



A reason to talk

Introduction

While I was waiting in the 'green room' to be interviewed on Radio 4's *Today* programme about my role as Communication Champion, I was lucky enough to meet regular contributor Rabbi Lionel Blue. He told me this wonderful story about why some children might be late talkers:

An Austrian couple have a son. After the birth, medical tests reveal that the child is normal. There is nothing to worry about. As the child grows older, he learns to do everything except talk. For some reason he never speaks. The concerned parents take him to the doctor, who reassures them that as the child is perfectly developed in all other areas, there is nothing to worry about and that he is sure the speech faculty will eventually blossom. Years pass. The child is five, and is still not speaking. The child's mother is especially distressed by this, but attempts to conceal her sadness. One day she makes soup for lunch. As the family sit at the dinner table, the child suddenly declares, 'Mother. This soup is a little tepid.' The parents are astonished. 'All these years,' the mother exclaims, 'we assumed you could not speak. And yet all along it appears you could. Why? Why did you never say anything before?' 'Because, mother,' answers the child, 'up until now, everything has been correct.'

This story underlines the point that children, and adults, talk for a purpose. There has to be a reason to make us communicate.

A reason to talk in the classroom

In most classrooms children have plenty of reason to use informal conversational language. Whatever they are supposed to be doing, they will chat about what was on telly last night, what Amy said to Sunita, what's happening at the weekend. The purpose is to exchange views, cement friendships and gather information that is of interest to them.

It is less common, however, for classroom learning to provide a reason for children to use the more extended and formal styles of talk that support learning. In most lessons, teacher talk dominates, interspersed with closed questions usually requiring pupils to give short answers. Research shows that the ratio of closed to open questions is in the order of five to one in Key Stage 1 classrooms, and three to one in Key Stage 2 classrooms (Hardman *et al.*, 2001) and that the average length of a pupil's contribution to a class discussion is just four words (National Literacy Trust, 2011).

The questions we ask children, moreover, are almost always ones to which we already know the answers. Answering questions that are not really questions at all, and having what education guru Mick Waters calls 'false conversations' – what authentic reason to communicate does this offer children?

After the teacher talk and questioning part of the lesson, children generally go off to undertake solitary tasks. Even when seated in groups, as is common in primary classrooms, they are generally doing work that does not require collaboration and co-operation beyond minimal interactions like 'pass the rubber', or off-task conversational chat.

All this off-task talk, in turn, attracts criticism from the teacher. Children get a message that talk is undesirable and holds no value. In other words, as one teacher told her class, 'I don't mind if you co-operate, as long as I can't hear you.'

Contexts for talk

It doesn't always have to be like this. I have visited and heard about many schools and classrooms which give children real reasons to use talk, for a range of purposes. Classrooms where teachers talk less and children talk more. Classrooms where teachers do what a wise head teacher, writing in the *Times Educational Supplement*, suggests: 'Scrap the mechanistic reliance on hands-up, ask more open-ended questions (why? how?), give thinking time, make space for collaborative conversations and oral rehearsal of answers, and then always ask pupils – rather than us – to comment upon the answer they have just heard' (Barton, 2011). Classrooms where adults ask questions to which they don't already know the answers. Classrooms, moreover, where children 'do things for real' and are stimulated by their experience to *need* and *want* to talk.

Here is my top ten list of 'for real' contexts that provide a reason to talk:

1. Surprise
2. Children asking the questions
3. Children giving instructions
4. Collaborating
5. Giving an opinion
6. Debating
7. Using technology
8. Reminiscing
9. Drama and role play
10. Philosophy for children

No Pens Day Wednesday

All my top ten contexts for purposeful talk featured strongly in schools which have chosen to take part in the Communication Trust's 'No Pens Day Wednesday', introduced in the national year of communication and now a regular fixture in the education calendar.

Here are some brilliant examples of what schools got up to on No Pens Day Wednesday.

CASE STUDY

At St Joseph's primary school in Camden, a time machine had arrived in the playground overnight. Covered in silver foil and cordoned off, it had a huge clock with backwards numbers, a 0-9 number pad, a *Blue Peter*-type control console and – best of all – a calendar with Wednesday 28 September marked with a cross and the words 'St Joseph's School, Earth' scrawled across the page.

