



From oracy

There is a feeling abroad that the benefits of using classroom conversation as a tool for learning have been overlooked in the scramble for better SATs results. Neil Mercer talks to Steve Williams about what we can learn from The National Oracy Project.

Steve: It is now over ten years since the findings of the National Oracy Project were published. What were the main achievements of the project and what impact did it have?

Neil: There has been a tendency in the British state education system to focus on language skills in writing and reading to a much greater extent than talk, and the actual development of children's oral skills has only recently figured explicitly in the educational agenda. I say 'state' education system, because within the private (public school) system, the development of rhetorical speaking abilities has always been given attention. I think that the main achievement of the National Oracy Project (NOP) was to bring children's talk into view, to celebrate its richness and educational potential and to legitimise talk-based activities. It encouraged teachers to listen to pupil's talk and to incorporate talk activities more into the mainstream of classroom life. The NOP also offered teachers a variety of methods for managing talk in their lessons. Some wonderful examples of children's talk were captured, especially by teachers who simply left tape recorders running while children worked together. The children involved in the NOP also became aware of many aspects of their own spoken language.

Some critics viewed government support for oracy somewhat cynically, as really representing nothing more than a concern to have the next generation of workers trained in oral skills for Britain's developing service industries; but even if that is true to some extent, I don't think that an official recognition of the potential value of talk at that time was a bad thing at all.

Steve: How has your own work developed since the oracy project? Do you have new or different priorities for classroom talk?

Neil: The NOP was successful in celebrating children's talk but, after its completion, I decided that what was needed next was a more critical analysis of how talk was used in classrooms and how this related to the skills that children needed to develop. While the recorded evidence that I and other researchers and teachers gathered around the time of the NOP included some great examples of how children could use talk to learn together, that evidence also revealed that much of the talk that went on in classrooms was not educationally productive or helpful for extending children's language and thinking skills. It seemed that many children did not use talk to work well together – and perhaps did not know how to do so.

This wasn't surprising when you took into account the likelihood that many children were not regularly exposed to examples of 'good discussions' in their lives outside school – coupled with the observed fact that teachers hardly ever made the nature of a good discussion a matter for explicit consideration in class. Simply allowing and encouraging children to talk in the classroom was not enough. It could even be a waste of time unless some attention was given to helping children become more aware of how talk could be used most effectively in particular contexts and to helping them extend their repertoire of language skills. Not everyone agreed with the position I took on this because it implied that the social backgrounds of some children might be depriving them of valuable language learning experience; but I think that if education doesn't take into account the differences in experience that pupils have outside school, it can never help achieve more equality of opportunity.

So in recent years, one of my main areas of work (with Rupert Wegerif, Lyn Dawes and others) has been to develop practical ways for teachers to enable children to develop their awareness and skills in using spoken language,

to dialogue

especially as a tool for learning and thinking collectively. This wasn't always easy, because the political and educational climate did not seem to favour applied research on that topic. After the NOP, oracy seemed to be banished to the educational wilderness for a while – I think at least partly because government ministers thought it hadn't had a hard enough 'skills-development' edge to it. That really was a case of the baby going out with the bath water. Even the term 'oracy', which had been coined in the 1960s by the British language researcher Andrew Wilkinson, fell into disfavour.

From the beginning, the National Curriculum documentation only mentioned 'speaking and listening' but I am glad to say that in the last couple years, the spiral has turned again, with educational policy in England and Wales now giving much more attention to talk. Last week I spoke at a conference for teachers with 'oracy' in its title, which also included speakers from government agencies. However, I expect the focus this time round to be less on the celebration of talk and more on the development of children's awareness and understanding of spoken language and their skills in using it. Fortunately, the work my colleagues and I have been doing is well suited to this new climate and is recognised as such. For example, we were commissioned to write training materials for teachers about 'thinking together' for the current Key Stage 3 national strategy for the Foundation Subjects, and our ideas have also been incorporated into the National Literacy Strategy.

Steve: The NOP stressed the need to find ways to assess talk. The argument seemed to be that only that which is assessed is valued – therefore if we assess talk it will be valued. Your recent work focuses on the importance of exploratory talk to help pupils think together. Risk taking is obviously required from pupils if exploratory talk is to assist their thinking. Does assessment undermine the risk taking that is required for thinking aloud?

Neil: I don't think that this is quite the dilemma it seems. Assessment could be made of any selected features or qualities of talk, so pupils' talk could be assessed for its imaginative or adventurous qualities ('risk taking'). The difficult problem would be to design a suitable criteria for making the assessment. It is also important to note that unless someone (such as the teacher) does assess the

quality of children's use of talk for thinking together, pupils who need help in developing their discussion skills will not be identified.

Steve: One of your arguments is that pupils internalise the thinking moves of exploratory talk and that this improves their own individual thinking. So, for example, one pupil might state a point of view, another might ask for evidence and the discussion proceeds. You argue that members of the group are likely to internalise the need to check for evidence. Some teachers would argue that this could be done equally well when the initial thinking moves come from the teacher. The teacher could constantly remind pupils of the need to back up their statements with evidence and then require them to do just that. Wouldn't pupils internalise this equally well? If they could, then teaching would be more efficient because teaching wouldn't be so uncertain. After all, pupils sometimes don't always contribute the thinking moves the teacher is looking for.

Neil: I think that teachers do have a crucial role in raising children's awareness of how to use language for thinking and in 'modelling' effective ways of doing so. They can do this in whole class sessions (as we advocate in the *Thinking Together* and *Talkbox* books). I have also seen teachers help lift a discussion amongst pupils to new heights, or set it more clearly in an appropriate direction, by intervening carefully in a group discussion (and then leaving again). But pupils also need opportunities to talk together without a teacher listening and contributing, because the quality of 'interthinking' amongst peers is quite different and offers its own special learning opportunities. The important thing is to get a balance in the classroom between the two kinds of interactions.

Neil Mercer is Professor and Director of the Centre for Language and Communications at the Open University. He is joint author of *Thinking Together*, Questions Publishing, 2001 and *TalkBox*, Questions Publishing, April 2003. He and his colleagues are giving a series of seminars in the summer term on using talk for thinking together. For further details see the leaflet enclosed in this edition or ring Malrose Allen on 0121 666 7878.