

# IMPROVING ORACY AND CLASSROOM TALK IN ENGLISH SCHOOLS: ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES

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*Extended and referenced version of a presentation given at the Department for Education (DfE) seminar on Oracy, the National Curriculum and Educational Standards, 20 February 2012*

## Introduction

The seminar for which this paper was prepared had a double impetus: the ninth chapter ('Oral language and its development within the National Curriculum') of the December 2011 report of the UK government's National Curriculum (NC) Review Expert Panel, and the international conference *Socialising Intelligence Through Academic Talk and Dialogue* which was sponsored by the American Educational Research Association (AERA) and took place in Pittsburgh three months earlier, in September 2011.<sup>1</sup>

The AERA conference was significant in all kinds of ways, but in the policy context it was notable for confirming, from a now critical mass of robust evidence, that the quality of classroom talk has a measurable impact on standards of attainment in English, mathematics and science. Immediately after the conference (30 September 2011) I wrote to the Secretary of State, copying in the NC Review Expert Panel, Ofsted and the Department's review of professional standards, to alert him to the implications for oracy in the national curriculum and for the way pedagogy is handled in school inspections, teacher training and professional standards. There followed meetings with the Schools Minister (1 December 2011), DfE officials (17 November 2011, 24 January 2012), the chair of the Professional Standards Review (2 November 2011), the chair of the Expert Panel (20 October 2011) and Ofsted (1 December 2011). The Expert Panel report took up the message from Pittsburgh, though briefly and without attribution.

The 20 February DfE seminar was the latest stage in this process, and the AERA connection was reinforced by the videolink contribution of Lauren Resnick, who conceived and directed the Pittsburgh conference and is one of America's most distinguished educational researchers and the architect of 'accountable talk'.<sup>2</sup>

It seems to me that the evidence as it now stands presents us with a pretty clear choice:

- In a radical act of joined-up policy we can begin to secure simultaneous leverage on the quality of classroom talk and hence student learning outcomes through the prescribed curriculum, non-statutory guidance, assessment for learning, inspection, teacher training and professional standards.

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<sup>1</sup> DfE (2011) *The Framework for the Curriculum: a report by the Expert Panel for the National Curriculum Review*, pp 52-4; Resnick, L.B., Asterhan, C., Clarke, C. and Hofkens, T. (ed) (forthcoming) *Socializing Intelligence* [papers from the AERA Pittsburgh conference], Washington DC: AERA.

<sup>2</sup> Resnick, L. B., Michaels, S., & O'Connor, C. (2010), 'How (well structured) talk builds the mind' in R. Sternberg & D. Preiss (Eds.), *From genes to context: new discoveries about learning from educational research and their applications*, New York, Springer; Michaels, S., O'Connor, C., & Resnick, L. B. (2008), 'Deliberative discourse idealized and realized: accountable talk in the classroom and in civic life', *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 27(4), 283-297.

- Or we can tweak at the margins of ‘speaking and listening’ in the National Curriculum, hope that teachers get the message, leave the Ofsted ‘quality of teaching’ judgement as it stands, and gloss over the glaring and inexcusable mismatch between the new professional standards and what the international evidence tells us about the constituents of competent and outstanding teaching.<sup>3</sup>

If we – or rather the government, national agencies and providers of initial teacher training and CPD – take the easy route, then on past form it is clear that the nation’s schools will carry on pretty much as before, some of them using talk in the ways that the evidence dictates that all of them should, while elsewhere the potential of talk to transform teaching and learning remains barely understood and inadequately exploited, to the detriment of the education of yet another generation of the nation’s children.

In my letter to the Secretary of State of 30 September 2011 I presented six propositions:

1. We have known for a long time that talk is essential to children’s thinking and learning, and to their productive engagement in classroom life, especially in the early and primary years. We now have additional evidence, from over 20 major international studies, that high quality classroom talk raises standards in the core subjects as typically measured in national and international tests.
2. There can no longer be any doubt that oracy should feature prominently within the statutory national curriculum.
3. We need a different kind of talk from *teachers* in order to extend the repertoire of *pupil* talk and raise the standard and cognitive impact of classroom talk overall.
4. Though the terms ‘speaking and listening’ and ‘communication skills’ indicate objectives of indisputable educational significance, they have become devalued by casual use and should be replaced by terms that signal the emphatic step change in thinking and practice that is needed. ‘Oracy’ is a neologism which some find unappealing; ‘spoken language’ fits the bill reasonably well, though it doesn’t have the connotation of acquired skill that, by analogy with literacy, ‘oracy’ possesses.
5. There is a strong case for revisiting the 1975 Bullock Report’s advocacy of ‘language across the curriculum’ in order to underline the argument that educationally productive talk is the responsibility of all teachers, not just those who teach English.
6. Since this is about the quality of teaching as well as the content of the curriculum, it has implications not only for the NC review but also for initial teacher training, CPD, inspection and professional standards.

In its evidence to the NC Review the Cambridge Primary Review – whose final report highlighted the importance of high quality talk as fundamental to effective learning and teaching<sup>4</sup> – took the penultimate point rather further:

We recommend that in addition to the programmes of study of English, there should be a clear statement on language across the curriculum which requires attention in all subjects to the character, quality and uses of reading, writing, talk and ICT, and to the

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<sup>3</sup> DfE (2011) *Teachers’ Standards for England from 2012*, London, DfE; DfE (2011) *Second Report of the Independent Review of Teachers’ Standards: post-threshold, excellent teacher and advanced skills teacher standards*, London, DfE. Several expert submissions and witnesses to the standards review group argued that the revised standards should be properly aligned with the research evidence on professional development and expertise, thus correcting one of the more serious weaknesses of the previous standards. Bafflingly, their advice was ignored.