The local community policewoman came down to check for health and safety, while the children came out in class groups to explore and talk about the machine. The oldest children discussed what year they might want to go back (or forward) to. One girl said 9/11, so that 'we could stop it happening'. A child in a younger class suggested that maybe if you pressed a number on the number pad you would become that age – 'You'd be six... or nine...'. Others speculated about where the machine might have come from – 'I think it came from the sky' and 'I think the teachers made it' – while the teachers encouraged speculative language and modelled exciting vocabulary.

Then each class used the time machine as a stimulus for no-pens activities. In Reception the creative areas had been set out with foil and glitter and boxes for the children to use. Older groups discussed, planned and made their own robots and time machines in design and technology.

In Year 6 children imagined fast-forwarding to the future in a time machine. The children took part in an extended improvisation about life in the year 3011. One activity was group work to plan a talking brochure for a school in this new world. They had to choose a name for their school and its vision statement, then use their bodies to create a still image for the front cover of the prospectus. Later they recorded the images using camera and sound, and went on to work on the inside pages.

CASE STUDY

At All Saints school in Oldham, No Pens Day was a mixture of 'normal' lessons adapted to be speaking- and listening-based, and games and discussions about the importance of effective communication. When Year 6 came in they found a mysterious sign saying 'Press me!', with an arrow to a button on which their teacher had recorded a short message explaining what No Pens Day was all about. They listened to the recording and had a discussion about what it would be like to learn all day without pens, and what the pleasures and problems might be. They then had a ten-minute challenge to see if they could learn a non-verbal form of communication (some signs from British Sign Language). In literacy, rather than write about their favourite genre, author and book the children were challenged to come up with a radio or TV presentation to advertise it. In maths, they completed a carousel of problem-solving activities without pens. In the afternoon they played Chinese whispers and discussed how easily messages can become distorted, then improvised characters arriving at a party while their friends had to guess who the characters were. The day ended with a debate. The class had been thinking about a new breed of micro-pigs, and after reading several different articles on the subject they took positions on the question 'Micro-pigs – cool or cruel?' and justified their views.

CASE STUDY

At Coppetts Wood primary in Barnet, No Pens Day started with a whole-school assembly introducing the 'Pen Police' – six Year 6 pupils in uniforms, who asked every class to bring their pens and pencils to the hall so they could be locked up. Throughout the day they roamed about, checking that no one was using a pen. At the end of the day there was a mock trial of anyone caught out – mostly members of staff. The police presented their case against each defendant and they had a chance to plead theirs. The judge (another Year 6 pupil) asked questions then gave his verdict. He found them all guilty and handed out some harsh punishments including, for one teacher, scraping her class's plates in the dining hall.

CASE STUDY

No Pens Day proved to be a huge success at Frizington community primary school in Cumbria, where children had the opportunity to be history detectives, looking at World War II mysteries in groups. They analysed a bag of evidence, hypothesised, and presented possible reasons and answers to the class. Staff were also barred from using pens throughout the day and so classes came up with inventive ways of taking the register using stickers, stamps or finger prints next to their name.

CASE STUDY

At a secondary school in Leeds, a Year 8 maths set were given a challenge – to get the most chocolate. Different numbers of bars of chocolate were placed on three tables. Students then chose which table they wanted to go to (in secret). They then sat round their chosen bars of chocolate and worked out how many pieces each member of the group could have. This always turned out to be unfair on some. They repeated the process, discussing strategies as they began to 'see' the problem more clearly. All the pupils enjoyed the activity; one boy got so interested he even invented a new-sized bar to guarantee every student the same amount.

A science lesson started with a matching activity where pupils worked in pairs to match pictures of specialist cells with their names and how they are adapted to their function. Pupils then worked in small groups from diagrams and instruction sheets to make models of cells using salt dough, plastic bags, string and jelly. They took photos of the cells they had made, next to the name and diagram of the cell. They had a list of words that named the structures in the cell that they had to use in their talk to each other, and then they were asked to explain what each part of their model was in the real cell, using these words. The students really enjoyed the activity, staying in voluntarily at lunchtime to finish their models and clear up the mess. One student said it was the best science lesson she had ever had in her life.

Surprise

Surprise makes human beings want to talk – to exclaim, check out with others what might be happening, explore ideas about the event and so on.

Schools often use this element of surprise to launch a new curriculum topic. Head teacher Chris Fenton (2012) describes how he uses the unusual and unexpected in his teaching.

