How can I make talk related activities more inclusive using the Thinking Together approach?

The STeP Journal
Student Teacher Perspectives

University of Cumbria
Vol 6(1) pages 73-80

Philip Last
Canterbury Christ Church University

Abstract
This article looks at the Thinking Together approach as a way of generating more meaningful discussions in a class. It is the aim that once the Thinking Together approach has been adopted that the language and confidence of the class to speak openly will increase. The benefits should also see the class sharing their own language thus exposing children to other language bases. The action research undertaken was prompted by a number of experiences where clear language difficulties were preventing progression despite the children in question showing abilities that were not given opportunities to be expressed. After the action research had been completed and adopted, the class showed a number of improvements including being able to work as a group with a wider range of class members and being able to hold, develop and conclude discussions more effectively.

Introduction
During my initial teacher training year, I have reflected often on how I can become a better teacher. While researching dialogic teaching I came to appreciate the value which such an approach brought to the class room. I questioned what was dialogic about my own pedagogies, those of my peers and those of other schools and staff I have observed elsewhere. When the opportunity to carry out some action research arose I knew that I wanted to explore how I could make talk related activities more inclusive. I strongly believe that we as Primary Teachers are a major determiner in a child's educational life and that using language or talk is one of the most important pedagogies we need to develop and use appropriately. As Grugeon et al. point out, talk is a ready-made resource the pupils bring with them on day one, but many take it for granted (2001). During one placement I worked with a year 1 pupil whose language was limited and his ability to understand concepts non-existent. I asked my Mentor why he had so little support and unsurprisingly, the answer came down to funding. He did not qualify for one-to-one support as he had no 'need' and so the school were providing as many interventions as they could with the resources they had. I remember questioning when he entered year two or year three, how far behind would he have become? These thoughts still haunt me now and I wonder how he is progressing. However, these thoughts also fuel my desire to establish a more effective method of using talk to help those pupils who are excluded from conversations or learning and joining in because of their lack of language or willingness for whatever reason. When you consider that research undertaken by Smith, Hardman, Wall and Mroz (2004, as cited by Meiers, 2014) state that research conducted in typical schools found 70% of the time verbal exchanges lasted less than 5 seconds and used 3 words or fewer and that open questions only formed 10% of those asked with only 11% of those questions leading to extended dialogue, it is not surprising that many pupils struggle to develop their language. From this action research project I intend to develop my knowledge further about how talk is used in a class and how I as the class teacher can not only include every student as much as possible but also help develop pupils beyond the education they receive directly from me, but to extend it so that every experience, or at least as many as possible, forms a part of their wider education.

Citation
Last, P. (2019) 'How can I make talk related activates more inclusive using the "Thinking Together" approach?' *STeP journal,* 6 (1), pp. 73-80.

Literature Review

When previously investigating the research or policies linked to an area of study it has been straightforward. However, when looking at language in the way that I need it has proven more challenging. While at first glance the National Curriculum looks at Spoken Language in some detail, when you start to look deeper you discover there are a lot of broad statements such as 'developing their capacity', 'developing their understanding of reading and writing' and even 'gaining knowledge through the artistic practice of drama'. There is little that is concrete about the standards sought or the levels that need to be achieved. The issue I have is that I believe there is a large swathe of children that are in a grey area. In a previous assignment I have cited the Bercow Report (2008) as it categorically states there is a growing need for speech, language and communication skills to be improved dramatically as 50% of the pupils who come from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds have language skills significantly lower than those of their peers and that this trend is growing (DCSF, 2008). Similarly, the Rose Report (DCSF, 2009) suggests that pupils are entering the education system with 'impoverished' language. This number is growing and suggests that research has proved that the number of books within a home is a major influence in a child's word and world knowledge (DCSF, 2009).

If we consider the various different types of speech and language disorders that are currently recognised and then consider further the number of assessments that are available such as, full language, expressive language, receptive language, articulation, phonological, to name a few, do the schools have the resources to assess half their intake to ensure they know the level of language difficulties a child may have? What about those that do not have SLCN (Speech, Language and Communication Needs) and have simply not been exposed to a diverse and rich language as they were raised? The answer is no, schools cannot assess all of these pupils, they do not have the resources and many teachers do not have the willingness or the skills (Avramidis and Norwich, 2010, Williams, 2006). According to Gross, children who start school with limited language ability could need between 5 and 7 years of interventions in order to catch up with their peers (Gross, 2013). I have witnessed teachers making their own assessments based on observations, but these are for their personal use in planning and adapting teaching. In differentiating the work they provide, are they helping the child to develop their language or to merely work within the language boundaries that the child has?