<sup>4</sup> Alexander, R.J. (ed) (2011) *Children, their World, their Education: final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*, Abingdon, Routledge, especially pp 305-7.

development of pupils' understanding of the distinct registers, vocabularies and modes of discourse of each subject.<sup>5</sup>

Below, I deal briefly with six areas: (i) achievements, (ii) challenges, (iii) what we might learn from official interventions and initiatives to date, (iv) the relationship between oracy, curriculum and pedagogy, (v) next steps for the National Curriculum Review, and (vi) implications for other policy areas.

## Achievements

### *Teachers' understanding of the issues*

1. Over the past 40 years teachers, especially in the early and primary years, have increasingly come to accept that talk makes a unique and powerful contribution to children's development, thinking and learning, and that it must therefore have a central place in their education.
2. Teachers also understand that the educational consequences of social disadvantage can be compounded by children's difficulties in oral development and communication; and that talk can be an effective means of re-engaging the disengaged and closing the overlapping gaps of equity and attainment.
3. There is general recognition, by employers as well as educators, of the social and economic importance of the skills of articulate communication, in speaking as well as writing.
4. There is growing acknowledgement of the importance of student voice in education both as a vital aspect of classroom learning and as the basis for democratic engagement.
5. It is also understood, though not universally, that once we broaden our view of assessment beyond summative written tests, talk is a powerful tool for formative assessment because of the way talk is embedded in teaching rather than separate from it. But it has to be the right kind of talk.
6. There is growing though again far from universal recognition of the limitations of traditional modes of classroom talk to meet these purposes (by 'traditional' I mean not only recitation, IRE<sup>6</sup> and questions that *test* children's thinking but don't actually *foster* it, but also the endless round of unfocused open questions and the genial but unstructured, directionless and repetitious conversation that some teachers believe is recitation's proper antithesis); and of the potential of alternative and more rigorous forms in which reciprocity, exploration, speculation, argumentation and carefully structured discussion replace mere recall of predetermined responses, and in which - in Martin Nystrand's words - classroom talk 'requires students to think, not just to report someone else's thinking.'<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Cambridge Primary Review (2011) Response to the call for evidence from the National Curriculum Review, [http://www.primaryreview.org.uk/downloads/\\_news/2011/04/NC\\_Review\\_CPR\\_response\\_Phase\\_1B.pdf](http://www.primaryreview.org.uk/downloads/_news/2011/04/NC_Review_CPR_response_Phase_1B.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> IRE: *initiation - response - evaluation*, or teacher (closed) question - student (recall) answer - teacher yes/no or correct/incorrect feedback. This has been identified as the 'essential teaching exchange' that differentiates classroom interaction from human interaction elsewhere, and it has long been the default teaching mode in Britain, the United States and perhaps worldwide. In the United States it is also called 'recitation.'

<sup>7</sup> Nystrand, M., Gamoran A., Kachur, R., Prendergast, C. (1997) *Opening Dialogue: understanding the dynamics of language and learning in the English classroom*, New York, Teachers College, p 72. In analysing the kinds of classroom questions that teachers typically use, Nystrand makes a helpful distinction between

### ***Developments in research, policy and practice***

7. The six vital functions of classroom talk that are identified in 1-5 above - for *thinking, learning, communicating, democratic engagement, teaching and assessing* - are sometimes rather carelessly conflated. They should not be, though in pursuit of whichever of these purposes it is also true that recent years have witnessed a modest broadening of the observable repertoire of classroom talk among both teachers and students – with, for example, paired and small group discussion taking their places alongside whole class interaction, and teachers showing greater readiness to switch between these. So the general picture is modestly encouraging.

I stress that the issue here is *repertoire*. It's not an either/or situation in which recitation is replaced by something no less monolithic, for (a) recitation has its appropriate uses (propositions that have been taught do need to be recalled and checked, especially at the beginning and end of lessons) and (b) no single pattern of classroom interaction can meet the varied demands of a modern curriculum. Rather, teachers' instructional repertoire needs to be extended to encompass other kinds of talk; and pupils' talk repertoire needs to be extended beyond providing recall or 'guess-what-the-teacher-is-thinking' answers. Pupils need, for both learning and life, not only to be able to provide relevant and focused answers but also to learn how to pose their own questions, and how to use talk to narrate, explain, speculate, imagine, hypothesise, explore, evaluate, discuss, argue, reason and justify.<sup>8</sup>

8. In a significant minority of classrooms, and sometimes across whole schools and local authorities,<sup>9</sup> there are now teachers who give high priority to talk in one, two, three or indeed all senses above, and use it with rigour and flair and to impressive effect in terms of its impact on students' engagement, learning, understanding as well as their capacity to use spoken language in the various ways I have listed.
9. There has been a huge growth in national and international research on productive classroom talk, much of directly applied to the task of talk reform and resulting in useful guidance and materials for teachers. As a result, there is now a vast amount of professional support material available in print, on video/DVD and on-line. Some of this excellent, some of it – unfortunately – pretty poor. The best material comes from non-official sources. So does the worst.

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'test' and 'authentic' questions. Test questions have their place, but they are retrospective rather than prospective and don't probe students' thinking or take it forward.

<sup>8</sup> The shift from the prevailing commitment to 'one right way' to a diverse and discriminatingly applied repertoire of teaching strategies and techniques was commended 20 years ago in the so-called 'three wise men' report commissioned by a previous government: Alexander, R.J., Rose, J. and Woodhead, C. (1992) *Curriculum Organisation and Classroom Practice in Primary Schools*, London, DES. The particular repertoire of different kinds of 'learning talk' above is taken from Alexander, R.J. (2008) *Towards Dialogic Teaching: rethinking classroom talk* (4<sup>th</sup> edition), York, Dialogos, pp 39-40.

