

Learning through talk



Trainer's handbook

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How to use this handbook

Objectives

This module sets out to:

- consider the ways in which talk can promote learning in the classroom
- examine potential problems and solutions
- look at the ways in which groups can be organised to help promote talk for learning
- demonstrate the dynamics of group discussion.

Structure

The topics covered are:

- Benefits of talk
- Problems with talk
- Organising groups
- Including everyone: Ball of string

Organization

Each activity:

- starts with teacher's notes which set out the purpose of the activity, the materials required and instructions for how to proceed
- is followed by the relevant OHTs and handouts.

Key	
Teacher's notes	
Handout	
OHTs	

Learning through talk objectives

- To consider the ways in which talk can promote learning in the classroom
- To examine potential problems and solutions
- To look at ways in which groups can be organised to help promote talk for learning
- To demonstrate the dynamics of group discussion.



The benefits of talk

Purpose

To examine the potential benefits of speaking activities while allowing participants to experience for themselves a learning activity which has depended on talk

Materials

- **Benefits of talk** handout
- a 'benefits bag' to hold the cut up sentences
- **Benefits of talk: key** handout.

Instructions

Conduct this task as a discussion and matching activity.

Hand around the benefits bag (or hat or box), which contains a card with a benefit written on it.

Participants must examine their card, and find someone else who has a card with a very similar benefit. To achieve this they will need to walk around the room talking to each other about their cards, sharing and comparing the benefits, until they have all found a match.

The trainer should mingle too, providing help where needed.

Allow some feedback on the matches, then distribute **Benefits of talk: key** handout for participants to check that they have found the right partner, and to familiarize themselves with any ideas that they may have missed during the mingling activity.

Benefits of talk resource sheet



When we explain an idea, we come to understand it more clearly.

By putting something into our own words, we make ideas and information our own.

When the students are engaged in speaking activities they have to think for themselves, rather than copying what the teacher says.

When students have to respond to each other, this encourages independent thinking, because the teacher is not telling them what to say each time.

Speaking activities with young children are 'sowing the seeds' for the development of vital discussion skills which will be needed later in their education, and in life.

Discussion, like writing, can be a useful way to develop thoughts and ideas, as well as to solve problems. Speaking activities thus develop useful discussion skills for later life.

Active listening helps us to understand what other people, know and think and feel.

By listening carefully to what other people say, we have a clearer picture of their thoughts and needs.

Talking among themselves gives children the chance to explore concepts to try out theories and to express opinions. It also gives immediate feedback.

When children explore ideas and express opinions in discussion with others, the feedback they receive helps them to become more confident.

Dialogue between a child and a more skilled person is a very powerful way to learn.

When children are able to interact with others more experienced than themselves they are able to learn a great deal.

When teachers observe children's talk they learn a great deal about what children know and understand and how they think.

The teacher is freed to monitor student needs and achievements when they are involved in speaking activities.

Learning through talk is enjoyable and productive.

Chatting is fun, relaxing. It doesn't feel like real 'work' but in fact real learning is taking place during speaking activities.

Benefits of talk: key

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Potential problems with talk

Purpose

To help participants identify potential problems with talk in the classroom and to find solutions for these

Materials

- **Potential problems with talk** handout
- **Potential problems with talk: solutions** handout

Instructions

Organise participants into groups, and conduct this session as a discussion.

Provide the participants with **Potential problems with talk** handout, which lists some of the potential problems in classroom where children are encouraged to learn through talk.

Reassure them that there are not necessarily any right or wrong answers, but encourage them to share ideas and to think of possible solutions. Monitor and provide support where needed.

During feedback allow some of the individual groups to share their solutions with the rest of the class.

Talk through the problems that participants perceive as difficult areas, then distribute **Potential problems with talk: solutions** handout, so that participants can compare the trainer's solutions with their own, and also consider solutions for problems they found difficult to solve.

