Imagine a classroom completely quiet – not one where everyone is silently working but one where nobody ever talks. How much learning is taking place and how would you know? Of course classrooms are not like this, nor would we wish them to be. However, thinking about a ‘no talk’ classroom focuses attention on just how important talk is in supporting and promoting learning, both by students and teachers. Talk plays a central role in learning; in learning how to think and in talking your way into meaning.

Classroom talk is far from a smooth or even a continuous process. It often flounders as individuals, either teachers or students, struggle towards meaning having travelled up blind alleys and related personal anecdotes. When students engage in this type of cooperative talk in groups, then what Booth (1988) called coproduction occurs where students draw out meanings from each other that they would not have arrived at on their own. This type of classroom talk where students explore ideas is, by its very nature, hesitant and incomplete and is what led Barnes (1976) to term it ‘exploratory talk’.

Barnes (1976) postulated that talk played a central role in learning by enabling students to increase knowledge and develop understandings about particular topics by talking their way into meaning. In this view talk allowed students to explore meaning and try out new ways of understanding and to modify existing ideas. He concluded that the value of exploratory talk was that it required the learner to be actively engaged in the learning process through deliberate participation. Such active participation depended on learners taking responsibility for their learning by asking questions, making predictions and inferences and generally being thoughtful and critical about their learning. There is, therefore, a relationship between exploratory talk and reflective and critical behaviour on the part of the learner. It is through this critical but constructive engagement that students are able to challenge and counter-challenge thinking and to make reasoning visible in the talk.

Wells (1991) also attached importance to the exploratory nature of teacher–student and student–student talk. He suggested that teachers were commonly so focused on asking comprehension questions that they inadvertently prevented exploratory talk from developing. He called for a greater emphasis on talk among students and teachers that he termed ‘collaborative talk’.

Adapted from
CLASSROOM TALK: UNDERSTANDING DIALOGUE, PEDAGOGY & PRACTICE
Christine Edwards-Groves, Michele Anstey & Geoff Bull (2014)
Following from these ideas, the development of these functions of talk and behaviour require the teacher to develop a pedagogy that allowed students to be responsible for, and actively construct, their own learning (at least for some of the time). It also requires establishment of a climate in the classroom where students felt encouraged to talk and where they were not constrained by a fear of making mistakes or being contradicted, but rather involved in making approximations in meanings and developing understandings.

Students will engage in talk that is constructive only when they feel at ease to do so, and when they feel that the teacher has given them permission and allowed them the space to talk. In such classrooms teachers take a step backwards so that there is not only teacher talk but also learner talk.

Kahn and Fine (1991) in their study of talk in group situations found that students in Years 1 to 6 judged their classmates according to ‘liked most’ or ‘liked least’ according to the frequency of their talk. Interestingly, Cain (2012) also found that individuals (both children and adults) were judged favourably or unfavourably according to how much they talked in group situations. Cain also found that those individuals who spoke less frequently and were judged to be introverts exhibited higher order thinking skills than those of their more talkative, extrovert group members.

There has been a substantial amount of research about talk and there are significant reasons why talk should play a central and fundamental role in learning. There are five areas of research that have provided evidence that supports the importance of talk and have implications for teacher practice. A summary of these areas of research is presented in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of Research</th>
<th>Evidence Provided</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Neurological</td>
<td>In the early years talk assists in brain development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological</td>
<td>Talk plays a central role in the development of thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socio/cultural</td>
<td>Talk assists in the development of relationships and views of the world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political</td>
<td>Democracies are based on citizens talking rather than listening and discussing rather than complying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicative</td>
<td>Talk is central to the development of skills that support meaning making</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Talk That Enhances Learning**

Talk that enhances learning can be described as dialogic talk (as opposed to monologic talk). This is defined as an approach where both teachers and students made substantial and significant contributions to classroom talk and to learning in general. Talk that enhances learning is enacted when students:

- share a common purpose
- allow each other to talk
- value each other’s talk
• ask questions as well as answering them
• reflect on their own and others’ talk
• tolerate uncertainty and tentativeness
• explore and accept differences of opinion and points of view,
• give evidence to support ideas (Myhill, 2005; Myhill et al., 2006).