<sup>9</sup> I myself have worked on major dialogic teaching projects initiated by or in the local authorities of Barking and Dagenham, Bolton, Surrey and North Yorkshire as well as with schools and LAs elsewhere. Evaluation reports on two of these (Barking & Dagenham and North Yorkshire) have been published and Adam Lefstein of Ben Gurion University, Israel, has undertaken a separate study of the Barking and Dagenham project: Alexander, R.J. (2003) *Talk for Learning: the first year*, Northallerton, North Yorkshire County Council; Alexander, R.J. (2005) *Teaching Through Dialogue: the first year*, London, Barking and Dagenham Council; Alexander, R.J. (2005) *Talk for Learning: the second year*, Northallerton, North Yorkshire County Council; Lefstein, A. and Snell, J. (2011) 'Classroom discourse: the promise and complexity of dialogic practice' in S.Ellis, E.McCartney and J. Bourne (eds) *Insight and Impact: applied linguistics and the primary school*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

10. National agencies, notably QCDA and the previous government's national strategies, have attempted to encourage these developments through their own initiatives and by stitching talk more firmly into guidance for teachers (though not always appropriately or successfully).<sup>10</sup>
11. Finally, as the September 2011 AERA Pittsburgh conference showed, and as Lauren Resnick's presentation at the DfE seminar illustrated, we now have robust and replicable evidence, from studies using pretest/posttest with experimental and control groups, that talk that is cognitively demanding, reciprocal, accountable and/or dialogic has a direct and positive impact on measured standards in English, mathematics and science.<sup>11</sup>

## Challenges

1. Despite the growth in interest in talk, employers, university admissions tutors and others regularly complain that applicants' oral communication skills are in decline, that remedial action is needed to bring them up to scratch, and that the problem lies squarely with schools and education's 'progressive' wing, who since the 1960s have celebrated cultural and linguistic relativism, and unthinking and undisciplined chatter rather than Standard English.<sup>12</sup> There are two challenges here, then: students' communication skills and the polarisation of the debate about them.
2. Although there is now more teacher talk about talk, it has a price: semantic regression through careless usage. Too often, 'dialogue' is equated with NC Speaking and Listening, or – worse – just any old talk. As with 'assessment for learning', the adoption of the novel term merely allows old habits to persist.
3. Underlining how far we still have to go, speaking in English schools is still the poor relation of reading and writing, as it has been ever since 1825, when Sir Edward Curtis coined the term '3Rs' to define what is supposedly 'basic' to children's education and what is not. Consequently, for many teachers, parents and Ofsted inspectors written work is still regarded as the only 'real' work, and talk may be enlisted to support reading and writing but is less commonly pursued as an educational goal in its own right. In England, it is still rare to find (outside the teaching of drama) wholly oral lessons of the kind that you can observe in some other countries, or lessons where talking, reading and writing are brought into a really fruitful interplay.
4. Note that in DfE's report on the National Curriculum call for evidence a mere 41 per cent of respondents 'said that Speaking and Listening must be a central element in the statutory curriculum at every key stage [up to age 16] and that the ability to communicate effectively

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<sup>10</sup> For example: QCA (2003) *New perspectives on spoken English in the classroom*, London, QCA; Primary National Strategy (2003) *Speaking, Listening, Learning: working with children in Key Stages 1 and 2*, London, DfES/QCA.

<sup>11</sup> The as yet unpublished papers from the September 2011 AERA conference will be brought together in the Resnick *et al* edited book referenced at (1) above. For material already in the public domain in the UK that demonstrates the impact of high quality talk on student attainment, see for example the work of Philip Adey and his associates on 'cognitive acceleration', and publications from Neil Mercer's Thinking Together group: <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/sspp/departments/education/research/crestem/CogAcc/Cognaccl.aspx> and <http://thinkingtogether.educ.cam.ac.uk/publications/>

<sup>12</sup> This charge has been around for decades and is regularly recycled. See for example the Hillgate Group's complaint in 1987 that the teacher's proper task of authoritatively transmitting knowledge has been replaced by 'easygoing discussion and opinionated vagueness.' (Cited in Edward, A.D. and Westgate, D. (1994) *Investigating Classroom Talk* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition), London, Falmer Press).

is fundamental to all aspects of human development'.<sup>13</sup> *This suggests that the majority of respondents didn't consider speaking and listening that important.* It would be useful to have a primary/secondary breakdown for responses to that question. I suspect that it would show greater enthusiasm among primary teachers.

5. One of the reasons why talk is undervalued in British education is that there is a tendency to see its function as primarily *social*, as mainly about the acquisition of confidence in the business of communicating with others. Of course, confidence is a precondition for articulating ideas in front of others, but so too is the acquisition of ideas to articulate, so confidence cannot be pursued in isolation. We all know people who talk rubbish with supreme confidence! Yet note that most of the attainment target levels for Speaking and Listening in the current National Curriculum orders for English make heavy and repeated use of the words 'confident', 'confidently' and 'carefully': 'pupils talk confidently ... pupils listen carefully'. These repeated social or behavioural modifiers say nothing about the *structure, content, quality* or *manner* of talk, and indeed they deflect attention away from such attributes. But as psychologists, neuroscientists, anthropologists and classroom researchers have long understood, the function of talk in classrooms is *cognitive* and *cultural* as well as social.
6. Appending the word 'development' doesn't help - social development, emotional development, oral development - because this very British sleight of hand suggests that the teacher's task is merely to support and where necessary remediate a natural process. But as Vygotsky famously asserted, and contrary to the misapplied legacy of Plowden and those who still view teaching as no more than applied child development, education is about *intervening in and accelerating* development, not merely 'facilitating' it, otherwise why do we need schools?<sup>14</sup> Education is a cultural process, not a biological one.
7. Both of these tendencies - the valuing of the social function of talk at the expense of the cognitive, and viewing the teacher's task as facilitating rather than intervening - are firmly rooted in British and indeed American educational culture, as comparative research on pedagogy across cultures clearly shows. In many continental European countries teachers readily assert that their job is to intervene decisively in the process of development and to use talk to get children to think.<sup>15</sup>
8. Local authority advisers and others anxious to keep teachers on side at a time of educational change often say 'Don't worry, you do this already' - when of course they don't. (Perhaps they too are guilty of emphasising confidence at the expense of cognition and competence, among teachers as well as pupils). But transforming classroom talk into an instrument of greater rigour is easier for some teachers than others, for it exposes two of their greatest vulnerabilities: classroom control and subject knowledge. If you move from recitation to more genuinely reciprocal talk, you no longer retain full control of what is said and how; and if you are interested in other than yes/no or factual recall answers, then you must expect pupils to stray into aspects of the subject where you may be less secure.

