Chapter 1. Why Talk Is Important in Classrooms

Aldous Huxley (1958) once wrote, "Language has made possible man's progress from animality to civilization" (p. 167). In doing so, he effectively summarized the importance of language in humans' lives. It is through language that we are civilized. One could argue that nothing is more important to the human species than that. But Huxley wasn't done there; he continued by explaining the value of language:

Language permits its users to pay attention to things, persons and events, even when the things and persons are absent and the events are not taking place. Language gives definition to our memories and, by translating experiences into symbols, converts the immediacy of craving or abhorrence, or hatred or love, into fixed principles of feeling and conduct. (p. 168)

Language, in other words, is how we think. It's how we process information and remember. It's our operating system. Vygotsky (1962) suggested that thinking develops into words in a number of phases, moving from imaging to inner speech to inner speaking to speech. Tracing this idea backward, speech—talk—is the representation of thinking. As such, it seems reasonable to suggest that classrooms should be filled with talk, given that we want them filled with thinking!

A Brief History of Classroom Talk

Academic discourse has always been part of the classroom. Teachers have long understood the importance of using language to transmit ideas. In the early history of education, teachers talked for most of the instructional day while students were quiet and completed their assigned tasks. Students were expected to memorize facts and be able to recite them. Remember that in most classrooms of the late 1800s, the age range was very diverse. In the same classroom, teachers might have students who were 5 or 6 years old and others who were 15 to 18. Talking by students was not the norm. In fact, students were punished for talking in class, even if the talk was academic!

Over time, educators realized that students had to use the language if they were to become better educated. As a result, well-intentioned educators called on individual students to respond to questions. Teachers expected them to use academic language in their individual responses, and as students spoke, teachers would assess their knowledge. Consider the following exchange from a 3rd grade class. As you read it, think about how much academic language was used:

**Teacher:** I was thinking about the life cycle of an insect. Do you remember the life cycle we studied? Malik?

**Malik:** Yes.

**Teacher:** What was the first stage in the life cycle? Jesse?

**Jesse:** They were born?

**Teacher:** Yes, things are born, but think about the life cycle of insects. Let's try to be more specific in our thinking. What is the first stage in the insect life cycle? Miriam?

**Miriam:** Eggs.

**Teacher:** Yes, insects start as eggs. Then they change and develop. They become larva after eggs, right? And then what? What happens to them after they are larva? Adrian?

**Adrian:** They are adults.

**Teacher:** They do eventually become adults, but there is a step missing. What is the step between larva and adults? What is that stage of the life cycle called? Joe?

**Joe:** Mature larva?
Teacher: Yes, there are two kinds of larva in the life cycle of some insects. But what I was thinking about was what happened to them after the larva before they become adults. Mariah?

Mariah: Nymph?

Teacher: Now we're talking about the three-stage cycle for some insects. Do the insects that change into nymphs come from larva? Let's look at our two posters again. Remember these? There is a three-stage process and a four-stage process. Let's study these again.

Let's spend a few minutes analyzing this classroom exchange. First, it's not unlike many of the whole-class interactions we've seen, especially in a classroom where the students are obviously having a difficult time with the content. One student at a time is talking while the others listen or ignore the class. Second, the teacher is clearly using a lot of academic language, which is great. We know that teachers themselves have to use academic discourse if their students are ever going to have a chance to learn. Third, the balance of talk in this classroom is heavily weighted toward the teacher. If we count the number of words used, minus the student names, the teacher used 190 words, whereas the students used 11. This means that 94 percent of the words used in the classroom during this five-minute segment were spoken by the teacher. In addition, if we analyze the types of words used, half of the words spoken by the students were not academic in nature. That's not so great. Students need more time to talk, and this structure of asking them to do so one at a time will not significantly change the balance of talk in the classroom.

As you reflect on this excerpt from the classroom, consider whether you think that the students will ever become proficient in using the language. Our experience suggests that these students will fail to develop academic language and discourse simply because they aren't provided opportunities to use words. They are hearing words but are not using them. We are reminded of Bakhtin's (1981) realization: "The world in language is half someone else's. It becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention" (pp. 293–294). In other words, if students aren't using the words, they aren't developing academic discourse. As a result, we often think we've done a remarkable job teaching students and then wonder why they aren't learning. The key is for students to talk with one another, in purposeful ways, using academic language. Let's explore the importance of talk as the foundation for literacy next.

**Talk: Building the Foundation for Literacy**

Wilkinson (1965) introduced the term oracy as a way for people to think about the role that oral language plays in literacy development, defining it as "the ability to express oneself coherently and to communicate freely with others by word of mouth." Wilkinson noted that the development of oracy would lead to increased skill in reading and writing as users of the language became increasingly proficient—as James Britton (1983) put it so eloquently, "Reading and writing float on a sea of talk" (p. 11).

**When Talk Facilitates Learning**

Figure 1.2 provides a graphic representation of the opportunities for integrating talk in the classroom. We've divided the opportunities for talk into four major categories. These categories are consistent with a gradual release of responsibility model of instruction, which acknowledges that students must assume increasing responsibility if they are to learn (Fisher & Frey, 2008). This does not mean that students are supposed to become independent learners in the absence of the teacher but, rather, that classrooms are structured in such a way that students are introduced to ideas and then have opportunities to work with these ideas before being expected to complete tasks independently. As you'll see throughout this book, a number of instructional strategies are available for integrating purposeful student talk. For now, let's consider the instructional routines in which talk can be integrated.

