the focus is specifically on the use of talk (and non-verbal communication) to negotiate interpersonal relationships. This is the approach most often found in popular self-improvement literature,⁹ and it is also prominent in educational programmes focusing on what is sometimes called ‘emotional literacy’.¹⁰ The kinds of skills pupils practise in programmes of this type include sharing problems and feelings (this may involve explicit teaching of emotional vocabulary), listening respectfully/non-judgementally to others, and resolving conflicts verbally. There may be more or less explicit teaching of interactional norms based on therapeutic models, particularly the precepts of assertiveness training.¹¹ This approach is not usually associated with assessment.

These approaches collectively have some characteristic features that differentiate them from the Vygotskian paradigm discussed above, and which could be seen as potentially problematic in educational contexts.

First, communication skills approaches tend to focus attention on a rather limited set of spoken genres, and more particularly, they tend to focus on tasks that call for what Cummins would call BICS (conversational proficiency) rather than CALP (the ability to manipulate complex ideas in complex and formal language). The interpersonal function of language tends to be the central focus (not surprisingly if communication is conceived as an interpersonal/social skill), and the kind of speech that is practised is often of a relatively informal kind, typically presupposing low social distance and equal status among participants. If the goal is to develop ‘transferable’ skills (or specific job skills such as ‘answering the phone’), then clearly there is no special reason to concentrate on genres and registers which are significant for academic purposes. At the same time, one might question why there is, even in programmes that are not

⁸ QCA, *Key skills units levels 1–3: communication, application of number, information technology*, London, QCA, 1999.

⁹ For example British Telecommunications, *Talk Works: how to get more out of life through better conversations*, London, British Telecommunications, 1997.

¹⁰ Examples from North American schools are described in Goleman, D, *Emotional intelligence*, New York, Bantam Books, 1995; and analogous examples from the UK are given in Phillips, A, *Communication: a key skill for education*, London, BT Forum, 1998.

¹¹ Rakos, R, *Assertiveness: theory, training and research*, London, Routledge, 1991.

specifically vocational, such a relentless focus on the conversational/interpersonal end of the spoken language spectrum. It is not only academic genres that are neglected, but also rhetorical and performance genres (for example, argument and narrative). Moreover, even within the category of 'interpersonal' skills there is often a focus on basic rather than more complex communicative tasks, or to put it another way, a failure to acknowledge and build on the communicative competence learners are likely to have acquired without formal instruction. Many tasks and topics that appeared in the materials I reviewed¹² were, in Cummins' terms, cognitively undemanding; some were frankly trivial.

Undemanding and trivial tasks are limiting in another way – they tend not to produce language which is formally (lexically or grammatically) complex. In communication skills approaches, however, developing linguistic competence in this formal sense is not a primary objective. What matters (and what is typically assessed) is that the form of language used by the learner should be appropriate to the subject-matter, purpose and audience, so that a particular communicative effect (for example, informing someone of X, getting their agreement to Y or interesting them in Z) is successfully produced. In programmes of the 'key skills' type particularly, there may be few constraints on either the subject or the purpose of communication, and this means that students can meet the same criterion of 'appropriateness' using quite different registers and styles (and, therefore, lexicogrammatical resources) depending on what they choose to talk about.

For instance, to achieve level 1 in communication in the Key Skills Qualification, students must 'take part in a one-to-one discussion and a group discussion about different, straightforward subjects'.¹³ Students will be assessed on whether they provide information relevant to subject and purpose, speak clearly in a way appropriate to the situation and listen/respond appropriately to what others say. The only constraint here is the specification of subject-matter as 'straightforward' (at level 3 and above this will be replaced by 'complex', which is defined as including 'abstract' and 'sensitive' topics). Yet it will clearly make a difference to what counts as 'relevant' and 'appropriate' whether the topic of discussion is personal or impersonal, whether the primary purpose is phatic or instrumental, and whether the tone is serious or humorous. Linguistically speaking, 'relevance' or 'appropriateness' may be realised quite differently in, say, a discussion about one's pets with a friend and a discussion of a work task with a co-worker; and differently again if the interlocutor is a vet in the first case or a manager in the second. A task defined simply as 'taking part in a discussion' is not, then, designed to promote any particular way of using language; more generally, the relationship between communication skills and language skills is unclear, and in practice not as close as I think many people imagine it to be.

