



Teacher Learning Academy

Stage 2

Richard

My School Context

My school is a town, two-form entry Primary school. Many, but not all of the children enter the school with standards lower than those normally seen for children of this age, particularly in the areas of speech, language and communication. The proportion of children with learning difficulties or disabilities is above average. Most pupils are from white British backgrounds with a small amount at the early stages of learning English.

My Own Context

I am a Year 6 teacher. I am a member of the Senior Leadership Team with particular responsibility for the Every Child Matters Agenda. I also have responsibility for Teaching and Learning in our school. I have entered this research in both of these capacities.

- As a class teacher to improve my practice by trailing new methods and using the evidence together with learning conversations with my coach to establish a way forward.
- As a member of the Senior Leadership Team to try and evaluate new ideas before asking others to do so. Also to model good practice by showing that I am a reflective practitioner.

Preparing The Learning Journey

The focus of my professional learning is to investigate my practices as a class teacher.

- Research and identify opportunities for extended speaking to develop children's talk?
- How do I know any strategies used are effective?

My aim is to introduce talk partners to develop more opportunities for children to speak in full sentences throughout a lesson. By speaking I also mean the opportunity to frame their thoughts into words. This could:



- a) Enhance their thinking skills;
- b) Develop their vocabulary/skills of communication;
- c) Eventually improve their writing by widening their vocabulary (measured by national curriculum levels).
- d) Enhance their self-esteem.

Some of the children have a limited vocabulary; perhaps this is due to the quality of communication or engagement with literacy at home. Wells (cited in Corden 2000:147) 'found a correlation between preschool experiences and measures of literacy on school entry'. Also many of the children do not read for entertainment and perhaps, most importantly from my research, they may not have had sufficient opportunities to develop their vocabulary through planned speaking and listening on a formal basis in the classroom. Although I realize I have made sweeping generalizations about a class of 21 individuals, the roots of my enquiry are based in these beliefs.

As a member of the SLT I was able to undertake many 'learning walks'. It was on these walks that I began to notice the widely known fact that the ratio of talk teacher:pupils is heavily balanced on the side the of the teacher. My first discussion with the literacy co-coordinator and my coach was why I would want to change this? I explained the reading I had undertaken and we all agreed that it would be good to experiment in my own class before making any changes in school practice. However, as my coach pointed out, teachers have many different styles of teaching and if it worked for me it would not necessarily work for others. We decided though, on balance, that I should go ahead and see if the changes had any of the impact on learning.

At this point I did need to consider that I work in a two-form entry school and that by introducing these changes into my class only, I was denying the other Y6 the equal opportunity. However, I felt it was unfair to impose my strategies on another teacher at this stage. Although this was denying equal opportunities to both classes it did provide us with a 'control' class as they were quite evenly balanced (in National Curriculum levels).

There were no racial considerations regarding language as all the children are fluent English speakers, including the one child who is registered as Yoruba but is a fluent English speaker. Permission was sought from parents for videoing (during philosophy lessons) and they were informed of how and why this video would be used. Only the children whose parents returned signed permission slips were filmed.

Why Talk Partners?

Wirth in a Primary English Magazine article (2003:17) describes a 'failing' school's attempts to improve literacy through oral development. It was from their list of strategies that I was encouraged to experiment with talk partners



My investigation also stems from my own observations in classrooms – that children with poor verbal communication skills often have poor writing abilities. I have also heard the following statement in more than one staff room:

“How can children write in full sentences when they can’t even speak in full sentences”?

The role of speaking and listening in literacy skills was an area I was interested during my undergraduate studies as an English specialist. However my thoughts on how speaking and listening could improve children’s writing abilities were quite vague. I was yet to learn about the meticulous nature of enquiry (and am definitely still learning). I do know that at this point in the enquiry I had not given enough thought to the tools I would use to attain my goals.

Although speaking and listening have always been fundamental elements of education, it is only recently that they have been recognized as a part of the curriculum. Major reports on speaking and listening in education have been The Bullock Report, A Language for Life (DES 1975) and the National Oracy Project. However, although the NOP influenced the National Curriculum in 1989 to the extent that a section on Oracy was published, there was still no clear guidance as to how good practice could take place in schools (and what the benefits may be). Prue Goodwin in the introduction to Use of Language Across The Primary Curriculum (1998:xii) points out that the programme of study for the NC (1999) emphasized social aspects of speaking and listening almost to the exclusion of the cognitive skills. Perhaps this has been rectified to some extent in the DfES document, Speaking, Listening, Learning: working with children in Key stages 1 and 2. However, it is my belief that this still places emphasis on the social skills of working within a group for instance rather than skills of speaking to construct knowledge.