A lot of my humanities planning starts with the phrase *The children walk into my classroom and...* They might, for example, find glitter (space dust) everywhere and charcoal scrapings in the shape of a spaceship landing on a desk, with a note in a plastic cylinder from Zog, claiming that his planet was much better than earth (more unusual animals, better weather and more amazing landscapes) and challenging the class to prove him wrong.

Steve Eddison, who teaches at Arbourthorne primary in Sheffield and writes regularly for the TES, is another master of surprise. He describes, for example, how his Year 3 class were transfixed by a large cardboard box with the words 'DANGER. DO NOT DISTURB' written in big red letters on the side. The class had just been reading *Where the Wild Things Are* and were soon speculating that there might be a wild thing in the box. A letter then 'arrived' to confirm this, and Steve was able to suggest that persuasive letters inviting the creature to a wild rumpus might lure him out of his box. The end of this story involved Steve in holding the box lid down as it tried to open, and a huge glove puppet hidden inside the box jumping out to a crescendo of screams.

At a school in Brighton, as a stimulus for No Pens Day activities, staff had hidden artefacts in the sandpit so children could explore Roman archaeology. In Newark, teachers disguised as aliens arrived at a whole-school assembly and took all the children's pens, because 'you write too much'. They did give them back at the end of the day! And when a Year 2 class at Waterville primary, North Shields, who were working on traditional tales, tried to get into their classroom after play, they found the door to the playground locked. Their teacher told them she was worried that a stranger had been in the classroom – dark-haired with a pale, pale skin. Making their way in via the inside door they found a table set for eight. There was much discussion. Who could it be? Why eight places? The children soon worked out that Snow White must have been involved. In turn, groups used the area for role play, requesting extra props such as apples and a mirror and taking the parts of different characters.

Another example of the use of surprise comes from a Year 2 lesson observed in St Thomas of Canterbury primary school in Salford.

The lesson was part of a cross-curricular topic on dinosaurs. The teacher had earlier 'planted' a dinosaur egg in the classroom. The pupils were convinced that it had arrived through the roof. This captured their interest straightaway... The pupils had become very protective of the egg and made a nest and prehistoric forest for it to live in.

Early in the lesson observed, the classroom assistant entered to announce that the dinosaur egg was missing. Genuine consternation: 'What shall we do? Has it hatched out? When did we last see it?'. Pupils were sent to investigate the disappearance. The class talked about it and agreed that the police should be contacted. How should we describe it; size, texture, colour and so on? One pupil was chosen and used the teacher's mobile phone to call the policewoman (actually a friend of the teacher). The policewoman arrived, interviewed the pupils but then got called away. She asked the pupils to complete

a crime sheet and said that she would return later to collect it. The teacher arranged the pupils into small groups, all with a team leader dressed in a police helmet and fluorescent jacket, to investigate and prepare the report.

What was particularly impressive about the lesson was the effective use of literacy skills in 'real-life' contexts... It was important for the pupils to get things right so that the policewoman could be accurately briefed over the telephone. So it mattered what time the egg went missing, what it looked like, and what evidence about its disappearance could be supplied.

(Ofsted, 2011b)

Children asking the questions

All too often, adults are the only ones asking questions in classrooms.

At West Thornton Primary in Croydon, part of a 'Developing Talk for Learning' initiative (Croydon Local Authority, 2012) staff noticed how difficult their Reception children initially found it to ask questions. 'The class was very confused and could not grasp the idea of questioning at all, saying statements and delivering pieces of information instead of trying to find out something new', wrote their teacher. Observation showed that teacher talk dominated – 'I had chatted away merrily for twenty minutes and asked eight questions. The children had not attempted any.' Over the next few weeks, the class teacher and teaching assistant took on various roles and modelled questions children could ask to find out more about the character. They provided starters (who, where, why, what, when, do you...?) and collected questions on the whiteboard under these headings. Children became characters of their choice, using hot-seating and puppets. Their classmates were now able to put questions to them, using the models they had heard.

The next observation showed a significant change. The class were learning about the Chinese New Year, and this time had no difficulty in working with their talk partners to generate questions to ask Nia the dragon. The teacher's role was now one of listener and scribe.