Finally, communication skills approaches characteristically focus on practical outcomes; developing language awareness/knowledge about language (KAL) is not a major goal in most programmes (some vocational and 'life skills' programmes are

¹² Reviewed for Cameron, D, *Good to talk? Living and working in a communication culture*, London, Sage, 2000.

¹³ QCA, *Key skills units levels 1–3: communication, application of number, information technology*, London, QCA, 1999.

exceptions¹⁴). This is not a specific problem with ‘communication’ so much as a general feature of skills approaches, especially when assessment is competence-based.

In sum, I am suggesting that the communication skills approach to spoken language has severe limitations as a form of language education (and here we should remember that not all its advocates would see it as a form of language education; for some, communication skills are a subset of interpersonal or social skills rather than specifically language skills, while for many the real rationale is about maximising employability). Readers may wonder, however, what any of this has to do with the English curriculum, with which this publication is primarily concerned. The ‘communication as a key skill’ approach is not tied to any particular curriculum subject; there are differences between what is taught/assessed under the heading of ‘speaking and listening’ in the English curriculum and what is taught/assessed under the heading of ‘[oral] communication’ in something like the new Key Skills Qualification. Nevertheless, I think the inexorable rise of the communication skills approach has implications for thinking about English. For me, at least, it underlines the need for the teaching of English not only to preserve the distinctiveness of its concerns about spoken language (that is resist being ‘colonised’ by what is increasingly the dominant paradigm), but actually to become more clearly distinguished from the ‘communication skills’ approach. When everyone is talking about spoken language as ‘communication’, perhaps the question needs to be asked, what can English teaching contribute to the schooling of spoken language that other kinds of teaching cannot?

English and spoken language

Before I outline the distinctive contribution I believe the teaching of English can make in the area of spoken language, I should clarify what, in general, I take the subject ‘English’ to be about. In the debates that preceded the national curriculum, we saw how English, perhaps more than any other subject, readily becomes the focus of contending educational (which is also to say, ideological and political) ambitions. English teachers were variously charged with the task of ensuring ‘basic’ literacy, acting as guardians of the standard language and of the national culture as represented by the literary canon and teaching children grammar as a contribution to morality and good discipline (and those were only the ‘conservative’ demands); more ‘progressive’ forces meanwhile were emphasising the central role of English in promoting anything from media literacy to ‘personal growth’. Now ‘key skills’, especially communication, have been added to the mix.

Without supposing that all this historical/political baggage can easily be discarded, for the purposes of argument I take the liberty of proposing my own definition of English. I suggest it be thought of as the study (both theoretical and practical) of representational/communicative practices whose main (though not necessarily only)

¹⁴ It would be possible to integrate a KAL element into communication skills teaching, but at present there are real problems with the available material, which draws on an eclectic collection of sources, many of them of dubious value. Among the assertions I found repeated in more than one set of materials I reviewed for Cameron, D, *Good to talk? Living and working in a communication culture*, London, Sage, 2000, were the claims that 80 per cent of the meaning of any utterance is conveyed by body language; that listening is a four-stage process and that most people listen at a 25 per cent level of efficiency; that it is not possible to give a one-word answer to a WH-question or to answer a yes/no question at any length; and that before embarking on a conversation it is necessary to decide what you want to say. True, this sort of misinformation is more likely to be recycled in workplace training and self-help literature than in schools – although I did come across instances of schools and LEAs sending teachers to be trained and accredited for ‘key skills’ teaching by the commercial organisations which produce such materials. But I think it is a salutary reminder of how much there is for educators to do in producing relevant knowledge if we want the teaching of spoken language to be more than just practical ‘skilling’.

medium is language (particularly, but again not exclusively, the English language, in any/all of its varieties). The formula ‘representational/communicative’ is meant to embody the axiomatic principle that all language is *both* representation and communication. Acknowledging this explicitly might help to prevent spoken language being consigned to the ‘communication’ ghetto, where ‘skill’ easily becomes a wholly utilitarian concept, while the word ‘art’ is never mentioned at all.

From the foregoing remarks it follows that the distinctive contribution English teaching can make in the area of spoken language is to treat spoken language unapologetically as *language*, exploring the range of representational/communicative practices it supports, examining the distinctive forms and structures that are characteristic of those practices, and tracing the relationships among different practices (including those associated with writing and with other modes of representation/communication).