In an article in The Primary English Magazine (Vol 8, No.5, June 2003 page 17) *Thoughtful talk is the key to learning* Claire Wirth points out that it may not only be poor oral skills which cause children a problem but “teachers’ failure to develop pupils’ talk” (ibid:17). This was to be at the heart of my enquiry this year, training myself to develop the children’s talk by evaluating evidence, discussing next steps with my coach and changing practice.

The PEM article mentioned above describes a ‘failing’ school’s attempts to improve literacy through oral development. It was from their list of strategies that I first found the idea of talk partners. I later linked talk partners with another of their strategies that was provision throughout the curriculum ‘of time for talking ideas through before writing’.



Planning My Learning Journey

<u>ACTIONS</u>	<u>TIMESCALES/ DATES</u>	<u>RESOURCES/ PERSONNEL</u>	<u>SUCCESS CRITERIA</u>
Discuss intentions with literacy co-ordinator	Meeting at beginning of term, half term and end of term	Literacy Co-ordinator Myself ½ hour meetings	Ideas will have been exchanged. A plan of action outlined. And success criteria identified
Meet with coach for discussions	Half an hour, every two weeks	Myself, Colleague ½ hour	Progress will have been shared. Ideas will be refined (through challenging discussions with coach). New or planned steps forward discussed.
January 2008 Implement talk partners.	Ongoing	My Year 6 class. Names on playing cards. Talk partners chosen.	Children will know who their talk partner is. Children will use talk partner in whole class discussions.
Review and evaluation with Coach and Literacy coordinator	Beginning of summer term.	Literacy Co-ordinator (coach) Myself Meeting	Successes and areas for improvement identified through challenging discussions with coach. Next steps outlined.
Share findings with whole school.	1 x Literacy staff meeting	Literacy Co-ordinator (coach) Myself	Successful strategies copied throughout school.

When I had my first meeting with my coach it helped enormously. However I believe I went with the view that she would *tell* me what to do. At this point I had not learned to be an independent learner. I realized just how essential the coach's role is. She was there to help me organize my thoughts and actions and to be a sounding board, but also a critical friend. To begin with she asked me what my enquiry was about. Even I realized it seemed to be taking me a long time to explain to her. Perhaps this was due to me not yet having a focus. I began to tell her all about my concerns regarding speaking and listening and writing. I told her about the books I had been reading and how much of what I had read, confirmed to me that I would be justified in enhancing the profile of speaking and listening. By the time I had finished we both



decided that if I wasn't going to do a PhD I should narrow my focus. We then developed these questions when introducing talk partners:

- "what type of writing do I want to improve?"
- "what do you mean by speaking and listening?"
- and my existing concern "how are you going to measure any gains?"

Reflecting now on the aim to 'improve the children's writing skills', this was my first mistake. After discussions with my coach, it became clear that it was a naïve assumption that I expect a noticeable difference in writing levels in just one or two terms. I decided to film the children at the outset of the investigation (in a philosophy lesson) and again at the conclusion to see if there were noticeable differences in length and quality of utterances. With her help and advice to focus as tightly as possible I decided the following would be my refined aims for the research?

To provide increased opportunities to develop speaking and listening using talk partners during whole class teaching.

On The Learning Journey

Where to begin?

It was Neil Mercer's book 'Words and Minds' that influenced my practice the most. It was Mercer who first assured me of what a complicated world we enter when trying to decipher if what we are teaching is what children are learning, especially when considering 'talk'.

However Mercer believes that paired talk is often "unproductive, with more 'disputational' than 'exploratory' talk happening" (ibid:145). Through my observations and, dare I say it, general feeling, this year I believe this is not true.

To put my thoughts into words and sharpen my own definitions was tricky. What exactly did I mean by speaking? Did I want to improve any particular genre of writing or all of it? How would I measure this? And at this point in my research, I wondered if I was capable of carrying it out? Could I improve writing and how would I know if it did improve that it was due to enhanced speaking and listening opportunities. These are just a few of the questions that began to gather like storm clouds

I read widely using journals, books, Ofsted Reports etc. I enjoyed the reading and began to feel a little more knowledgeable on the subject. My coach pointed out when I worried about being overwhelmed with information that from a researcher's point of view I was not reading with a particular focus in mind. I was trying to read everything and this was a mistake. However, it was from this reading that I became seriously worried about my aim. Although I was in no doubt that the children's speaking and listening skills needed developing, I began to worry about the link to



writing. Could fiction writing be improved in this way? Both Michael Rosen and David Crystal, both point out the same fact:

“Writing should not be seen as merely ‘transcribed speech’, because its formal characteristics, and its strategies of production and comprehension are quite unlike those encountered in speech (Crystal 1987:177).