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<sup>13</sup> DfE (2011) *Review of the National Curriculum in England: summary report of the call for evidence*, London, DfE, p 17.

<sup>14</sup> Vygotsky, L.S. (1963) 'Learning and mental development at school age', in B.Simon and J.Simon (eds) *Educational Psychology in the USSR*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, p 31.

<sup>15</sup> Alexander, R.J. (2001) *Culture and Pedagogy: international comparisons in primary education*, Oxford, Blackwell. Some of the key differences between British and continental European approaches to classroom talk, and the views of teaching and the teacher's role that underpin them, are presented in Alexander, R.J. (2008) *Essays on Pedagogy*, Abingdon, Routledge, pp 92-120 (the chapter 'Talking, teaching, learning').

9. Finally, if in the late 1980s/early 1990s Kingman and Cox identified shortfalls in teachers' knowledge about language, can we be sure there's no longer a problem, or that the now defunct national strategies managed to plugged the gap? I don't think so. And, by extension, do all teacher training providers have the required capacity?

### Official initiatives and interventions: a cautionary tale

The optimistic rise and sad decline of a succession of talk-focused official initiatives bears witness to the extent to which talk still doesn't have the place in this country's educational culture that it deserves and requires, and to the challenges facing those interested in genuine and lasting reform. Thus:

- The 1975 Bullock report *A Language for Life* included a powerful and still relevant chapter on oral language, both in the teaching of English and across the curriculum as a whole. It provoked much applause but little action. I strongly commend revisiting Bullock on both oracy and on 'language across the curriculum'. It remains utterly relevant in what it recommends, depressingly so in the problems it identifies. Incidentally, in relation to our consideration of the place of talk in subjects other than English, consider this:

A curriculum subject, philosophically speaking, is a distinctive mode of analysis. While many teachers recognise that their aim is to initiate students into a particular mode of analysis, they rarely recognise the linguistic implications of doing so. They do not recognise, in short, that the mental processes they seek to foster are the outcome of a development that originates in speech.<sup>16</sup>

- The Kingman and Cox reports of 1988 and 1989<sup>17</sup> repeated Bullock's message, but concluded that a major bar to reform was the paucity – among both teachers and pupils – of 'knowledge about language' or KAL. For pupils, KAL is an essential part of their language curriculum. For teachers it is a precondition for their teaching English, or using language to teach any subject, with anything approaching competence. The call was taken up in the Language in the National Curriculum (LINC) project<sup>18</sup> which began to develop classroom materials before being closed down in 1991 by a government which objected to its alleged appeal to cultural and linguistic relativism and its failure to uphold the cause of Standard English. However, like 'language across the curriculum', knowledge about language also deserves to be revisited.
- The 1987-93 National Oracy Project piloted extensive materials to support the speaking and listening component of National Curriculum English.<sup>19</sup> It too, rapidly disappeared almost without trace. By now it was evident that talk reform was - and remains - an intensely political matter.
- From 1998 the previous government's National Literacy Strategy (NLS) focused attention on literacy at the expense of oracy, so much so that when in 2003 the Literacy and Numeracy Strategies were merged as the Primary National Strategy (PNS), talk wasn't

<sup>16</sup> DES (1975) *A Language for Life: report of the committee of inquiry appointed by the Secretary of State for Education and Science and the chairmanship of Sir Alan Bullock FBA*, London, HMSO, para 12.4.

<sup>17</sup> DES (1988) *Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Teaching of English Language*, (the Kingman Report), London, HMSO; DES (1989) *Report of the English Working Party 5 to 16* (the Cox Report), London, HMSO.

<sup>18</sup> Carter, R. (1990) *Knowledge about Language and the Curriculum: the LINC Reader*, London, Hodder and Stoughton.

<sup>19</sup> Norman, K. (ed) (1992) *Thinking Voices: the work of the National Oracy Project*, London, Hodder and Stoughton.

mentioned at all in the new strategy's manifesto document *Excellence and Enjoyment*.<sup>20</sup> To its subsequent credit, the PNS did try to remedy this deficiency.