In relation to writing, especially literature, English teaching has traditionally concerned itself with questions of value as well as questions of meaning and structure. This concern is equally applicable (and worthwhile) in relation to speech, where discussions of it are arguably less constrained by received opinion (because there is nothing comparable to the literary canon). The question of what constitutes ‘skill’ in the use of spoken language should be, precisely, a *question* which learners are enabled to explore, and not, as it often is in ‘communication skills’ approaches, a question that has been answered in advance (often vaguely or disputably) by competence-based assessment criteria.

How might one organise a spoken language curriculum reflecting these general principles? I would like to suggest ‘genre’ as a potentially useful framework in which to explore questions of meaning, structure and value – in fact not only for spoken language, but for all the representational/communicative practices English is about. I mean the term ‘genre’ in something like the sense it is defined by Hanks: ‘the historically specific conventions and ideals according to which authors compose discourse and audiences receive it’.¹⁵ Or as Claire Kramsch and Steve Thorne observe, ‘genre is the mediator between the global and the local ... the social and historical basis of our speech and thought’.¹⁶ Genre provides a framework in which one can examine both small details of form and large questions of meaning. Nor does that framework rule out being creative with language, rather it fosters understanding of the ‘social and historical basis’ which we must necessarily build on when we do new things with words.

Foregrounding genre might also encourage something I think has been neglected in the ‘learning through talk’ approach as well as in ‘communication skills’ approaches, namely an appreciation of the diversity of speech genres. In my ideal curriculum, learners would both study (that is acquire knowledge about) and practise using a broad range of spoken genres, encompassing a variety of subject-matters, purposes, types of audience, and levels of formality and of planning. In rhetorical and performance genres especially, they would also be given opportunities to hear and discuss the speech of skilled performers (for example, TV interviewers and talk-show hosts, stand-up comedians, preachers, politicians, oral storytellers and rappers) in the same way and for the same reasons that they are given opportunities to read and

¹⁵ Hanks, W, *Intertexts. Writings on language, utterance and context*, Lanham MD, Rowman and Littlefield, 2000, page 135.

¹⁶ Forthcoming; see also Kramsch, C, *Language and culture*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998.

discuss the work of skilled writers. Talk is no more just a means for accomplishing practical goals than writing is, but learners are less often and less explicitly encouraged to consider speech as an artistic medium. I would like to see that change.

Conclusion

I recognise, of course, that many of the things proposed here are already going on in some classrooms. My criticism is not that English teachers cannot or do not want to do them, it is that teachers are not sufficiently supported in doing them by the current curriculum, nor (especially) by the kind of discourse on 'skills' that now pervades so much discussion of spoken language in education. That discourse is a response to the perception that education must change radically if it is to meet the needs of learners in a postmodern, globalised world. And indeed, the world is changing in ways that I think English teaching should respond to. For instance, one salient development is the proliferation of new media and genres of representation/communication, and the renegotiation of relationships between existing media and genres (for example, the primacy of print can no longer be taken for granted, and the boundaries between public and private discourse are becoming more permeable, producing shifts in established stylistic norms). But turning to 'skills' is not the only possible response to change. The challenge for English is to embrace new sociolinguistic realities, while resisting pressure to alter the curriculum in ways that can only impoverish it intellectually, linguistically and culturally.

The educational value of 'dialogic talk' in 'whole-class dialogue'

Neil Mercer, *Open University*

Introduction

In this paper, I will discuss the nature and educational significance of the kind of interaction called 'dialogic talk' and its use in 'whole-class dialogue'. To do so, I must begin by saying something more general about patterns of classroom interaction and teachers' use of questions. Research in many countries has shown that in whole-class sessions teachers tend to talk much more than their pupils. They also ask the great majority of questions. Moreover, most of their questions will form the first part of an exchange between a teacher and pupil known as an initiation-response-feedback (IRF) exchange.¹ These IRF exchanges give classroom talk its distinctive and familiar form.

There has been much debate amongst educational researchers over the years about the functions and value of this characteristic form of classroom interaction.² In this debate, it was at one time very common to find researchers criticising teachers for talking and questioning too much. However, most classroom researchers would probably now agree that such judgements were too simplistic. One reason is that critics did not properly acknowledge teachers' professional responsibility for directing and assessing pupils' learning of a curriculum, and the ways that they must rely on questions and other prompts to do so. Secondly, they tended to assume that all IRF exchanges were performing the same communicative function. Through the work of sociolinguists, linguistic philosophers and psychologists, we now know that it is dangerous to assume that forms of language have any direct and necessary relation to their functions. By this I mean that, for example, we cannot assume that when someone poses a question to another person, they will always be 'doing the same thing'. At an everyday level, we all appreciate this very well. In a personal conversation we are likely to perceive the question 'Do you really think that you can talk to me like that?' as carrying a very different kind of message from 'Do you want a cup of tea?'. What is more, even an apparently simple and direct question may take on special meanings within a particular setting or relationship.