Beginning work on a new topic is a good point to encourage children's use of questioning. Teachers can ask children to identify what they already know (recorded as a giant mind map) – and to frame questions about the things they would like to know. In plenaries, too, students can question each other about their work or be asked to jot down one question they will ask at the start of the next lesson to check the class have remembered the key learning (not activity) from the previous lesson.

Children giving instructions and providing descriptions

Barrier games are a very good way of giving children a reason to talk, and a reason to listen. In a barrier game, a screen or large book is placed between two players. Often the partners each have identical equipment in front of them. One player gives verbal instructions to the second, who must listen and respond to the instructions. They can ask for clarification or to add more detail. At the end of the activity the barrier is removed and the pupils discuss the outcome.

Examples might be:

- One partner giving the other instructions on how to find treasure on a map.

- One partner making a Duplo model and then giving their partner instructions on how to make exactly the same model.
- Each child having a set of picture cards showing Victorian toys. One child chooses a card and describes it; the other child has to pick the card that matches the description.

The rule for both children is 'Don't look'. The rules for the instructor are 'Give clear instructions or a description. Wait.' The rule for the follower is 'Listen carefully. Ask a question if you are not sure.'

Barrier games are very effective in promoting the 'formal talk' we touched on in Chapter 1, because the presence of the barrier removes the context from the interaction. They are also a good way of helping children understand how to ask questions to seek clarification if they have not understood what was said to them – an essential classroom and life skill, as we shall see in Chapter 6.

There are great ideas for barrier games in ICAN's *Communication Cookbook* (www.ican.org.uk), in the Talking Partners intervention programme which originated in Bradford (www.educationworks.org.uk) and on the websites of national EMA networks (such as www.emaonline.org.uk) and local authority EMA services such as Milton Keynes (www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/emass).

Collaborating

Collaborative pair or group work is an ideal way of providing a reason to talk. Many teachers are familiar with ways of structuring group discussion and interaction such as talk partners, turn-and-talk, think-pair-share, triad teams, snowball, envying and jigsaw.

The use of talk partners (where pairs of children are given a short time to come up with an answer to a question, or to share their opinions) is common in primary schools, where it fits well with 'carpet time'. It is less often used in secondary classrooms, though I saw some teachers use turn-and-talk, in which pupils in one row turn round to talk to the pupil behind them. Many schools I met were finding that for more extended discussion, trios (sometimes called triad teams) proved more effective than pairs or larger groups – small enough so all are involved, but big enough to have people to bounce ideas off. Trios worked best where they included a higher, middle and lower attaining child and where adults modelled how to exchange ideas. One teacher, for example, would make a point of joining a group where one member was absent.

Think-pair-share allows a pair of children to join another pair; snowball allows for fours to become eights, and so on. In both these techniques, children share their partner's ideas as well as their own. In the envoy technique, children work in groups on a task, then one person from each group is selected as an 'envoy'. The envoy moves to a new group to share their group's ideas or findings and to find out what the other group discussed or achieved. They then report back to their original group. A brilliant idea I saw used at Elizabeth Garrett Anderson was choosing envoys by giving them a card looking like a travel pass (an Oyster card, in this London school) saying 'You will be a travelling envoy. When your group have completed the task you must move to the next group to your right in order to...'

In the jigsaw technique, children belong to two groups – a 'home' group and an 'expert' group. Each person in the home group is assigned a number, then all those in the class given a particular number (such as three) re-group to form an expert group. As experts, they research and become familiar with one aspect of a topic. If the class are studying rivers, for example,

there might be expert groups looking at the water cycle, the use of rivers for transport, their use to generate energy, their use in farming, and their use as a focus for leisure opportunities. If the topic is Henry VIII, each expert group might find information about one of Henry VIII's wives. Once they have researched their topic, children return to their 'home' group to pool their knowledge

Giving an opinion

Everyone likes to give an opinion, and I saw some really good ways of enabling pupils to give theirs. 'Pupil voice' initiatives such as School Councils and Parliaments are an obvious example, as long as they do not just involve those pupils who are already highly articulate.

One school I visited used the idea of Antony Gormley's Trafalgar Square 'One and other' event to set up its own plinth in school, which children and staff used to make a speech about something that they felt strongly about. In Sheffield, schools could buy a wooden 'soap box' from the local authority, for children to use. The initiative culminated in a 'Speakers' Corner' event in the centre of town.