Whitehead (2003) explains, and is supported by Eke and Lee (2009), that the interactions that are most important for educational purposes are those that occur in genuine partnerships where contributions from everyone are welcomed and more importantly respected. Furthermore, Whitehead continues to explain that the foundations of learning are best achieved through genuine talk partnerships and that these cannot be substituted by formal lessons that try and teach you how to talk and listen or through off the shelf courses (Whitehead, 2003). If this really is the case, could a project such as Thinking Together (2019) offer any support or help in teaching children how to hold conversations and thus expand their learning and increasing involvement. Are the conversations heralded by the Thinking Together project 'genuine'?

Dawes noted that children arrive in class with a range of speaking and listening skills which have been developed through their social exposure. While the language used at home is essential in a child's development, it too can have issues as children may arrive at school with misconceptions that then need to be corrected (Dawes, 2004, Wragg and Brown, 1993). However, Dawes supports the idea that peer learning can be achieved through group work. Collaborative learning supported by strong modelling by the teacher will help develop the pupil's awareness of speaking and listening and how these are tools that can used in isolation, in pairs or as a group (Dawes, 2004). Dawes continues to claim that children who are trained with 'talk' skills can scaffold their peers (2004). One of the main benefits of groups using what Dawes calls 'Exploratory Talk', is that every individual will work together to discover the answer, they will achieve their potential through discussion (Dawes, 2004). In addition,

it has been claimed that Exploratory Talk will aid teaching as pupils engage with each other's ideas in a constructive and critical manner (Mercer, 2003). According to a report produced for the Thinking Together programme many children need to be given the tools to be able to talk and work together but are not taught them. Giving opportunities to 'talk partners' is not enough (Dawes et al, 2012). Using this action research project, I was keen to evaluate how a similar approach to the thinking Together scheme could be added into the normal learning pattern at my base school as research proved that children who were involved in the control classes during the original research used exploratory talk more and as a result saw an uplift in their non-verbal skills (Dawes et al, 2012).

Methodology

When considering how I could use the Thinking Together scheme to make talk related activities more inclusive I had to examine the approach that was used by the Thinking Together project team and ascertain whether it would be suitable for me to duplicate. After scrutinising the original project, it was clear that the method used over a period of time was a qualitative approach using observation as the main data gathering method.

While I do not intend to duplicate the exact set of lesson plans provided by the Thinking Together team, the intention is that the action research that I undertake will develop the relationship between myself and the pupils and our own abilities to allow all involved to learn and understand how we can improve inclusion during normal lesson times while involved in discussions when in pairs, groups or when answering a question set by the teacher. A normative approach may be feasible however, as Have (2004) explains this would involve a fixed design for the research. Because of the need to be able to understand the thoughts and feelings that may be involved, there is a need for me to be involved in the research, or as McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead say, I'll be the "I" at the centre of the research (2003). For this reason, I will be using the participant observation method which will see me observing but not guiding the conversations being held (Morgan, 2011).

According to McNiff et al, action research is informed, committed and intentional (2003). My action research is informed because it is based on a need to do something about an issue that I have identified that will help me progress my learning. It is committed because I have a conviction that inclusion could be better through the correct use of talk and it is intentional because irrespective of the outcome, the learning process that will be completed will better inform my actions in the future. In order for me to carry out this piece of action research I will use observations as my primary method of gathering data with additional amendments made through reflections. Additional comments from the adult support will also be recorded if relevant. According to Have (2004), using observations will allow me to consider a multiple array of sources of information within the context of the situation giving me a clearer insight to the possible learning taking place, the changes that lead to learning deviations and whether the techniques used need to be amended.

Using observations in this way has many strengths. Some of these strengths include being able to gather contextual information at the very point in time that the behaviour took place. The main benefit of this is that you can take into account other possible factors that may have affected the behaviour and record them to reflect on later (McNiff et al, 2003). In addition to this, observations also allow you to take into account any sensitive issues that you as the teacher are aware of but that the participant may not be willing to discuss or the school unable to share with other parties conducting the action research (Have, 2004). Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly to me as a teacher, using this method will allow me to interrogate and reflect on what I have learned and the possible future implications this learning will have and how I could utilise the knowledge with classes moving forward (McNiff et al, 2003).