In the classroom, teachers' questions can have a range of different communicative functions. For example, they can be used to test pupils' factual knowledge or understanding ('Can anyone tell me the capital city of Argentina?'), to manage classroom activity ('Are you all ready now to put your pencils down and listen?') and to find out more about what pupils are doing ('Why did you decide to have just three characters in your play?').

Even the above analysis is an oversimplification, because a question can have more than one function (for example, to find out what pupils are doing *and* to make them think about it) and because it takes on special meanings in the life of a particular class (have they studied Argentina already or are they about to begin?). But the key point is that the distinction between form and function is important for analysing and evaluating teacher–pupil dialogue.

¹ Sinclair, J and Coulthard, M, *Towards an analysis of discourse: the English used by teachers and pupils*, London, Oxford University Press, 1975.

² Norman, K (ed) *Thinking voices: the work of the National Oracy Project*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1992; Edwards, AD and Westgate, DPG, *Investigating classroom talk*, second edition, London, Falmer Press, 1994; and Wells, G, *Dialogic inquiry: towards a sociocultural practice and theory of education*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

'Dialogic talk' and 'whole-class dialogue'

Through his comparative research in the primary school classrooms of five countries, Robin Alexander³ has shown that if we look beneath the superficial similarity of talk in classrooms the world over, we will find teachers organising the communicative process of teaching and learning in very different ways. In most of the classrooms he observed, teachers talked more than the pupils; but the balance and nature of contributions varied considerably, both between countries and between classrooms. One of the reasons for this variation was that in some classrooms a teacher's questions (or other prompts) would elicit only brief responses from pupils, while in others they often generated much more extended and reflective talk. The concept of 'dialogic talk' emerged from these observations as a way of describing a particularly effective type of classroom interaction. 'Dialogic talk' is that in which both teachers and pupils make substantial and significant contributions and through which pupils' thinking on a given idea or theme is helped to move forward. It may be used when teachers are interacting with groups or with whole classes.

I can illustrate my understanding of the function of this kind of talk through the example below. It was recorded in an English primary school by Open University researcher Manuel Fernandez, who is investigating the role of computers in children's literacy development. In this extract, the teacher is talking with some members of her year 5/6 class about their current activity; they are communicating by e-mail with members of a class in another local school about the shared curriculum topic 'How to have a healthy lifestyle'.

- Teacher: Right. Somebody is going to read this to me now.
- Declan: 'Dear Springdale. In science we are looking at the healthy human body. We need a lot of exercise to keep our muscles, hearts and lungs working.'
- Samia: 'Working well.'
- Declan: 'Working well. It also keeps our bones strong.'
- Samia: Yeah. We don't need a full stop.
- Teacher: Yeah. That's fine. That's all right. Carry on. 'Flies ...'
- Declan: 'Flies and other animals can spread diseases and germs. That is why it is very important to keep food stored in clean cupboards, etcetera.'
- Evan: Is cupboards spelled wrong? (*It is written 'cubourds'*)
- Teacher: Yes, it is spelled wrong actually. It is cup-boards. Cup-boards.
- Samia: (*Reading as teacher writes*) B-O-A-R-D-S.
- Teacher: It's a difficult word: C-U-P cup, and then you've got the OU makes an 'ow' sound. But it's OA, boards.
- Evan: O, A.
- Teacher: OK. Can I ask you a question? And etcetera is ETC, not ECT. I want to ask you a question before you carry on. So why have you felt it is important as a group to send Springdale this information?
(*Several children speak together*)
- Teacher: Just a minute. Let's have one answer at a time.
- Samia: Cause if they haven't done it yet. We can give them the information ...
- Teacher: Yeah.
- Samia: ... that we have found in the book and so when they do get – when they do this part they will know, they will know, so, to answer it.
- Teacher: OK. Excellent. So what were you going to say Declan?

³ Alexander, R, *Culture and pedagogy: international comparisons in primary education*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2000.

Declan: So they can have a healthy body and they can use it for information.
 Teacher: OK.
 Evan: And plus, if they haven't got the books.
 Teacher: And if they haven't got the books. Now before you tell me anything else you've found in a book, I think, don't know what you think, do you think it would be a good idea to tell them why you are ... what you've just explained to me? We are sending you this information because ...
 Samia: Just because, we couldn't find, something like ...
 Declan: They could be doing it right now.
 Teacher: Well, they might be.
 Samia: We are sending you this piece of information just in case you haven't done it yet, to help you.
 Teacher: Right, discuss it how you want to say that. OK?