Such talk attempts to engage students and teachers in a genuine dialogue in order to engage in the process of inquiry – and is termed dialogic talk. It aims to promote critical thinking and encourage higher order thinking skills. It is quite distinct from the question-and-answer routines that are a feature of the IRE sequence-based interactions that are commonly found in classrooms, where there is a preponderance of teacher talk and little learner talk. There is a real attempt to create authentic teacher–student exchanges through the exploration of ideas and the use of exploratory and collaborative talk.

Dialogic talk and ‘vacating the floor’

If talk is to be truly dialogic then student talk has to be appreciated as equally important as teacher talk by both teachers and students. If this position is to be adopted in a classroom then the teacher has to be very conscious of the use of IRE sequences. IRE sequences allow no space for student talk that is generated by the students themselves because they are too focused on answering of teacher questions (as is the teacher).

Dialogic talk requires the teacher to take a step back and provide opportunities for students to instigate talk in a classroom environment where they feel comfortable to do so. In the research on classroom talk this has been termed ‘vacating the floor’ (Bridges, 1988; Cazden, 1988; Perrott, 1988). Vacating the floor has come to be seen as one of the most significant factors in encouraging students to engage in exploratory talk and to take on some responsibility for shaping meaning through talk. In a contemporary study of the patterns of classroom talk, Godinho and Shrimpton (2003), concluded that vacating the floor created spaces for student dialogue and shared ownership of the talk where shared meaning making could take place between teachers and students.

Further Godinho and Shrimpton (2003, p. 38) stated that such a move authorised students to become more analytical while still allowed teachers to be facilitators and mediators of meaning through talk and promoted a ‘collaborative inquiry approach’ to develop. Later in the study Godinho and Shrimpton reported that in classrooms where teachers had not vacated the floor students struggled to recall important points in discussions and that many teachers found this move difficult. Finally they identified in their study, three factors upon which classroom talk is dependent that might go some way to supporting teachers in a move towards vacating the floor:

- familiarisation of what constitutes a discussion by both teacher and student
- introduction by the teacher of strategies that encourage dialogic talk
- development of a pedagogy built upon a collaborative inquiry approach.

Teacher knowledge about what constitutes dialogic talk can be instrumental in supporting them to take the step towards vacating the floor. Mercer (2000) suggested that general agreement about the rules for talk was useful in creating a classroom environment where students could focus more on collaboration and acclimatising to having a voice of their own and less on competitive bidding for teacher attention.
Mercer (2000, p. 98) also identified three types of talk that occurred in discussions:
- *disputational talk* that is competitive and is characterised by unwillingness to accept alternative points of view
- *cumulative talk* that builds on others’ talk
- *exploratory talk* that allows students to explore new ideas.

Obviously the more a teacher knows about how talk is conducted and what is involved in discussions, the more likely they are to be willing and confident to vacate the floor.

**Advantages of dialogic talk**

Alexander (2005b, p. 15) reported a number of positive outcomes from his work on talk in the UK that was a reflection of his earlier conclusions in his five nations study (2001). Among these outcomes was evidence that suggested a focus on dialogic talk led to:
- more talk about talk by both teachers and students
- a discernible shift away from hands-up competitive bidding towards more in-depth discussion
- teachers giving more thinking time to students to answer questions
- a replacement of IREs with questioning sequences that contained more open questions,
- a greater involvement of less able students and the quiet students due to the more inclusive climate of their classrooms
- An increase, due to a greater emphasis on talk, in the reading and writing abilities of all students, especially the less able.

Wolfe and Alexander (2008) and Mercer and Littleton (2007) all reported that when students were involved in dialogue and discussion, they were more likely to engage in critical discussion, learn more effectively and raise the levels of their intellectual achievement. Similar advantages were advanced by Scott (2009) who cited a study by Game and Metcalfe (2009) that concluded that dialogic talk enabled students to engage in levels of thinking that they were not capable of on their own while still recognising that such thoughts were developments of their own thinking.

There seems little doubt that the benefits of engaging in dialogic talk are many and varied and that there are advantages to be gained for both teachers and students.