While observations have many strengths there are of course weaknesses that need to be acknowledged. Observations are subjective and therefore open to interpretation which could lead to people questioning any results that are claimed or validated (McNiff et al, 2003, Have, 2004). I will be observing inside the classroom as part of a normal lesson and so will have to remain aware of the whole classroom even if focussing on a small group - it may well be that key points are missed during these periods or as a practitioner researcher, that a role conflict arises leading to less successful observations (Have, 2004). The length of time an observation may well take could also play a factor (Have, 2004). While I am trying to use talk as a way of including all pupils and strengthening the role inclusion plays in a class setting to boost the learning capacities of pupils, I will only have a finite time for the observed discussions to take place. The outcome of this action project is not intended as an intervention for individuals but to instil a behaviour into the whole class that will eventually become habit within every lesson. While observations in a controlled setting would produce results less prone to criticism, proving whether this outcome was achieved, the timescale and resources open to me are limiting factors that needed to be considered.

One other factor that must be carefully handled is that of the ethical considerations involved in any form of action research. Verbal assent was given by each and every pupil after I had explained what my intentions were and why and what level of information I would be gathering. I explained to the class my reasoning behind my action research project (did this have an impact on the behaviour?) and that the observations would be carried out at various points over the term and they would concentrate on a few pupils in order for me to gather data that could be validated more easily and that these would remain unknown to everyone. The class teacher and adult support were made aware of my intentions and were shown the Ethical Consent form and both gave their full support. As advised by colleagues, CCCU (Canterbury Christ Church University) and other peers, all notes, records and information gathered shall be anonymised (McNiff et al, 2003).

In order for me to gather data and code it I will use the constant comparative method. This method combines systematically gathering data, coding it and then analysing it in order to develop the theory which is then adjusted for further testing (Conrad, Neumann, Haworth and Scott, 1993 as cited by Kolb, 2012). I deemed this method the most suitable as the process centres around identifying a phenomenon, object, event or interest, concept or principle and then engaging in theoretical sampling or research of some kind before adjusting the theory and developing further research (Glaser and Straus 1967, as cited by Crabtree, 2008).

The steps that were taken to gather the data were:

- First I observed the class over a week as they engaged in normal talk partner sessions. This allowed me to view their behaviour having had no influence as to how they might want to or should behave.
- Following the initial week, the class then undertook an activity on how a discussion should be held. While it was intended that this would be conducted in 'new' partner groups I had planned this did not happen. Due to the rest of Year 5 and 6 being given unplanned free time it was completed in less time than I wished and was completed by each table.
- The result of this activity allowed me to create a list of 'rules' that the children needed to follow when holding a discussion. These rules were explained to the class at the time of creation and again before the first observed discussion.
- During the first observed discussion I created new groups so that the class were no longer with their tables but were in smaller groups of 4. I also positioned these groups at points around the class so that the 'environment' for their discussions did not hinder them e.g. they didn't play with their trays etc.

- I had opted to observe a core group at the front of the class to maximise my time close to them. After each observation I would code the data and then amend suggestions to the class (within their rules) for how group talk could be conducted ahead of the next observed discussion.
- The rules that were agreed by the class can be seen below in Figure 1.
- The four pupils that I have chosen to observe display a mix of the typical characteristics displayed during conversations, those that show dominance, those that are passive and those that support however fail to criticise or question (Mercer and Sams, 2006).

1) We will take turns to talk and to listen.
2) We will listen and think about each other's ideas.
3) We will co-operate – try to get along with each other.
4) We will make group decisions that we can all agree to.
5) We understand that talking is thinking aloud together.
6) We will try and reach a shared agreement.

Figure 1.

Results and Analysis

The following is an overview of the results and analysis following a series of six observations that took place over a 4-week period. At each opportunity during class discussions, the class were reminded of the basic rules that they had chosen. Following each observation, these rules were supported by feedback to use in the next discussion.

While the class discussions were carried out as a whole class, the observations were made on four pupils who provided a strong mix of characteristics. Once I had completed the coding for each observation I grouped the findings and then classified the themes into the 3 main types of talk that Dawes et al, (2012) identified in their research for the Thinking Together project – these were Disputational talk, Cumulative Talk and Exploratory Talk.

