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Spoken language

The importance of oracy

Spoken language sits at the heart of English teaching, reflected in James Britton's often-quoted words that 'reading and writing float on a sea of talk' (Britton, 1970). But spoken language is not simply a precursor to reading and writing; it is through the language we hear and use that we make sense of the world:

Children, we now know, need to talk and to experience a rich diet of spoken language, in order to think and to learn. Reading, writing and number may be the acknowledged curriculum 'basics', but talk is arguably the true foundation of learning.

Alexander (2004)

The development of spoken language is an important area of the curriculum in its own right, but it is also the medium through which learning happens. As it is intrinsically linked to the development of reading and writing, previous chapters have also considered aspects of spoken language. While the development of spoken language weaves through the chapters of the book, this chapter specifically considers how rich texts can provide children with opportunities to develop their spoken language, focusing on:

- Giving an opportunity for discussion and dialogue
- Providing a stimulus for debate
- Texts as a model for classroom language

Discussion and dialogue

Alexander (2001) organises classroom talk into five categories:

- **Rote** – drilling of facts, ideas and routines
- **Recitation** – questions designed to elicit recall or work out answers from clues in the question
- **Instruction or exposition** – giving information and explaining facts, principles and procedures
- **Discussion** – the exchange of ideas with a view to sharing information and solving problems
- **Dialogue** – achieving common understanding through structured, cumulative questioning and discussion which guide and prompt, reduce choices, minimise risk and error and expedite ‘handover’ of concepts and principles

While all of these types of talk are needed for specific purposes in the classroom, it is discussion and dialogue that are most useful for helping children to think and reason. And a rich text can be a useful starting point for these interactions. Genuine dialogue to develop children’s understanding, whether as a whole class, in pairs or between the teacher and child, depends on authenticity: asking questions that require a genuine answer rather than one the teacher is expecting (Nystrand, 2006). For genuine discussion to flourish, the classroom climate needs to be one where children feel free to share their ideas and expose their misconceptions without fear of giving the wrong answer or revealing that they have misunderstood. This is another benefit of authentic classroom talk: there will be many correct responses.

This type of talk, where children have the opportunity to share their knowledge and opinions, agree and disagree and defend their views politely and constructively, is the ideal for book talk. Roche (2014) argues that while reading and listening to books are important activities, these regular opportunities for thinking, interaction and rich book talk are necessary if children are to develop strong oral language skills and vocabulary.

However, this type of talk doesn't come naturally to most children and it is only through practice (and modelling from peers and adults) that they are able to interact in this way. While some may get this from home, for many children school will be where they develop this ability. This model for classroom talk has been discussed throughout the book, with advice on effective questioning in Chapter 4, how dialogue can be built into the curriculum in Chapter 3 and examples of questions and discussion points in the units of work in Appendix II.

Debate

A text-based curriculum for English provides more than just developing children's literacy skills. Studying and discussing rich works of literature can introduce children to new ideas and concepts.

Many great texts introduce children to characters and situations that are open to interpretation, with subtle shades of meaning that don't lend themselves to forming easy opinions. Debating the issues arising from a text is a valuable classroom activity, both for the development of children's understanding of texts, their spoken language and the ways it can link to wider learning experiences, such as understanding issues and empathising with characters and their situations. This may happen in an informal way through classroom discussion or through a more formal debating structure. Debating an issue from an informed opinion requires some knowledge and understanding of the subject if the debate is to move beyond very simple arguments. Having read a book or become familiar with the world of a story, children have the necessary knowledge to construct their arguments, linking these with their own ideas and knowledge from outside of the text. If the book or story is one the children have developed an emotional attachment to, then they may be motivated to argue their case more convincingly too.

A challenging task can be to give children the job of defending a particular position, especially one that might seem indefensible, such as defending a villain in a court trial. In many rich books there will be a logic to the antagonist's actions and a reason for them behaving like

they do. Even if the children don't agree with the actions, an activity like this can support understanding or build empathy.

The story of *Macbeth* is a perfect story for debate. Planning the debate around statements such as:

Macbeth is ultimately responsible for King Duncan's Death

can prompt discussion between children given different sides of the argument. While one side may argue that Macbeth is responsible as it is he who commits the physical act of murder, another group may be tasked with arguing that responsibility lies with Lady Macbeth who urged her husband or the Weird Sisters who prophesised the murder.

A text like *Would You Rather . . .* by John Burningham, while covering very different subject matter, can also be a useful tool for debate. Each page provides motivating subject matter: would it be better to eat slug dumplings or drink snail squash; to make magic with a fairy or be naughty with an imp? Again, while these texts appear very different, both can provide the catalyst for a class debate following a similar structure:

1. Initial vote – before they have been told which side of the argument they will be representing, the children to vote to decide if they agree with the statement or not. Votes are counted and recorded.
2. Organise the groups – the children are placed into teams for each side of the argument. That might mean two teams in the case of the *Macbeth* statement or more if the text provides that choice. For *Would You Rather . . .*, children could be placed into teams to argue that it is best to be:
 - lost in the fog
 - lost at sea
 - lost in a desert
 - lost in a forest
 - lost in a crowd

3. Prepare arguments – each group needs time to prepare their arguments, focusing on positives of their argument (why their side of the argument is right) and the weaknesses of the other side (why the other side is wrong).
4. Present – each group has a short period of time to make their case as persuasively as they can.
5. Questions – after the children have listened to each other’s presentations, allow time for the groups to ask each other questions and respond.
6. Final vote – ask the children to vote again. Have their choices changed? Have any groups been successful in persuading their classmates to change their mind?