**Figure 1.2. Types of Talk**
Teacher Modeling

During whole-class instruction, teachers model behaviors, skills, and strategies that they expect to see from their students. As we will discuss in Chapter 3, this modeling is based on an established purpose and provides students with a mental model for completing tasks they will encounter in another phase of instruction. We've already seen that questioning can be used during teacher modeling, but teachers can also activate their students' background knowledge during this time (for example, a 10th grade biology teacher might ask his students to talk with a partner about cell life before he explains cell division to them). In addition, teachers model the use of academic language as they engage in think alouds, shared readings, read alouds, lectures, and other whole-class events. After modeling, students can reflect on what they learned through both writing independently and talking with a partner.

Guided Instruction

During guided instructional events, teachers use talk to determine what students know and what they still need to know. This is an opportunity to use questions, prompts, and cues to help students complete tasks. Although guided instruction is teacher led, this does not mean that students are not talking. They use talk to ask questions—of the teacher, of peers, and of themselves—as well as to clarify understanding, provide feedback to a partner, and reflect once more on their learning.

As we will see in subsequent chapters, teachers can use talk during guided instruction in a number of ways. For example, an art teacher might meet with a small group of students who have difficulty with perspective in their drawings. He asks them to compare and contrast several drawings from his collections of books and then has them give one-word explanations of the differences. The students use words such as proportion, line, and shading. Through talk, this art teacher is able to facilitate increased understanding for his students.

Collaborative Tasks

In this phase of instruction, students are provided an opportunity to work together, with the teacher monitoring and supporting as needed. Talk becomes critical when students discuss tasks or ideas and question one another, negotiate meaning, clarify their own understanding, and make their ideas comprehensible to their partners. It is during collaborative tasks that students must use academic language if they are to focus on the content. Here again, their understanding grows as they talk with their partners to reflect on their learning. A number of classroom structures, such as reciprocal teaching, literature circles, partner discussions, and so on, require students to talk together. Our experience suggests that this phase of instruction is critical for English language learners to use the language and, as Bakhtin noted, own the words and ideas.

Independent Tasks

It might seem strange to suggest that talk plays a critical role during independent activities. But think about the self-talk (inner speaking) you use when you complete independent tasks. Some of this self-talk occurs in your mind, whereas some is vocalized. Again, thinking occurs as we use language, and this type of talk is an important aspect to learning. As students work independently, they may also use talk to receive input on
their work and give feedback to others. Reporting out after independent work may require a more formal
register of language than that used during collaborative activities.

As an example of the type of instruction in which talk permeates the learning environment, let us peek inside
a 5th grade classroom as students read and discuss Hattie Big Sky (Larson, 2006). The teacher has just
finished reading a chapter aloud. As she was reading, she regularly paused to provide context clues for
vocabulary words. For example, when she came to the word skyscraper, she paused and commented,
"What a great word! I know from the context that it's a type of building, but I can really see this in my mind.
The big tall buildings in Chicago must have seemed to really scrape the sky. Have you seen buildings like
that? Describe a skyscraper to your partner."

At that moment, the classroom bursts into talk. Teresa leans over to Javier and says, "Like totally covered in
glass, you know, all shiny so that you can see yourself. It's so big, you can see the ocean when you're up
there."

After the reading and think aloud, the teacher asks students to think about the differences in life in San
Diego today and Montana in 1918. She says, "There are two things on my mind that we should talk about.
There are differences and similarities between San Diego and the town Hattie lives in: Vida, Montana. And
there are also differences and similarities between today and 1918. Choose one of those topics to discuss
with your partner."

Pedro turns to Alex and says, "They had nice people and mean people, just like we do. But they got bad
weather and we don't." Alex responds, "Yeah, and they have farms and we don't, but they have chores like
we do."

Following the whole-class and partner discussions, students moved to their collaborative learning groups.
The teacher had purposefully organized the membership in these groups such that students at the beginning
levels of English proficiency had access to language brokers who could support their participation. She also
focused on creating groups with diverse interests and skill levels such that the group would become
interdependent as they processed information.

One of the collaborative learning tasks required students to create a readers' theater script based on the
chapter they had read. Their teacher knows that students will reread the text, talk about it, practice reading
the scripts, and provide one another feedback on their speaking parts as a component of this task. A few
lines from the script written by Alex's group highlight the ways in which language and talk are used to
facilitate learning:

Hattie: I gotta get my chores done but I'm so cold.

Narrator: What will I do? I don't want to freeze to death.

Hattie: I put on all of my clothes at once, every stitch. That will help me face the extreme cold.

Mr. Whiskers: I'm not going outside with you—you're crazy! But there might be milk. I guess I'll go.

Narrator: The cow was waiting so Hattie braved the weather.

Rooster Jim: Howdy neighbor.

Hattie: Oh, hello. Do you want some coffee? I'm almost done and could use some company.

The class continued on with productive group work and all of the talk associated with it. In this classroom,
the teacher and her students share the responsibility for talking. Importantly, not just one student talks at a
time; during partner conversations, 50 percent of the students are talking at a time. The important thing to
remember is that this talk has to be purposeful; it can't just be social if we are going to see improvements in
achievement.

Summary

As we analyze why many students are not learning what we are teaching, we must evaluate our own
practice for evidence of student talk throughout the day. Oral language is the foundation of literacy, and as
such, it requires focused attention in planning. Altering the ratio of teacher to student talk doesn't just
happen. Rather, it occurs through both believing in the importance of student talk and planning with a clear
purpose and expectations. But before we discuss how to plan lessons that integrate purposeful academic
talk, reading, and writing, we must be clear on our own understanding of exactly what academic oral
discourse is. We turn our attention now to an analysis of the elements of discourse in the classroom.