Opportunities to develop speaking and listening as the classroom have never been better. The National Curriculum places emphasis on the status and value of spoken language. The renewed Primary National Strategy firmly reinstates talk as a learning medium, with the first four strands of objectives relating to speaking and listening. Oracy is no longer a poor relation to literacy but recognised as the bedrock of children’s learning.

Oracy: why it’s important

In his book Thought and Language, psychologist Lev Vygotsky described how thought and language go hand-in-hand. Talk not only shapes thinking but is also a window into the child’s mind. When we talk through ideas with each other we move our thinking forward. The National Curriculum places emphasis on the importance of thinking skills – ‘knowing how’ – and it is talk that powers these. Reasoning, enquiry and creative thinking will all flourish in classrooms that value and promote spoken language.

Talk can also promote inclusion, reflecting children’s diverse language communities and experiences. A language-rich curriculum respects and draws upon Standard English, dialects, and languages other than English so that children are enabled to make choices about how, when and where to use language.

Experienced teachers are well-versed in strategies for using talk effectively in the classroom but some basic principles are always worth repeating, considering and developing. What follows is a reminder of some techniques and their rationale, as well as a few specific examples of useful approaches.

Types of talk

As teachers, we know that children can be talkative and classrooms can be chaotic places but sometimes we may have concerns about how productive or focussed the children’s talk is.

Types of talk promote learning. In Thinking Voices – the work of the National Oracy Project (1992.), Douglas Barnes suggested two broad categories of talk for learning which teachers have found useful: presentational and exploratory.

Presentational talk is the product, whilst exploratory talk reflects processes of learning. Children use presentational talk when they report back to peers, teachers or the whole school in assemblies; this is a valuable skill. Exploratory talk occurs when children are problem-solving, investigating, developing ideas, drafting. In contrast to presentational talk, exploratory talk is more tentative, less complete and often involves dialogue. Both have their place and teachers can plan for opportunities for each; both offer rich contexts for assessing children’s understanding.

These talk types are well illustrated in the familiar ‘jigsaw’ technique which can be used in any curriculum area. In the following example, Year 5 pupils have been reading Philip Pullman’s short novel The Firework Maker’s Daughter; they have been set a group task of creating a poster introducing the main characters which they will present to a Year 4 class who are about to begin reading the book. Initially, the children are placed in initial ‘home’ groups of four and each is allocated a character: Lila, Chulak, Lalchand and Lambah. These groups are then disbanded in favour of ‘expert’ groups, each of which will look at one character. Using prompt sheets provided by the teacher, the children discuss and make notes in readiness for reporting back to their home group.

So, the group focusing on Lila are asked to decide on three adjectives which best describe her. One child’s suggestion of ‘wild’ is hotly disputed by the others in the group and they finally settle upon ‘determined’, ‘brave’ and ‘clever’. This exploratory talk gives way to more formal presentational talk when the group report back to the home group and when the final presentations are made to the Year 4 class.

Kinds of talk

Making plans

Exploring and solving problems

Raising questions

Working out meanings in texts

Reflecting

Rehearsing

Giving explanations

Informing and entertaining others

Reporting and summarising

Interviewing

Telling stories

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A particular effective approach is based on the work of Dorothy Heathcote, Gavin Bolton and Cecily O’Neill (see Drama for Learning by D. Heathcote and G. Bolton) and involves the teacher working in role alongside children. When a teacher assumes a role she can model, channel and extend language in a range of fictitious drama contexts. Such an approach can afford children the opportunity to reason, challenge, persuade and negotiate in role.

For example, Waddell and Oxenbury’s multi-layered picture book Farmer Duck draws on aspects of Orwell’s classic Animal Farm and has potential for use in a Nursery or a Year Six Class. The plot presents the unfair treatment of animals and the eventual displacement of the original farmer. However, drama allows you to explore situations with children before, during and after those presented in the story. Here are some possibilities.

1. Go into role with the children as the unfairly treated animals. In this situation you may choose to discuss plans, reason with the powerful farmer, or persuade others to take the dangerous course of revolutionary action and be prepared to justify such action to others.
2. Take on the role of the farmer and argue against attempts at negotiation by the animals.
3. Choose to go sideways into the story and assume the roles of neighbouring farmers/animals reacting to the news of the farmer’s eviction.
4. Go forwards in time to consider the problems of farm management by the victorious animals. While animals such as cows have an obvious economic contribution to make – just what purposes might pigs serve?

As these dramatic situations develop, the language in use serves different purposes. Note the following example where a reception child has taken on the role of the farmer’s mother. She has abdicated her responsibilities for his behaviour and is attempting to persuade a hostile audience that the unhealthy diet she provided for him as a child was justified.

In every dramatic situation, there is the need for talking for a range of social purposes. Children are used to this demand from their early play experiences. You have only to observe a themed home corner such as a hospital to hear children complaining, diagnosing, reassuring and prescribing. Drama capitalises on these early play experiences and enables teachers of children at any age to focus and extend the use of talk in the classroom. Such talk can provide authentic pathways and reasons for a range of writing (for example, in the example above, the children could go on to write healthy recipes and shopping lists for the mother and her farmer son).

In conclusion, it is important that children themselves have opportunities to reflect on the value of talk. This Year 5 boy commented on how talk helps him to think:

I get to understand their ideas as well as mine, so I can get a mixture of both ideas, instead of just having mine.

(‘Boys on the margins’ by Safford et al, 2004)

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