Disputational Talk

Disputational Talk leads to disagreements and individuals making decisions. It often has little constructive dialogue and also tends to be conducted with short exchanges leading to closed answers (Dawes et al, 2012). These traits could be seen in the two higher ability pupils who would previously dominate any discussion they were a part of. The third pupil would often end up working on their own with the fourth pupil assuming the role of passive scribe. When the rules were introduced for the first observation, these 'roles' almost disappeared. The passive scribe suddenly found their voice and began to argue their point with the remainder all interacting amicably. While I was not standing over the group, they were close by. When I left to check on the other groups in the class the 'normal' roles resumed. Over the next few observations, the rules were handed out and reinforced with questions often posed such as "would it help if there was a team leader to guide the talk?".

Cumulative Talk.

Cumulative talk occurs when speakers offer an input and build positively on what has been said but there is no criticism of what has been said. Cumulative talk is where a common knowledge is constructed from the conversation, it is often repeated, confirmed or elaborated on (Dawes et al, 2012). During the observations I noted very little cumulative talk which was interesting. The core group would either adopt a disputational style or move into a more exploratory style or vice versa. This would suggest that the core group did not have the right kind of people in it for cumulative talk

to take place, maybe the characteristics were too dominant or strong or perhaps it was because they were not with their 'friends'? However, on one occasion where cumulative traits were noticed it involved matching ancient Hebrew Words to the modern day equivalent. This task was started cold and with no prior input. During the 5 minutes the class had it was noticeable that the level of discussion was more muted than normal across the whole class. The core group did not have a dominant speaker and when an ideas was suggested, there was general consensus that this must be right.

Exploratory Talk.

Exploratory talk is where I hoped the core group would develop their conversational style. It would see them critically yet constructively discussing ideas and accepting that other ideas are valid but open to joint consideration (Dawes et al, 2012). While there were instances of exploratory type talk within the core group quite often gentle reminders 'to the whole class' had to be made in order to re-focus their attention. Towards the end of the 4-week observation period, the necessity for me to provide these prompts did reduce but were still required on occasions. Of the 4 members of the core group, when their conversation was 'exploratory' it was really pleasing to listen to them all sharing ideas and exploring new ideas together. During one conversation the member who would often work as an individual did pull themselves away from the group as they thought the group was not listening to them, however, it was the fourth 'passive scribe' member who spotted this change in behaviour and started to talk to them directly. This direct interaction seemed to be all that was required as the two of them re-joined the group and explained what they had discussed to the other two members.

Analysis.

These results are obviously subjective and within the limitations of this section have not been explored as fully as I would have hoped. However, from the observations and the data that I gathered it is possible to note that there were changes.

In total there were 6 observations that were monitored and a similar number that had the rules and messages reinforced before a talk activity was undertaken. Was this enough to change behaviours? Permanently, no, not at all. Is it possible to claim that inclusivity was more evident at the end? Categorically, no, because while I was closely observing four members of the class, there are at least 5 others that I would like to see 'included' a lot more but I was unable to monitor those as closely as I would have liked. The data suggests that there was also more 'inclusion' with the core group. The two who were more dominant in talk situations became better listeners and helped articulate points being made while the individual who would often leave a group and work alone did so far less. Perhaps the most significant change was in the fourth member who would normally adopt the passive scribe role. This member surprised me the most with the change in behaviour. During one non-observed talk partner session at their tables, instead of sitting back and letting the conversation happen, the pupil took the lead and nearly dominated the conversation.

Conclusion.

How then has this action research helped me to develop my understanding of talk and how it can help include pupils and help develop my teaching strategies? The aim at the outset was to look at how I could make talk related activities more inclusive using the Thinking Together approach. By using the Thinking Together research and adapting it to fit in with the normal lesson structure I have come to appreciate that with time and consistent input, it is possible to encourage a class wide style of conversation so that everyone in the class is included. How will this aid a child's development? Even from the short exposure my core group had I saw a positive change in one member, in their confidence and even their own self-belief in their ideas. The intention then is to carry on with this approach for each and every talk activity so that my current class will hopefully adapt their behaviours further throughout Term 6. In September however, the opportunity to start with my own class from day one

really does excite me. While I am in a different year set, I do not believe that will make a difference, if anything, as they are a year younger they may well be more keen to work with me. By starting to encourage exploratory talk from day one using I will observe with a different eye how the conversations develop and will look to guide my class so that we, altogether, can ensure that everyone is included and that though this we will have genuine conversations that we can all learn from.

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