One useful idea I noted was that what I am undertaking is “action disciplined by enquiry” (Hopkins 2002:42). It was the word ‘disciplined’ I found most useful. It reminded me that I should be working in a structured way and that carrying out actions without scrutinizing and constantly re-adjusting my thoughts/conclusions could not be labeled research. For instance it would not be enough to get the children talking I would need to investigate what works, what doesn’t and why. However, although Hopkins and most of the literature I have read take a rigid scientific stance on research I believe much of my work this year has depended on what I can only call Eureka moments. For example when I asked the class for their initial thoughts on the word ‘*environment*’ one hand went up. I then asked them to discuss it with the people sitting near them and after a 30 second discussion more than 80% of the hands went up – this was the point that ‘talk partners’ in my classroom was conceived. It wasn’t planned but my previous reading flagged up a well-known strategy that I now tried (almost by mistake) and found to work.

This presentation has been a tool itself, forcing me to focus, evaluate and plan for the future. However for the purpose of reflection, an important element of my learning this year has been my journal. I used the journal in four main ways:

- ★ to record my thoughts on the teaching and learning taking place in my classroom;
- ★ to argue with myself over certain aspects i.e. to try to view events from a different perspective;
- ★ to note down any thoughts I was having at all about my enquiry;
- ★ to note down issues raised from my reading and discussions with my coach that I had particularly connected with my enquiry;

Without the journal this presentation, and any pulling together of my work this year, would have been extremely difficult. However a balance needs to be struck. Whilst I agree with Boud about the effectiveness of journal writing, this needs to be balanced. In the words of J.D. Salinger and Joan Armatrading it is all a bit “Me, myself and I”. In this respect I have found discussions with my coach and colleagues invaluable together with professional reading.

Action

With a focus on the teacher:pupil talk ratio during whole class teaching time, I decided to devise a system for asking children questions. I found that if I just asked the ‘class’ a question the same hands would be up all the time. The children who did not put their hands up had many different reasons I am sure. In hindsight, it would



have been good for me to have carried out a survey/questionnaire about pupil talk in the classroom. This is something I will definitely carry out next year with my new class.

I glued each child's name to a playing card. Using the playing cards (shuffled) each child was then given a 'talk partner' for half a term. When I ask the whole class a question they are given time to discuss their response with a talk partner. I then took the top card off the pack to decide who to ask for a response. To ensure equal access for all children, I differentiated any subsequent questions to that person (to develop the answer), depending on whose name was chosen.

I had noticed that the length of utterances used in response tended to be very short. My aim was to develop (extend) their speaking. When talking about this with my coach we decided that it was the questions that could be a fault. I needed to be asking more open questions. I made a conscious effort to ask open questions, giving the children as much opportunity to respond in detail. This did make a difference to the answers.

Although talk partners seemed to be a success and I felt it was working there were some things worrying me.

Most children seemed to be talking because if one talk partnership is unable to begin to discuss the necessary topic they are encouraged to turn to another partnership and seek their help.

However, were some of the children being carried by their partners? I needed to be able to identify that all children were having their talk developed, not just the ones I noticed. Or perhaps an even worse scenario, are both children talking but not about the topic.

I decided that to listen in on some of these conversations would be helpful.

I tried to tape some conversations but because the whole class was talking it once I would need to put the tape machine under the nose of those being taped in order to hear one particular conversation. This I believed would be counterproductive because knowing that the teacher will be listening to this conversation later it would affect the actions of those being recorded.

I discussed the problem with my coach but we could find no way round it. I decided to take notes rather than try to use a tape recorder as it might be less intrusive.

The observation was carried out whilst a supply teacher taught a maths lesson. The children had been in their partnerships for about three weeks. Robert and Sarah (not real names for the sake of confidentiality) would not naturally choose one another. Robert is a very outgoing, lively, popular boy and Sara is a very quiet shy girl. I did not choose this pair to observe, I sat at a table where I knew children would be near and waited to observe the closest couple. Whilst at the time I believed this would eliminate any bias on my behalf from *choosing* a couple it did not eliminate other



factors such as children who would see me sitting down and choose to sit on the opposite side of the room! Also I was nearer the back and there are issues about children who sit under the teacher's nose at the front (often in an attempt not to be questioned) and those who sit at the back (hoping not to be spotted looking at football cards). My presence and the presence of the supply teacher probably determined the seating plan to some extent.