Potential problems with learning through talk

<i>Potential Problems</i>	<i>Solutions?</i>
Are the students actually learning when they are speaking?	
In some cultures, children are not allowed to initiate interaction with adults.	
Parents think that when the children are talking no real learning is taking place	
Colleagues think that speaking activities are too noisy.	
Children are at so many different stages in their development that it is difficult to plan activities which will meet everyone's needs.	
What happens if the children are not on task and are discussing what they are going to do tonight and not the matter in hand?	
How do I evaluate if a speaking session is successful?	

Potential problems with learning through talk: possible solutions



Potential Problems	Solutions?
Are the students actually learning when they are speaking?	Yes! They are exploring concepts, trying out theories and expressing opinions. They are also taking responsibility for their own learning.
In some cultures, children are not allowed to initiate interaction with adults.	Teachers need to understand that children may be reticent and find ways of reassuring them that they are allowed to both initiate and respond.
Parents think that when the children are talking no real learning is taking place	Parents need to know what you are doing and why. Most problems arise when parents don't understand what is happening. Explain that the teacher is still active but in different ways. Her role is to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain to children what they are being asked to do in any particular activity • Judge how and when to intervene so that children can make sense of their discoveries and failures.
Colleagues think that speaking activities are too noisy.	Again, it is important to explain what you are doing and why. Point out that <i>productive</i> talk, where children are focused on a particular problem, sounds very different from <i>recreational</i> talk.
Children are at so many different stages in their development that it is difficult to plan activities which will meet everyone's needs.	The teacher needs to use what children say and do to plan activities that move them on. Each child will participate at his or her own level.
What happens if the children are not on task and are discussing what they are going to do tonight and not the matter in hand?	The teacher needs to refocus the discussion, drawing children in to what she wants them to work on.
How do I evaluate if a speaking session is successful?	There are many possible criteria, depending on the aims of the activity. Is there a good level of participation? Do students look happy and keen to carry on? Are there plenty of ideas for taking things forward?

Organising groups

Purpose

To help participants focus on the range of factors which can be used for organising children into groups for different learning purposes

Materials

Organising groups handout

Organising groups: key handout

Instructions

Ask participants to divide into discussion groups of four or five to discuss the questions on the **Organising groups** handout.

Take feedback and then distribute **Organising groups: key** handout, which can be used as a reference point for their own deliberations.

Organising groups

What are the advantages and disadvantages of organising groups in the following ways:

	Same	Different
gender		
language		
ability		
friendship		
personality		

Organising groups: key

	Same	Different
gender	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> boys <i>and</i> girls may be better able to discuss gender-related matters which affect them. girls are able to avoid being dominated by boys in the group. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> girls are very good at doing the spade work in discussion and ensuring everyone has a turn boys may not give girls enough space to express their own ideas.
language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> children may be better able to discuss matters that they normally talk about in the mother tongue children may feel more confident about their contributions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> children may be more motivated to develop speaking and listening skills in English children may be more reluctant to contribute in their weaker language.
ability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> everyone can proceed at their own speed children risk being labelled as 'bright' or 'slow'. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the more able children can offer support to less able children
friendship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> children may work better with friends friends may be more interested in talking about extra-curricular matters. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> children may start to build relations with class mates that they normally don't associate with children may feel threatened and withdraw.
personality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a group with very strong personalities is likely to be very boisterous shy children may find it easier to express themselves in a group not dominated by strong personalities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> dominant personalities may overshadow shy children good opportunities for sensitizing children to the need for everyone to have a turn

Ball of string: including everyone

Purpose

To help participants focus on the importance of making sure that everyone is included in group activities. This game works well with both adults and children

Materials

A ball of string

Instructions

Arrange participants in circles of 10 – 20.

Choose a participant to open the discussion and hand them a ball of string or wool.

Ask them to make an opening statement such as: "I'm going to pass the string to ... because...". They should hold on to one end of the string and then pass the ball to the second person, who add their own statement before passing the ball on to the next person and so on. The resultant web becomes evidence of who has and hasn't spoken.

When the activity is finished, invite participants' thoughts on:

- What has taken place?
- Do some people take part more than others?
- How easy is it for a teacher to overlook children in group discussions?
- What can we do to ensure everyone has a turn?