One of the interesting organisations I came across as Communication Champion was the Speakers' Corner Trust, a charity that helps young people from all backgrounds become 'speakers', able to express their views, engage in public debate and be active citizens. The charity can provide school-based workshops for students. It has also collaborated with others to develop a website (www.youthamplified.com). The resources on the site focus on confidence, listening, projection, persuasion, negotiation and argumentation and include:

- animated films in which young people discuss the skills they need to speak confidently and effectively in public;
- videos in which young people talk about speaking challenges they have faced;
- a self-evaluation quiz to identify personal speaking strengths and weaknesses;
- a guide designed to help teachers and youth workers support young people in the development of these skills across the curriculum and outside school.

Speak Out, an initiative from another charitable organisation called the Speaker's Trust, also provides really useful workshops for young people on public speaking skills, and organises challenge events for schools.

Debating

Debating is not just an archaic activity beloved of more traditional government ministers. If we can give young people lots of practice in debating skills – particularly those who are socially disadvantaged – we immediately help them move confidently into the more formal language of which they may have little previous experience. We also help them build confidence.

I was reminded of this when listening to a former director of children's services describing taking a party of pupils to take part in a European debating competition in which they competed with public school students. 'Our pupils were very bright,' he said, 'but as soon as they got onto the stage they crumpled up. They are sharp... they have the wit, the intelligence... but what they don't have is the ability to translate that into language.'

There is evidence (Akerman and Neale, 2011) that debating activities can have a positive effect on attainment. Research conducted in urban American high schools showed that

students who took part in debating activities were 25 per cent more likely to complete their formal education than those who did not. Debate was also associated with improved literacy skills and subject knowledge in science, history and art.

I saw really interesting debates on local and national issues, with topics such as 'How far should you go to stand up for what you believe?' and 'Do video computer games affect your brain?'

In one Year 6 class, Ofsted (2011b) observed pupils applied their debating skills in a courtroom scenario, role-playing a courtroom scene in which a jury has to decide whether to ban fox hunting. The class had been researching facts and drafting short arguments, which they presented to the court. The lesson showed pupils attempting formal language, avoiding abbreviations and slang as they stated their views. The teacher moved into role, consulting with the jury before the verdict was announced. Near the end of the lesson, pupils put on different types of 'thinking hat' to review the issues raised. They then planned the next steps: 'We could write letters to people. In maths, we could do voting.' Pupils were keeping journalists' notebooks to record what they thought, knew and wanted to find out. When the lesson ended, they were still talking about what they had been doing and what to do next.

There are several organisations which support the development of debating in schools. Debating Matters (www.debatingmatters.com) specialises in sixth formers, but has topical resources relevant to younger pupils too. Debate Mate (www.debatemate.com) works in primary and secondary schools. It is an international educational charity dedicated to improving social mobility using cost-effective peer-to-peer debate mentoring. It trains undergraduates from top universities to run weekly after-school debating clubs in areas of social disadvantage. The charity also provides bespoke workshops for teachers looking to integrate debating into their classroom, and specialised training for students who want to 'debate like a world champion'.

Independent evaluation of Debate Mate's work showed that two thirds of students who took part enjoyed classroom discussions more than before, and 85% said they had become more confident and articulate. Pupils showed an average increase of two Speaking and Listening national curriculum levels over a period of 15 weeks. Debate Mate's work has been praised by Ofsted:

Supported by mentors from the university, students engage in speaking and listening games but also practise debating skills. Topics include things such as: 'should voting be compulsory?' and 'should the monarchy be abolished?' In addition to debates within school, there are competitions across London and opportunities to work with competition winners from other cities. Boys are very keen on Debate Mate. They see it as being particularly helpful in relation to future careers, 'It'll look good on my CV... I want to be a lawyer and it will be very helpful.' Students agree that the sessions are fun, that they have given them confidence and that they also help to develop their listening skills. They enjoy the occasional political discussions and talks and many of the boys like the competitive nature of the events. These skills are then complemented by oral work, drama and debates in mainstream English lessons. All this goes some way to explaining why boys do so well in English.

(Ofsted, 2011b)

Using technology

Recording devices

Putting a microphone or any other recording device into children's hands instantly challenges them to generate decontextualised talk. It gives a purpose to the activity, and helps develop a sense of audience.

