

Research for Teachers

Effective talk in the primary classroom

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There is plenty of sound evidence about the effectiveness of structured dialogue in small groups for pupil learning. But how effectively does classroom talk in whole class situations promote pupils' learning?

This month, we feature a study in which groups of primary teachers and school leaders explored this issue with the support of a team of researchers from the University of Exeter. This study into patterns of talk during whole class teaching episodes shows how hard the demands of classroom teaching make it for teachers to move away from dominating classroom talk and how the teachers worked to give pupils opportunities to learn through speaking.

The participating teachers believed in the importance of good questioning and of pupils participating in classroom talk. By reflecting on videos of their lessons, teachers identified several features likely to increase pupils' participation in classroom talk and developed strategies to use them more often. A second phase of the project showed positive change in some areas of practice, but also showed that teachers found it difficult to make extensive changes to their questioning strategies.

Given the emphasis in the national strategies on whole class interactive teaching, this study offers some useful insights into strategies for improvement. It also suggests possible reasons for why even motivated teachers find changing their patterns of classroom talk difficult. In whole-class situations, it seemed that teachers were anxious to cover curriculum objectives and so they prioritised group delivery of learning objectives and curriculum content over developing individual pupil understanding. This added to their difficulties in overcoming ingrained habits of unrehearsed classroom talk.

This RfT is based on:

Talking, listening learning: effective talk in the primary classroom

Myhill, D., Jones, S. and Hopper, R. (2006)

Open University Press, Maidenhead.

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