- The national strategies did, however, make much of 'interactive whole class teaching', an idea imported from the classrooms of Switzerland, Germany and Taiwan. Unfortunately, far more attention was paid to the whole class teaching than the interaction, for whole class teaching spoke to a desire to return to traditional pedagogy. This spectacularly missed the point, because in interactive whole class teaching, as in teaching however it is organised, it's the quality of the *interaction* that makes the difference.<sup>21</sup>
- Meanwhile, building on my own international classroom discourse video and transcript data,<sup>22</sup> QCA began from 2001 to develop multi-media materials to support a more rigorous approach to classroom dialogue in primary schools. We filmed in classrooms in different parts of Britain, drafted professional guidance and then waited ... and waited. In the end the initiative, and the materials, fell foul of turf wars between QCA and the national strategies, for control of the agenda for classroom talk was something that the National Strategies were determined to retain. Only a single clip from the dozens of videotaped lessons was ever released.<sup>23</sup> Was this a re-run of the LINC episode?
- What did happen, however, was that this work, and that of Neil Mercer, Frank Hardman, myself and others, found its way in fragmented though sometimes inappropriate form into National Strategy support materials. In this, I have to say that the KS3 strategy did a better job than the PNS.
- However, the real running in all this, I submit, has been made not by policy or official initiatives but by researchers, teachers and one or two local authorities that have pushed ahead with talk reform in spite of the twists and turns of policy. It is their work that has blazed the necessary trail.
- Confirming the limited impact of policy, Jim Rose's 2006 review of early reading underlined the essential role of oracy in literacy development<sup>24</sup> but then cited the 2005 Ofsted report which found that 'too little attention has been given to teaching the full National Curriculum programme of study for speaking and listening and the range of contexts provided for speaking and listening remains too limited.'<sup>25</sup> That finding should give pause for thought to those who believe that leverage on the quality of practice in this vital area can be effectively exerted by relying on statutory curriculum programmes of study alone.
- What illustrates both dimensions of the challenge facing us – the limited impact of national initiatives and the resilience of professional culture and habit – is this finding

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<sup>20</sup> DfES (2003) *Excellence and Enjoyment: a strategy for primary schools*, London, DfES. For a detailed critique covering this report's failure not only to mention talk but also to engage more generally with research evidence on teaching, see Alexander, R.J. (2004) 'Still no pedagogy? Principle, pragmatism and compliance in primary education', *Cambridge Journal of Education*, (34)(1), 7-34.

<sup>21</sup> For an account and critique of the 'interactive whole class teaching' movement, see Alexander, R.J. (2008) *Essays on Pedagogy*, Abingdon, Routledge, pp 9-42 ('Pedagogy goes East').

<sup>22</sup> From the 1994-2000 research project Primary Education in Five Cultures [England, France, India, Russia, the United States], funded by the Leverhulme Trust and published as Alexander, R.J. (2001) *Culture and Pedagogy: international comparisons in primary education*, Oxford, Blackwell.

<sup>23</sup> QCA (2005) *Opening up Talk* (DVD), London, QCA.

<sup>24</sup> DfES (2006) *Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading: final report by Jim Rose*, London, DfES.

<sup>25</sup> Ofsted (2005) *English 2000-2005: a review of inspection evidence*, London, Ofsted.



from Frank Hardman's studies of the impact of the NLS/NNS/PNS. In 2004 Hardman and his colleagues reported:

The findings suggest that traditional patterns of whole class interaction have not been dramatically transformed by the Strategies ... Teachers spent the majority of their time either explaining or using highly structured question and answer sequences. Far from encouraging and extending pupil contributions to promote high levels of interaction and cognitive engagement, most of the questions asked were of a low cognitive level designed to funnel pupils' response towards a required answer. Open questions made up 10% of the questioning exchanges and 15% of the sample did not ask any such questions. Probing by the teacher, where the teacher stayed with the same child to ask further questions to encourage sustained and extended dialogue, occurred in just over 11% of the questioning exchanges. Uptake questions occurred in only 4% of the teaching exchanges and 43% of the teachers did not use any such moves. Only rarely were teachers' questions used to assist pupils to more complete or elaborated ideas. Most of the pupils' exchanges were very short, with answers lasting on average 5 seconds, and were limited to three words or fewer for 70% of the time.<sup>26</sup>

- Which is pretty well what Douglas Barnes found in British secondary classrooms in the late 1960s<sup>27</sup> shortly before Courtney Cazden was noting similar tendencies in the United States.<sup>28</sup> Will this National Curriculum review succeed where previous reviews have failed or at best had limited success, or where competing agencies and initiatives have even undermined each other?
- And so to 2012. We now have a brief but positive statement on oral language development in the National Curriculum Expert Panel report. This has pleased many, though they - and perhaps the Expert Panel itself - may be unaware that what the EP report says has been said many, many times before, and that the impact of such official statements and the initiatives to which they lead has not been particularly impressive, and if - for example - Bullock and Kingman had had the impact they deserved the Expert Panel's statement would be unnecessary. So what will it be this time: evolution, revolution, reinventing the wheel or rearranging the deckchairs?

### Oracy, curriculum and pedagogy

Some may argue that the research finding quoted above is irrelevant to our task because it relates to *pedagogy* rather than *curriculum* and the remit of the National Curriculum review covers only the latter. Indeed, the Expert Panel concludes its chapter 'Oral language and its development in the National Curriculum' with this statement:

9.12 We are aware of and support the pedagogic significance of language and other forms of dialogue in classroom practice across the curriculum. However, this is not the direct focus of this report on a framework for the National Curriculum.

By the way, that phrase 'language and other forms of dialogue' is odd: did the Expert Group mean 'dialogue and other forms of language'? Aside from that quibble, the insistence that we can discuss talk in the curriculum without mentioning pedagogy is, I suggest, both highly problematic and symptomatic of the cultural challenge we face, so it requires our attention.

<sup>26</sup> Smith, F., Hardman, F., Wall, K., Mroz, M. (2004) 'Interactive whole class teaching in the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies', *British Educational Research Journal*, 30(3), 408.

<sup>27</sup> Barnes, D. (1969) 'Language in the secondary classroom' in D. Barnes, J. Britton, and H. Rosen, *Language, the Learner and the School*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, pp 9-77.

<sup>28</sup> Cazden, C.B. (1988) *Classroom Discourse: the teaching of language and learning*, NH, Heinemann (2<sup>nd</sup> edition published in 2001).