Texts as a model for classroom language

Both the 2014 National Curriculum and the Teacher Standards for England require teachers to promote children’s use of ‘Standard English’ in the classroom. In this context, Standard English:

... can be recognised by the use of a very small range of forms such as *those books*, *I did it* and *I wasn’t doing anything* (rather than their non-Standard equivalents); it is not limited to any particular accent. It is the variety of English which is used, with only minor variation, as a major world language. Some people use Standard English all the time, in all situations from the most casual to the most formal, so it covers most registers.

(DfE, 2013)

It is what Crystal (1995) calls ‘a minority variety (identified chiefly by its vocabulary, grammar and orthography) which carries most prestige and is most widely understood’. Standard English is the variety of English most closely associated with powerful institutions and is useful in formal situations. While it is the native spoken dialect of only around 15% of the country, it is also the variety of English that most closely

matches written English. Being able to move from a local dialect to Standard English and back again is incredibly useful for children's writing (Bex and Watts, 1999).

While the two are often conflated, Standard English isn't the same as formal language. Informal Standard English uses contractions (wouldn't, isn't), colloquial language (*mates, the Rec*) and abbreviations (*TV* instead of *television*), but does not use features of non-Standard English such as double negatives (*he hasn't got none*) and dialect-specific subject-verb agreement (*we was* instead of *we were*). Thinking about the two things and sorting phrases and sentences into formal and informal, Standard and non-Standard can be a useful way of making this distinction.

Think and reflect

Standard English and accent

Children sometimes need to be reminded that it is perfectly possible to use Standard English constructions in any accent at all. Sometimes accent gets mixed up with the structure of language, especially if children are encouraged to switch to Standard English by 'using a posh voice' or 'speaking like the Queen'. These two ways of introducing Standard English should be avoided at all costs as they make Standard English something 'other': a way of speaking used by people 'who aren't like us'.

Listening to the same sentence or line of dialogue from a book read aloud in different accents can be useful in helping children to see that the words stay the same, even if the *way* they are pronounced is different.

Myhill *et al.* (2016) suggest five principles for approaching the teaching of Standard English:

- Focus on understanding language and knowledge about language, rather than 'correctness'

- Talk about both Standard and non-Standard English
- Encourage language investigation, especially of local dialects
- Remember that language variation is not just regional, but social too
- Support children in becoming confident code-switchers – able to use SE with ease where appropriate

Much of the spoken language use, apart from in very formal situations such as presentations, doesn't follow the same patterns of language as Standard English. Sentences often trail off unfinished, non-verbal clues such as gestures are used to supplement missing words and the variety of sentence structures can be limited. It is through reading written text that children are able to encounter and ultimately absorb the vocabulary and syntax of formal written English, developing control over increasingly sophisticated language patterns that exist in written language, such as noun phrases for clarity of meaning, phrasal verbs and different types of subordination (Perera, 1984; Allison *et al.*, 2002).

Why not try?

Texts that contrast characters speaking in ways other than Standard English are useful for helping children to think about what is a standard construction and what is not. These include texts where characters speak in regional dialects, archaic language or other non-standard speech patterns. Some useful texts for this are:

One Thousand and One Arabian Nights by Geraldine McCaughrean

I Yam a Donkey by Cece Bell

The BFG by Roald Dahl

Shakespeare Stories by Leon Garfield

The Raven by Edgar Allen Poe

The Red Badge of Courage by Stephen Crane

(continued)

Why not try? (*continued*)

Gawain and the Green Knight retold by Philip Reeve

Just So Stories by Rudyard Kipling

How the Whale Became by Ted Hughes

The Owl Service by Alan Garner

Dis Poetry by Benjamin Zephaniah

Listen Mr Oxford Don by John Agard

While it can be thought of as a discrete area of the curriculum to be taught, spoken language runs like a thread through all aspects of classroom life. Through the approaches to teaching English and the curriculum design outlined in this book, there are three ideas that will help children's spoken language to develop by making use of a rich text-based curriculum:

- Rich texts give children a model for language that isn't often represented in speech. Time to read and talk about books gives children access to this formal language. This helps them to recognise different types of language, enabling them to code-switch to the variety of spoken English that supports their writing and allows their voice to be taken seriously
- Reading widely on its own isn't enough. It is through rich dialogue and discussion around books that children have the opportunity to stretch their thinking, form opinions and then defend these opinions. It is through high-quality talk that children explore new ideas and, ultimately, learn new things
- The characters and situations presented in rich texts are often ambiguous and open to interpretation, requiring thought and empathy on the part of the reader. This provides the opportunity for children to think about and then discuss or debate these ideas. This potential for high-level discussion is why a text-based curriculum can be so valuable beyond simply helping children to become better readers and writers

In summary

- Spoken language development is important as the foundation to reading and writing, but it is also an important end in itself; it is the medium through which we think and learn
- Of the different forms of classroom language modes, discussion and dialogue are the most valuable for children's learning in English; opportunities for these need to be planned carefully
- Rich texts provide opportunities for children to debate, helping them to consider issues and ideas outside of their immediate sphere of experience
- Written texts provide a model for the different, more-formal language structures that are useful for a range of different contexts, including much of the writing that is required to communicate successfully at school

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Literature

Macbeth by William Shakespeare

Would You Rather . . . by John Burningham