It need not be technologically complex. I watched groups of three-year-olds confidently using Easispeak microphones to record speech, play it back and delete it when they had finished. I saw slightly older children use the microphones to be 'roving reporters', to share songs and rhymes, to tell and retell stories, downloading and saving their recordings as WAV or MP3 files.

There are numerous other devices that can record brief pieces of speech and link this to images. Examples include talking tins, talking buttons, tell-a-story cards, recordable speech bubbles, think/say/feel recordable cards (shaped like a speech bubble/thought cloud/heart), talking photo albums, talking postcards, and sound shuffle sequencers. Pie Corbett's recordable story mountain, for example, is an A5 wipeable postcard which enables children to record a ten second message to support the main five aspects of narrative: the opening (once upon a time), the build-up (one day), the problem (unfortunately), resolution (luckily) and the ending (finally).

A number of suppliers stock these recordable devices; TTS (www.tts-group.co.uk) has a particularly comprehensive catalogue. They are being used increasingly and creatively in schools, for example, to enable children to:

- record instructions for a game or process;
- sequence pictures and tell their story;
- prepare input for assemblies;
- prepare talking captions for a display;
- develop talking mindmaps about a topic; and
- develop a quiz for classmates to complete.

The devices can also be used to promote home-school links. Children or adults can record descriptions of events at home, to share at school – or vice versa. Parents of children learning EAL can be asked to record a question or statement in the home language using recordable photo albums with pictures of the child doing everyday activities.

In one special school, pupils used TalkingPENS to create an instruction board with a series of recorded oral instructions on how to play a game. These pens allow audio recordings to be transferred to 'hotspots' on a printed surface. In this case the students recorded the instructions on sticky labels fixed to photographs the students had taken of themselves playing each stage of the game.

In another school, children used a recordable bar/story sequencer to create their own spoken account of a visit they had made to a castle. The sequencer is a simple recording device made of clear Perspex with a velcro strip across the front for attaching cards that can display words, pictures or symbols. Children can record a ten second message to correspond with each picture (in this case, photographs from the visit) and then press a button for playback.

When I visited at Frederick Bird Primary in Coventry school I saw Talking Tins used on a display about the school's success in a recent city-wide debating competition. There were photographs of the debating 'team' next to the Tins on which they had recorded their memories of the competition.

School radio and podcasting

Another inspiring use of sound recording is the development of school radio stations, like the one at Lyndhurst primary school (see case study below).

CASE STUDY

At Lyndhurst primary school in Grove Lane, London, Grove FM broadcasts to the whole school every Friday with content generated by pupils. Programmes are based on the curriculum or any other issues that the children feel strongly about. There is also a school vimeo channel (<http://vimeo.com>). Year 5 and 6 pupils can attend an after-school radio club where they learn how to edit, write, research, direct and work as a team. They have also worked with real live radio journalists on questions and interview techniques.

A term's programming might include, for example, 'a brilliant chicken joke from Nursery', a story written by a pupil after studying Greek myths, facts about the Olympics, an account of a class trip, opinions on religion, the word in the playground about a royal wedding, anti-bullying raps written by the children, a broadcast by the School Council, an infomercial about computer hacking, and a special programme about transition made by Year 6 pupils who are preparing to go to secondary school and children who have left Lyndhurst in the last few years.

If a school radio station seems too big an enterprise, podcasting offers an alternative. I saw this put to particularly good use in a school where pupils make podcasts for other pupils, such as a geography investigation undertaken in Year 9 to be offered to the next year group.

There are many sources of podcasting advice and resources for schools, but one I came across was the not-for-profit Radio in Schools podcasting platform (www.radioinschools.co.uk), which enables schools, teachers, pupils and parents to create and share podcasts online. Podcasts are produced with the easy to use Virtual Studio, which is accessible anytime, wherever there is an internet connection. It's a really simple process with no need to download and install software, provides space for users to store files and operates in an e-safe environment. Content can be shared with the whole podcasting community via schools' individual home pages. The organisation also provides learning activities directly linked to the National Curriculum.

Software

Software that promotes talk and gives it purpose is developing rapidly. One good example is Crazy Talk, which allows children to script and give a voice to photos and images, animating them as if they were speaking the children's words. A photo is uploaded into the application and with some minor pinpointing of key elements of the image it can be brought to life to 'say' pre-recorded messages using automated lip syncing. Celebrities can 'announce' outrageous gossip and reveal plot lines; sports stars can change their teams or decide on new career paths and animated characters can reflect real life stories. Adventurous students have been known to upload an image of their teacher to allow an early home time, no homework and free play all day...