Let's first tease out the two strands. The term 'oracy' goes back to 1965, and is credited to Andrew Wilkinson.<sup>29</sup> He used it in an attempt to give educational and pedagogical life to the primacy of speech in human development and culture, and to ensure that teachers treat children's oral development no less seriously than they treat the development of children's ability to read and write. Whether we call it 'oracy' (as in the National Oracy Project), 'oral development' (the Expert Panel's term), 'communication skills' (the subject of a major project by Joan Tough in the 1970s and a no-nonsense term preferred by many), or 'speaking and listening' (as, since 1988, in the National Curriculum English subject orders), the field is the same, and it is both legitimate and essential. *It is what the school does to support the development of children's capacity to use speech to express their thoughts and communicate with others, in education and in life.*

But there's another strand, what we might call 'oral pedagogy', the particular kind of talk through which teaching and learning – all teaching and all learning, in all subjects, not just English – is mediated. Interest in this strand has also been around a long time, certainly since Douglas Barnes' ground-breaking observational studies of talk in secondary classrooms in the 1960s.<sup>30</sup> This is the strand with which Courtney Cazden, Lauren Resnick, Martin Nystrand and their colleagues in San Diego, Pittsburgh, Madison and Boston,<sup>31</sup> and Tony Edwards, Philip Adey, Neil Mercer, Frank Hardman, Rupert Wegerif, Lyn Dawes, Phil Scott, Liz Grugeon, Karen Littleton, myself and many others in the UK have been particularly concerned. We have analysed prevailing patterns of classroom talk, assessed its impact on children's learning in specific subjects and indeed on their 'oracy', 'oral development' and 'communication skills', and have proposed alternative patterns which appear to be more effective: reciprocal talk, accountable talk, interthinking, dialogic teaching and so on.

I accept that these two aspects of talk - the *developmental* and the *pedagogical* - are not synonymous, for most of children's oral development takes place outside the classroom and there's more to pedagogy than talk. So why, when it comes to oracy *in the classroom*, do I insist that we cannot consider *talk as curriculum* in isolation from *talk as pedagogy*? And why do I say that in paragraph 9.12 of its report the Expert Group is wrong to signal that if it says anything about oral pedagogy it will be exceeding its curriculum brief? Here are my reasons.

- In all classroom learning the agency of the teacher is central, but in no aspect of children's learning, or of the curriculum, is this more true than in relation to talk. For unlike reading, writing and computation, which the child can pursue silently and independently, *talk is by its nature always dependent upon others*. Talk has to be with someone; that 'someone' may be other pupils but it is usually the teacher; and because of the power differential which Philip Jackson reminded us long ago is a fact of classroom life,<sup>32</sup> it is mainly through and in response to the teacher's talk that the child's own talk is facilitated, prompted, inspired, probed or otherwise orchestrated; or indeed inhibited, restricted, ignored, prematurely terminated or persistently channelled along the narrow tramlines of recitation and factual recall. What the teacher says partly conditions what the child says. But if we follow the

<sup>29</sup> Wilkinson, A. (1965) *Spoken English*, Birmingham, University of Birmingham Press.

<sup>30</sup> See note 27.

<sup>31</sup> The San Diego colleague of Courtney Cazden was Hugh Mehan: Mehan, H. (1979), *Learning Lessons*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press; Cazden, C.B. (1988 and 2011) *Classroom Discourse: the Language of teaching and learning*, Portsmouth NH: Heinemann. Lauren Resnick's Boston colleagues in this context are Sarah Michaels and Cathy O'Connor. See, for example, Michaels, S. and Sohmer, R.E. (2001), 'Discourses' that promote new academic identities' in Li, D. (ed), *Discourses in Search of Members*, pp. 171-219, New York, University Press of America, pp 171-219; Michaels, S., O'Connor, M.C., Hall, M.W. with Resnick, L.B. (2002) *Accountable Talk: classroom conversation that works* (3 CD-ROM set), Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh; Michaels, S. and O'Connor, C. (2012) *Talk Science Primer*, Cambridge MA, TERC

<sup>32</sup> Jackson, P.W. (1968) *Life in Classrooms*, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Expert Panel's self-imposed ruling, then what the student says is defined as 'curriculum' while what the teacher says is 'pedagogy'. There's the categorical difficulty.

- In fact, given that curriculum is process as well as content and pedagogy necessarily encompasses learning as well as teaching – for teaching is by definition the intention or act of generating learning – one can as readily reverse the equation and argue that what the child says is pedagogy and what the teacher says is curriculum. That would be both true and equally arbitrary, for every exchange between teacher and student manifests both curriculum *and* pedagogy.
- In reading and writing, the student's skills are influenced more by the teacher's skills as a *teacher* of reading and writing than by how well the teacher herself reads and writes. Not so with talk. Its essentially interactive nature means that *the teacher's own competence as a speaker and listener contributes significantly to the developing oral competence of the student*.
- Thus in oracy the teacher's agency is critical in perhaps unique and uniquely powerful ways. So, arguably, it makes little sense to specify a curriculum for speaking and listening which lists requirements for one of the parties to classroom talk but not for the other, but that's exactly what the current National Curriculum English orders do, and that's what I fear, taking their lead from the Expert Panel, the new orders will do also.
- In fact, talk is the one area of classroom learning where the familiar distinctions between what and how, content and process, curriculum and pedagogy, break down. Where talk is concerned, the what *is* the how, and curriculum *is* pedagogy. The most obvious example of this is in literacy itself, for where would phonics be in the reading curriculum without talk? In the teaching of reading the relationship between grapheme and phoneme, between what is written and spoken, is fundamental. This is something that Jim Rose's 2006 report on early reading articulated very clearly, and he argued there that raising the profile of speaking and listening would enhance not just the teaching of phonics but also literacy development more widely.<sup>33</sup>
- That, incidentally, is one good reason among many for continuing to give oracy prominence within the statutory orders for National Curriculum English. I understand that at one stage the possibility of deleting spoken language as a programme of study within English was considered. I support the reworking of Bullock's argument that talk is fundamental to all learning, in all subjects, and therefore needs to be everywhere rather than confined to English. But this isn't an either/or situation. To remove talk from English would be both categorical nonsense (how can the study of English include reading and writing but not talk?) and pedagogical folly. *Talk needs, of course, to be in every subject but it requires particularly close attention in the teaching of English.*