Robert is more able and confident than Sara so I was not surprised he started. I had difficulty writing down *every* word the pair said but luckily for me they were speaking quite slowly and thoughtfully. However, due to the noise of 21 children talking I had to sit close and of course they realized I was listening to them. Immediately I had affected the outcome. Because of this I watched this couple from my teaching viewpoint over the next couple of days to see if they were talking as much and did in fact find them to be a very engaged partnership.

From line 23 to line 31 Robert seems to be carrying out the work, with Sarah encouraging with her answer 'yeah'. After the teacher intervenes and reiterates that they should be working with their partner to decide, Sara actively participates. Daniel broke into Robert and Sarah's conversation, to help. Daniel's intervention indicates that some children are aware of conversations around them as well as (or perhaps instead of) their own. His help seems to encourage Robert and Sara with Sara in lines 45 and 46 actually leading and demanding Robert look at her example. When Robert tells Sara she is wrong (line 57) she readily accepts this fact but Robert seems genuinely pleased in line 67 that she did in fact later get it right. Even after the teacher tells the children to stop Robert continues to work to be sure of the answer and he still includes his partner in his conclusion (line 69).

Through this observation I saw how important to me it is to be clear to the children what is required (to discuss strategies) and to remind them of this whilst they are working.

When watching the videos made during philosophy lessons with my coach and the literacy coordinator, we believe that the introduction of talk partners has been successful. The children are talking more than me. Each child is talking at greater length than before. I believe this could be due to the following:

- any person in the class may be required to respond to the teacher about the subject being discussed therefore all need to participate;
- children can venture a thought in a safe environment with other children without getting it wrong in front of the whole class and the teacher;
- thinking time is built into the strategy
- ample time has been given to rehearse a reply;

and my expectation that they are doing what I have asked them to.

Learning Breakthrough



My learning breakthrough came when I realized through the above observation and my own observations while teaching, the children were discussing the issues they had been asked to discuss but forgetting what they had said when they were called upon. When discussing this with my coach we decided that it would be a good idea to remind the children of the question at the end of the talk time and then give them a short time to rehearse their answer.

When trying this out I found it had other good aspects. Not only did the children have time to prompt each other in a recap; it reminded them of the aim of the conversation and it gave them time to put their answer into full sentences. This was how their speaking has been **developed**, encouraging adventurous vocabulary and grammatically correct sentences.

These findings led me to an awareness of the necessity to model adventurous language, encouraging the children to request definitions of new vocabulary. In my conversations with the literacy co-ordinator and in conjunction with my teaching of literacy and philosophy I began to recognize the importance of giving the children speaking frames. The specific language for different genres now has a much higher profile in my classroom, i.e. the language of debate, persuasion etc.

Recognizing that significant progress had been made with speaking, my coach challenged me to identify how well the children were listening. On reflection, this turned out to be another breakthrough. We decided it would be beneficial to ask the children what their partner had said rather than what they had said themselves. When I first tried this in the classroom it became clear that the children were speaking but not listening.

However, it did not take long for them to really begin to listen as they were aware they maybe caught out. I had just assumed that they were listening to one another. I had forgotten just how ego-centric children are at this age.

The major learning breakthrough for my development as a professional was how essential a good coach is, challenging and probing questions can lead you to a much better understanding of what you are researching. It is not always possible to see outside of the problem when you are immersed in something i.e. I had not noticed about the listening aspect.

One unexpected and welcome by-product of talk partners has been noted frequently in my journal – an improvement in relationships. I have noticed that a girl who usually chose to stay away from the other children (very low self-esteem) had been helped on more than one occasion by her talk partner and an ex-talk partner in social settings. Also a boy who is not known for being kind and caring was seen to collect the necessary equipment for both his partner (a girl) and himself before a lesson. Not only have I seen many instances of co-operation amongst partners but I have noticed a general improvement in group work/discussions. This improvement I believe is partly due to the shared understanding of group discussion rules and the opportunities given to practice communicating with one another.



It was decided to present these findings to the rest of the staff (along with the videos) in a literacy staff meeting. This would be used to help the Literacy coordinator introduce speaking and listening strategies and a school wide basis. I also believe, as a senior leader, I am modeling good practice, not only in speaking and listening but also as a reflective practitioner. Perhaps this will encourage others to take part in TLA presentations?

This investigation has given me ideas for further investigations in the future:

- Do talk partners promote relationship building skills?
- How can children help one another to learn through talk?
- Children talking after you have asked them to stop might not necessarily be a bad thing.