Another interesting use of technology for older pupils (who must be over thirteen to use the site) is the Xtranormal website (www.xtranormal.com), which creates simple animated

movies in which characters 'speak' a script that pupils have written, using text-to-speech technology. It can be used to motivate children to create short pieces of dialogue, a news report, an explanation of a concept, or a short debate. The finished videos are hosted on the Xtranormal website or can be uploaded into blogs/VLE or YouTube.

Skype and video conferencing

Skype and video conferencing offer further opportunities for purposeful talk. The Skype in the classroom website has safeguards built into the privacy settings which make it suitable for classroom use. At Lent Rise Combined School in Buckinghamshire, Reception children's first Skype conference is with Father Christmas; older children have conversations with staff from major museums and even NASA. Many schools have developed international Skype partnerships with other schools. At Hamilton Community College in Leicester, students studying citizenship chat with classes at a Kentucky school about the latest political and economic developments in their countries. Special schools can team up with local mainstream schools, too, with pupils interviewing each other, asking questions about uniforms, lessons, meals, hobbies and interests.

The potential Skype holds for enriching learning in the humanities and sciences is obvious. What may need to be developed is teachers' skills in using the medium to explicitly develop specific language skills too – how to ask questions, for example, or the active listening skill of seek clarification if you haven't understood something.

Reminiscing

As we saw in Chapter 2, reminiscing about shared past events is an important way in which children develop their language skills.

Early-years practitioners are very good at making pictorial records of children's activities as a basis for shared talk. But while such books may be made in primary and secondary classes, they tend to be used for writing rather than shared reminiscence – yet sharing the memories (of school trips, for example) could be a wonderful activity for 'talk volunteers' from the community to undertake with a small group.

Drama and role play

Most primary teachers, though rather fewer secondary teachers (other than English teachers), will be familiar with the repertoire of drama strategies that can be used across the curriculum to support learning and develop talk – from puppets to hot seating, thought tracking, conscience alley, forum theatre and mantle of the expert.

A lovely example of the use of drama is given by English teacher Fran Hill, who uses 'group therapy' to deepen pupils' understanding of characters in the class novel, play or poem. Pupils work in teams of five or six, with one taking the role of one of the characters. They respond to questions from the 'therapists', such as what happened in your childhood to make you act as you do.

Ofsted (2011a) describe wonderful work at St Paul's academy in Greenwich, where in one lesson students applied their knowledge of TV programmes such as the *Jeremy Kyle Show* to J. B. Priestley's *An Inspector Calls*. Characters from the play appeared in turn, to be grilled by the presenter. The pupils work combined good understanding of the play alongside very good dramatic ability. 'Mr Birling' revealed all his characteristic pugnacity, arguing with the

presenter: 'I don't appreciate you insulting my daughter... remember that life is hard', before storming out of the 'studio' exclaiming that 'I've got better things to do with my time.' The class booed and hissed, as appropriate.

Another example of the use of drama is work in Southwark, where with the help of drama consultant Nina Birch, and teachers who trained at local theatres to become Drama Champions, thirteen primary schools took part in a year-long project to develop children's oral language skills for writing. Children made puppets, used role play, re-enacted scenes and events, took guided tours, drew story maps and went on large story walks. They also saw their teachers and class helpers pretend to be characters from stories or periods of history. Over the year, they wrote a story based on two best friends, Misery Guts and Cheerful Chappie, broadly based on *Misery Moo* by Jeanne Willis. 'I liked it when my teacher was the miserable old cow. It made me laugh', said one child. Then the children made really disgusting cakes (spiders, maggots and cobwebs) and wrote recipes based on the Jeanne Willis book *The Rascally Cake* ('I loved the disgusting things; I didn't know all those disgusting words before', reported one girl). Head teachers noted at the end of the project that 'it has been truly inclusive, with all children inspired and motivated to achieve', that the quality of children's speaking and listening had improved, and that Key Stage 1 writing results had improved sharply as a result.