In the first part of the example, the teacher uses prompts to find out what the children have done. The first actual question comes from a child, on a point of spelling accuracy. When the teacher then begins to question the children, it is not to assess their spelling; it is to elicit their reasons for what they are writing to the children in the other school. She provides feedback on their answers ('OK. Excellent.'). So the episode has some features of the familiar IRF structure; but the teacher's questioning is used to encourage the pupils to perceive more clearly the nature of their task. She then picks up on what they have said to guide the next part of their activity, by suggesting that it will be useful to share their reasoning with their audience (and modelling how they might do it: 'We are sending you this information because ...'). She is using this interaction to build the knowledge foundations for the next stage of their activity – talking with them to guide their thinking forward. So we have here talk in which pupils make substantial and thoughtful contributions, and in which the teacher does not merely test understanding, but guides its development. What is more, all the pupils present are exposed to this reasoned discussion. This may not be 'whole-class dialogue', because the discussion is not shared with all members of the class; but it certainly seems to qualify as 'dialogic talk'.

We can consider further what 'dialogic talk' offers, from an educational point of view. One of the prime goals of education is to enable children to become more adept at using language, to express their thoughts and to engage with others in joint intellectual activity (their communication skills). A second important goal is to advance children's individual capacity for productive, rational and reflective thinking (their thinking skills). Dialogic talk can help achieve both these goals. The work of the Russian psychologist Vygotsky is relevant for understanding why this is so.⁴ He suggested that using language to communicate helps us learn ways to think. As he put it, what children gain from their 'intermental' experience (communication between minds through social interaction) shapes their 'intramental' activity (the ways they think as individuals). What is more, he suggested that some of the most important influences on the development of thinking will come from the interaction between a learner and more knowledgeable, supportive members of their community.

Although developed over half a century ago, Vygotsky's intriguing ideas have only really been put to the test in recent years. Now research has confirmed the validity of some of his claims about the link between language use and the learning of ways of

⁴ Vygotsky, LS, *Mind in society: the development of higher psychological processes*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1978.

thinking. Research has shown that teachers' modelling of ways of asking questions, offering explanations and providing reasons can have a significant and positive effect on how children use language in problem-solving tasks.⁵ Research by myself and colleagues has shown that a programme of carefully designed teacher-led and group-based activities enables children not only to become better at talking and working together but also at solving problems alone.⁶ The group-based activities of this programme are very important; but equally important is the kind of dialogue a teacher uses in whole-class plenaries and group monitoring. It is no coincidence that the teacher in the example above has been involved in this programme. And this brings us back to 'dialogic talk'.

Conclusion

For children to become more able in using language as a tool for both solitary and collective thinking, they need involvement in thoughtful and reasoned dialogue, in which conversational partners 'model' useful language strategies and in which they can practise using language to reason, reflect, enquire and explain their thinking to others. By using questions to draw out children's reasons for their views or actions, teachers can help them not only to reflect on their reasoning but also to see how and why to seek reasons from others. By seeking and comparing different points of view, a teacher can help those views to be shared and help children see how to use language to compare, debate and perhaps reconcile different perspectives. Providing only brief factual answers to IRF exchanges will not give children suitable opportunities for practice, whereas being drawn into more extended explanations and discussions of problems or topics will. This is the valuable kind of educational experience that 'dialogic talk' and 'whole-class dialogue' can offer.

⁵ Brown, A and Palincsar, AS, 'Guided, co-operative learning and individual knowledge acquisition', in L Resnick (ed), *Knowing, learning and instruction*, New York, Lawrence Erlbaum, 1989; and Rojas-Drummond, S, 'Guided participation, discourse and the construction of knowledge in Mexican classrooms', in H Cowie and D van der Aalsvoort (eds), *Social interaction in learning and instruction: the meaning of discourse for the construction of knowledge*, Oxford, Elsevier, 2000.

⁶ Mercer, N, Wegerif, R and Dawes, L, Children's talk and the development of reasoning in the classroom, *British educational research journal*, 25(1), 1999, pages 95 to 111.