Behind these categorical difficulties is another, the distinction between the curriculum as *prescribed* and *enacted*. I have been critical of what I see as the Expert Panel's and DfE's excessive faith in the power of the prescribed or paper curriculum to raise standards, and no less critical of the belief that the way forward is to emulate the paper curriculum of those jurisdictions which outperform the UK in TIMSS and PISA - because of course we know that the key to raising standards is what teachers do in classrooms; and we also know that in many

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<sup>33</sup> See note 24.

classrooms the gap between what is prescribed and enacted can be considerable.<sup>34</sup> That's a basic fact of teaching. Again, oracy is a particularly thorny instance of this problem, for talk is largely about the enacted curriculum, and so much of what is said in classrooms cannot conceivably be scripted in advance in the way that a paper curriculum attempts to do. We can have a shot at prescribing the questions that teachers ask, but can we prescribe pupils' answers? Well, actually, many teachers attempt to do just that, and it's called the 'recitation script' or IRE exchange structure, and classroom research shows that its pervasiveness far exceeds its educational usefulness.

Interestingly, the Department's report on what we can learn from the English, maths and science curricula of high-performing jurisdictions fudges the prescribed/enacted distinction though actually it is exclusively about what is formally prescribed. (The report is entitled *What can we learn from the English, mathematics and science curricula of high performing jurisdictions?* The crucial word 'prescribed' is omitted).<sup>35</sup> I suspect that it would be much more illuminating to ask *What can we learn from the way English, mathematics and science are taught in the classrooms of high performing jurisdictions?* What is enacted in classrooms is no less about the 'curriculum' than what is prescribed by DfE.

Having said all this, I offer a proviso. In classroom talk, content isn't wholly synonymous with process, for talk actually has two kinds of content or subject matter: first, that which is specific to the issue being discussed or the subject being taught and which makes mathematical talk different from scientific talk, historical talk or artistic talk - for mathematicians, scientists, historians, artists ask different kinds of questions, use different vocabularies and think and reason in different ways. This is the force of Lauren Resnick's idea that talk should be accountable to knowledge and standards of reasoning, that is to say to the particular kinds of knowledge and standards of reasoning that are embodied in subjects. Second, there is also possible to identify a *generic* content of talk as such, which applies to all subjects and in all contexts, but especially within the teaching of English. This is what the current KS1/2 orders for En1, Speaking and Listening, try to do. And, rather differently, it's what Ron Carter's work on the 'grammar of talk' or my own work on dialogic teaching have attempted.<sup>36</sup>

But especially the generic content of talk is what is signalled by KAL, which, it will be remembered, relates primarily to the student's knowledge but by extension to the teacher's too. Some have suggested that the rationale for talk becomes evident only in subjects other than English. 'We can see', they say, 'what can be talked about in a science or history lesson, but what is there to talk about in an English lesson? Do children just talk about the books they are reading?' The answer is simple: the subject matter of science is science; the subject matter of English is English. That is to say, literature certainly, *but also the English language itself*: how it works; its building blocks from sound and letter to word, sentence and text, or (in speech) from utterance to act and exchange; its formal properties; its grammars (spoken as well as written); the nature, origins and nuances of words; the way language conveys, explores and manipulates meaning; the panoply of rhetorical devices which take the language user from competence to mastery; the many registers and social contexts of spoken language in use; the

<sup>34</sup> Alexander, R.J. (2011) 'Could do even better: making the most of international comparison as a tool of policy', internal DfE discussion paper; Alexander, R.J. (2012) 'Moral panic, miracle cures and educational policy: what can we really learn from international comparison?' *Scottish Educational Review*, 44(1). The extent of the prescribed/enacted gap in Singapore, a PISA high performer provoking particular interest at DfE, is uncovered in a major but as yet unpublished report which David Hogan and his colleagues at Nanyang Technological University have prepared for the Singapore government.

<sup>35</sup> DfE (2011) *Review of the National Curriculum: what can we learn from the English, mathematics and science curricula of high-performing jurisdictions*, London, DfE.

<sup>36</sup> Carter, R. for the QCA (2004) *Introducing the Grammar of Talk*, London, QCA; Alexander, R.J. (2008) *Towards Dialogic Teaching: rethinking classroom talk* (4<sup>th</sup> edition), York, Dialogos.

interplay of speaking, reading and writing; the artistry of spoken language at its best, and the knowledge and skill that underpin that artistry. That there should even be a question about whether English has subject-matter outside what appears in texts, or anxiety that English merely exists to 'service' other subjects, is perhaps indicative of how far the discourse about the teaching of English has been impoverished by the insistence that grammar is old hat and usage – or for that matter Standard English – are all that matters.