The website www.dramaresource.com has descriptions of commonly used and other less well known drama strategies, plus fabulous units of work and lesson plans for *The Gruffalo* (Julia Donaldson), *Funnybones* (Janet and Allan Ahlberg), and the topic of World War II evacuees. Similarly, *Shakespeare for All Ages and Stages*, a booklet from the DfE archive, provides a brilliant range of practical drama activities which can be applied well beyond the Shakespearean context itself.

Philosophy for children

Philosophy for children (P4C) is a classroom approach that develops children's ability to listen, explore, question and reflect through dialogue (www.sapere.org.uk). Children are presented with an initial stimulus, which might be a picture, a piece of film, or a text. They then come up with questions they would like to discuss, based on the stimulus. The class vote on the question they would most like to discuss as a group, and one question is chosen – as an example, this might be 'Should you always tell the truth?', or 'Is heaven the same for everybody?'

During P4C sessions children lead the discussion; the teacher acts as a facilitator. Children learn to listen actively to one another, to think before they speak, and give reasons for what they say.

I heard a wonderful example of the power of philosophical discussion in a Sheffield school serving an area of social deprivation. The teacher had read a Year 6 class the story of a scorpion who asked a frog to carry him across the river because he couldn't swim. The frog said 'Yes, if you don't sting me.' Halfway across the river, however, the scorpion stung the frog. The frog said 'Why did you do that? Now we are both going to die.' But the scorpion said 'I can't help myself. It's in my nature.' The children were asked to discuss the story, in small groups. One group drew a parallel with recent history – 'It's like 9/11... it's like suicide bombers.' Another likened the scorpion to Judas Iscariot. Groups presented their ideas to the rest of the class, then held a class discussion on the question 'Are you responsible for your own actions?'

Another lovely example of P4C in action is a primary class who used Michael Rosen's book *Sad* and several photographs depicting people looking sad as the stimuli. The children formulated the following questions:

- Do people like to be on their own when they are sad?
- What is sadness?
- Why do people cry?
- Is it alright to be sad?
- Why do people feel depressed?

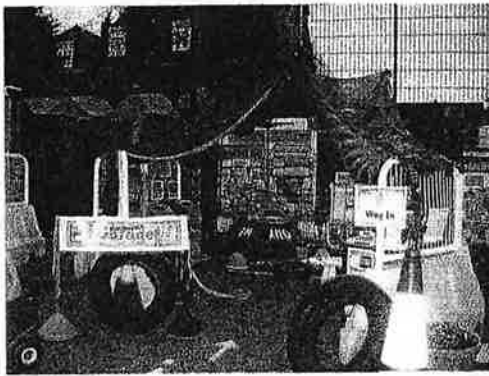
They decided to focus on the question 'Is it alright to be sad?' and pursued this line of enquiry. They agreed that it was alright to feel sad and that sometimes as humans we could not control this. They developed a line of thought that suggested that there were times in a person's life when they felt greater degrees of sadness and that people should show how they feel, so that they can be helped.

There is some good evidence of the impact of P4C. Studies in Clackmannanshire with 10- to 12-year-olds showed significant improvements in cognitive abilities (average increase of 6.5 IQ points), self-esteem and confidence – and in classroom behaviour.

Summary

In this chapter we have explored classroom activities that provide real reasons for children to seek to communicate effectively. Together with the environments and supportive adult interactions that make for a good place to talk, they provide the foundations for language learning. Left to themselves, however, children and young people may simply use all these contexts to recycle what they already know about language. To take their skills to the next level, they will need something more than opportunities and reasons for talk. They will need explicit teaching strategies that target vocabulary, listening skills, sentence structures and the skills of social interaction. It is to these we now turn, in the next chapter.

A reason to talk: role play areas



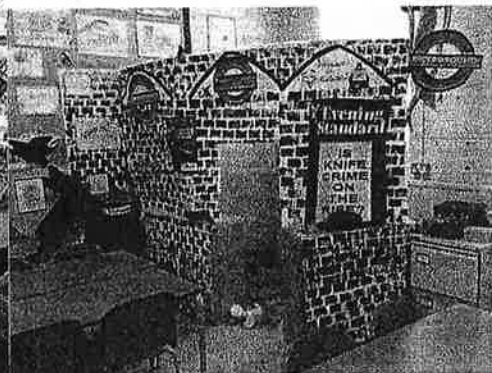
Early Years Foundation Stage: garage



Key Stage 2: a 1940s living room



Key Stage 2: World War II Anderson shelter



Key Stage 2: an underground station