Afterword

Ron Carter, School of English Studies, University of Nottingham

Introduction

The data, commentaries and arguments so far developed in this QCA project, underline how little we know about the nature and functions of talk and how important it is to understand it better. One problem in this endeavour is that talk is something that most people can do very naturally and unselfconsciously; it is easy therefore to overlook how successfully people do it and not to reflect on the precise nature of spoken language.

When we talk, the human mind shows a truly remarkable capacity for on-line adjustments and for processing large amounts of information. This information is not just linguistic, but also cognitive, semiotic and sociocultural. The processes involved are dynamic, constantly changing and fluctuating as new meanings emerge, and they often place demands on speakers and listeners that can reveal them at their most exposed in their identities as people. The ability to record, interpret, adjust to and use this information in the articulation of meanings, often with the mind working at very great speeds, underlines that spoken language use, more than any other use of language, is language working at full stretch in its interaction with the environment. This work therefore leads to a project we are calling 'At full stretch: grammar, spoken English and the classroom'.

The principles of the project

A basic principle of this project is to begin to reverse a long history of attention to written grammars and written language organisation. The aim is to show how spoken language is organised and how and why people can be effective talkers and listeners. Recent applied linguistic research can help in this process.

If we accept that it is still early days in our understandings, what steps might be taken to further enrich our existing knowledge and how might these steps advance things?

- We should continue to explore the basic frameworks for the description of the linguistic structure and texture of talk and see what a basic grammar of talk looks like, both in the sense of particular grammatical properties and in terms of the overall architecture of interactive dialogue. This means applying further some of the recent findings produced by those areas of applied linguistics that have sought to examine large stretches of spoken discourse and produce provisional frameworks for its description.
- Then we should refine these frameworks and attempt a mapping of features onto national curricular specifications for speaking and listening. This will be done by working with groups of teachers who will be able to assess the usefulness of the frameworks and propose the kinds of adjustments and developments to them that both experience and practice suggest. Tasks designed by teachers so far to elicit and record naturally occurring talk or to encourage pupils to collect such data have demonstrated the value of increased language awareness. A related step then is to explore further reflections by pupils themselves on the nature and purposes of the talk.

- A number of further steps might then lead into an examination of contrasts and continuities between spoken and written language and into sequences of learning in which differences and distinctions between speech and writing are explored in the context of pupils' own production and reception of language. Although the focus needs to remain on the nature of talk, there are clear benefits to be derived from helping pupils to navigate the difficult and complex journeys from successful talk to successful writing and back again, extending and refining language repertoires in the process.

Moving beyond the project

The 'At full stretch' project will enable progress to be made, but it will generate further questions and issues.

- What guidance can be provided for clarification of, and in addition to, statutory requirements?
- How can talk in the classroom be better connected to or be made part of the oral heritage with its rich history of performance skills, cultural traditions and oral memories?
- There is no Palgrave's golden 'treasury' of spoken English – is it possible to construct a canon or canons of successful talk, including both private and public, monologic and dialogic, large group and small group examples?
- How far can we illustrate the extent to which talk has aesthetic and rhetorical functions that are valued within a range of different communities?

Talk of all kinds is crucial in the construction and negotiation of interpersonal relationships as much in the classroom as outside it. There has been much research on the ways in which the distribution of power between participants (on the basis of gender, status and knowledge) affects how spoken discourse is managed by different speakers. How might any of this information be useful to teachers and pupils? Work in the classroom understandably emphasises uses of talk that are collaborative and consensual, but it is important to note that talk is also sometimes conflictual and is used to insult and hurt. How can we build on pupils' understanding of these functions and purposes of talk in ways that will contribute to more effective critical analysis of language?

Finally, it would be a mistake to assume that the complexities of talk can be wholly embraced within any grammatical framework, however important grammar is. The attention to language is indeed crucial, as is enhanced language awareness on the part of teachers and students, but it is also important to move beyond a purely language focus and to work to build a wider platform for understanding, consensus for action and for national curricular classroom-oriented research.

Acknowledgements

The QCA English team is grateful to the many teachers, advisers and researchers who have contributed to the shaping of ideas in this publication, together with colleagues from the DfES, Ofsted and the national literacy strategies.

We would also like to acknowledge the collaboration of the major subject associations: the English Association, the National Association for Drama, the National Association for Language Development in the Curriculum, the National Association for the Teaching of English, the National Association of Advisers in English and the United Kingdom Reading Association for their help in taking forward aspects of the work.

Particular thanks are due to Rebecca Hughes of the School of English Studies, University of Nottingham, for her work in editing the initial seminar papers.

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