A final note on the curriculum/pedagogy issue from a comparative perspective. Those who worry overmuch about this dividing line may be unaware that – like some other matters referred to in this paper – this is a very Anglo-Saxon preoccupation. Because Britain and the United States avoided national or (in the US) state curricula for much longer than most other countries, curriculum was always viewed as problematic and contestable and became an overwhelming concern, with pedagogy treated as subsidiary. Indeed, in the influential curriculum models of Tyler, Taba and others during the post-Sputnik curriculum development boom of the 1960s and 1970s, pedagogy became a subsidiary element in the grander scheme connoted by 'curriculum', which acquired boundless (and ultimately useless) definitions like 'everything that goes on in school, unintended as well as intended'. In contrast, in continental Europe 'pedagogy' – the art, science and craft of teaching – is the overarching concept and curriculum is one of its elements, so the relationship between 'what' and 'how' is always pursued as a matter of course. Hence the courses in didactics/la didactique/die Didaktik, didaktika (the art or science of teaching a subject) which are a major part of teacher training courses in many continental countries and whose genealogy goes back at least to 1657 and the *Didactica Magna* of Jan Komensky (Comenius). German, Dutch, Czech or Swedish educators, for example, would be somewhat puzzled by the notion that it is possible to set down requirements for the science curriculum which avoid saying or implying anything about how it should be taught.<sup>37</sup>

This brief comparative/historical digression is pursued in order to encourage the Government's current National Curriculum review to take a more relaxed (or continental) view of the curriculum/pedagogy relationship.

### Next steps for the National Curriculum Review

These can be expressed succinctly:

- Revisit two key ideas and proposals from previous government enquiries: **language across the curriculum** as an essential element of every school's curriculum policy, and **knowledge about language** as a precondition for all teaching, not just the teaching of English. Determining the knowledge about language which is needed (i) by students, (ii) by teachers of English, and (iii) by teachers of subjects other than English, is a considerable but necessary task, especially when we come to the neglected area of knowledge about spoken language.
- Work towards draft statements and/or programmes of study in the following three areas, agreeing first what kind of statement is merited and what force it should have:

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<sup>37</sup> All this is discussed in Alexander, R.J. (2001) *Culture and Pedagogy: international comparisons in primary education*, Oxford, Blackwell, pp 540-563, and Alexander, R.J. (2009) 'Towards a comparative pedagogy', in Cowen, R. and Kasamias, A.M. (ed) *International Handbook of Comparative Education*, New York: Springer, pp 911-929.

- *Talk as a central element in the English curriculum* (a statutory programme of study?).
  - *Language, in all its aspects, across the curriculum* (a statutory requirement that every school should have a policy on language – reading, writing, talking, ICT<sup>38</sup> - across the curriculum, plus non-statutory guidance on what such a policy might contain?).
  - *Talk as a necessary component of every other subject* (general statutory requirement plus non-statutory guidance?).
- *Within the orders for English* emphasise talk (i) as an end in itself and (ii) as an essential tool for reading and writing, and (iii) map the key contexts where oracy and literacy interact.
  - In the orders for talk attend to the agency of the teacher as well as the pupil.
  - Clearly signal that we are not merely re-packaging the existing ‘speaking and listening’ orders but are inviting a genuine step change in professional thinking and practice.
  - Say much more about the cognitive and cultural functions of talk and avoid the subliminal message of the current S & L orders that talk is exclusively about communication and social poise.
  - *Within the orders for subjects other than English*, heed Bullock’s concern, 35 years on, and give particular attention to the relationship between subject structure, mode of enquiry and language register, or to the particular vocabulary and kinds of discourse with which each subject is necessarily concerned. Or, using Lauren Resnick’s terms, make the talk accountable to the particular kinds of knowledge with which each subject deals. Note that some but not all of the current orders have attempted this, though usually to only a limited extent. Thus, for example, the current KS 1/2 science orders include raising questions about the nature of scientific enquiry while the maths orders get straight down to the business of listing what the pupil should know. There is a similar contrast between the geography and history orders: the geography orders include requirements to ‘ask geographical questions’ and ‘use geographical vocabulary’, but the history orders are couched mainly in terms of propositional knowledge. (I wonder whether the DfE’s curriculum data from high performing jurisdictions offer any insights on this).
  - *Within the statement on language across the curriculum*, emphasise teacher agency as argued above, while avoiding the curriculum/pedagogy demarcation dispute implied by para 9.12 of the Expert Panel Report, by two simple expedients: (i) be sparing in the use of the ‘P’ word (pedagogy), thus avoiding hostages to fortune; (ii) focus on the language environment of the classroom *as a whole* rather than on the teacher’s talk as such, specifying the kinds of classroom talk that should be in evidence if children’s oral capacities are to be fully developed and if talk is to fulfil its potential as a tool for learning. By this means we can signal, without trespassing on professional autonomy over teaching methods, that such talk cannot be fostered unless teachers attend closely and critically to what they themselves say and how they say it.

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The Cambridge Primary Review argued that for these purposes ICT should be regarded as a component of the language curriculum rather than a mere free-wheeling ‘skill’ because its ubiquity is such that it now needs to be approached with the same kind of criticality that traditionally has been reserved for written English. Alexander, R.J. (ed) (2010) *Children, their World, their Education: final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*, Abingdon, Routledge, pp 268-271.

**Implications for other policy areas**

- Ensure that these ideas are acted on in courses of initial teacher training.
- While respecting the Secretary of State's commitment to give teaching back to teachers, explore what DfE can usefully do to support teachers in the task of improving pedagogy in line with the evidence on the importance of high-quality classroom talk, for example through non-statutory guidance on the effective use of talk in teaching and learning.
- Give thought to the considerable CPD implications of raising the profile of talk – in which matter there is already valuable experience to be tapped in both Britain and the United States.
- Ensure that talk is a significant focus for 'quality of teaching' assessments in Ofsted inspections.
- Find ways of remedying the abject failure of the review of professional standards to act on the considerable research evidence about the role of talk in effective teaching, especially the evidence that high quality classroom interaction is one of the defining characteristics of outstanding teachers.
- Identify a basic term to replace 'speaking and listening' and sort out an agreed terminology for contingent concepts.