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Douglas
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To what extent does the explicit teaching of oracy, implemented for eight weeks, improve independent discussion among a group of disengaged pupil premium students?

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Key Stage 2

Project rationale

I work with many students who do not benefit from 'talk-rich' environments or the early-life experiences of their more advantaged peers. For these students, "school is their second chance to acquire the rich and varied vocabulary they will need for success both in life and academically." (Gaunt & Stott, 2019). As a trust of schools across Suffolk, we are committed to improving the oracy skills of our students in the hope of closing this gap. Before this project, we had already begun to raise the profile of high quality oracy in schools, through a focus on ensuring talk is purposeful, structured and scaffolded. For this project, I chose to focus on discussion skills as an area of development. Following learning walks and discussions with colleagues, it was evident that, although students' presentational talk within lessons and assemblies had improved, they were not as proficient when engaging in exploratory talk with their learning partners.

When planning my impact project, I thought of David Nunan's journal, 'New Ways in Teaching Listening', in which he states, "learners must interact to achieve understanding" (Nunan, 1995). I believed that focusing on exploratory talk would lead to students developing an internal voice that could then help them when working alone. However, I understood that, in order for students to be able to engage in exploratory talk effectively, 'interthinking' and learning through talk, they needed to be able to listen effectively and respond appropriately, engaging with each other's ideas. Dawes and Mercer state that students "learn to use language as a tool for thinking, collectively and alone. However, children will not learn how to make the best use of language as a tool for communicating and thinking without guidance from their teachers" (Dawes & Mercer, 2015). Mercer also wrote that "A possible explanation for the doubtful quality of much collaborative talk is that the children do not bring to this task a clear conception of what they are expected to do, or what would constitute a good, effective discussion" (Mercer, 2006). I therefore planned for an early focus on classroom discussion guidelines and listening skills.

I chose to focus on a group of five pupil premium students who I had noticed had become particularly disengaged with paired and group discussion. This group of students often preferred to work alone. These students were able in terms of the curriculum but reluctant to share their ideas in group discussions and would rarely contribute to class discussion unless invited to by an adult. Through the teaching of specific and explicit oracy strategies, my aim was to equip the members of this group with the skills necessary to develop their independence, active-listening, reasoning and self-confidence in discussions.

My research question was: To what extent does the explicit teaching of oracy, implemented for one half term, improve independent discussion among a group of disengaged pupil premium students?

Baseline data

Prior to the explicit teaching of discussion skills, I recorded the focus group of students working together. I recorded these children working with their learning partners discussing historical artefacts and analysing vocabulary in English. These activities are pictured with the transcripts and were typical of teaching at The Oaks.

Hennessey and Rojas-Drummond (2015) developed a tool to analyse dialogic interactions in classrooms and codify them for comparison purposes (T-SEDA coding framework). I used this framework to analyse the scripts.



Class teacher: Ok everyone, on the board there are some pictures. With your partner, I'd like you to discuss – which of these do you think were invented by the Ancient Egyptians? There are lots to discuss so I will give you two minutes. Off you go.

Student 1: Toothpaste was! Toothpaste was! Toothpaste. Toothpaste was. Toothpaste! Yeah. Toothpaste.

Student 2: Ok so toothpaste.

Student 1: Yeah toothpaste was.

Student 2: Anything else?

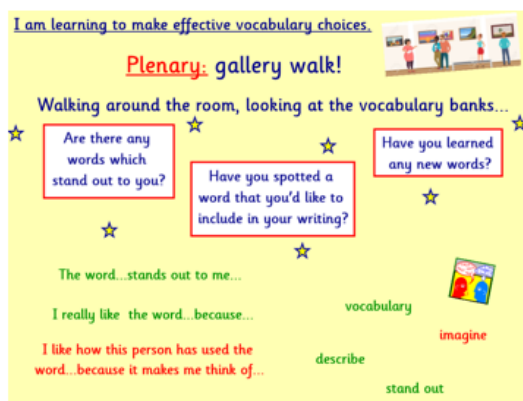
Student 1: You haven't said one. Mine is toothpaste.

Student 2: Oh yeah. Bowling isn't Egyptian because I did it at the weekend.

Student 1: Ok. So mine is toothpaste and yours is bowling.

Transcript A

In this discussion between two of the focus students, Student 1 became fixated upon an idea but did not elaborate upon this with any explanation. Student 2 prompts them to provide more, asking “Anything else?” but to this, Student 1 appears to explain that they have completed their work in saying “Toothpaste”. What struck me about this recording was that neither student challenged the other or asked clarifying questions. Both students stated their opinion without building upon, questioning or challenging each other's ideas.



Class teacher: Now we have written our word banks, it's time for our gallery walk. I'd like you to move around the room looking at the word banks. Here are some questions I'd like you to have a little think about. Read these questions to your partner.

Students read the questions from the board to their partners.

I will be stopping you after a short while to share what you think with the class. I will be asking you to use my sentence stems from the board. Have a walk around the room in your trio now.

Student 3: What does that say? Look at their handwriting.

Student 4: It looks like it says glittering.

Student 5: No I think it's glistening.

Student 4: Yeah that's a better word but it says glittering – doesn't it Student 3?

Student 3: I don't know. It's spelled wrong either way.

Student 4: Yeah. Glittering has two t's.

Student 5: It's glistening. Glistening has one t.

Student 4: Yeah but also an s.

Student 3: I like this word. Exquisite.

Student 4: I don't even know what that means.

Class teacher: Ok everyone. I'm going to choose pick sticks to hear words that you like. Student 4, which word stood out the most to you?

Student 4: The word exquisite stands out to me.

Class teacher: Yes, very good. Exquisite means very fine. Very beautiful and delicate. Breakable almost.

Transcript B

In this discussion, there were a total of 10 peer-to-peer interactions, with 7 of them being irrelevant to the task. Student 4 is identified here as the main disrupter of collaborative talk, continuing to discuss the spelling of the vocabulary even when others appear to want to move the discussion forward.

Both of these baseline transcripts demonstrated a lack of skills to access a simple problem together and suggested to me why the students preferred to work independently upon entering year 4.

During this period, I also observed talk within lessons and noticed that questions asked in lessons were posed solely by the teacher and responses from the students were directed to the teacher more than the group as a whole, therefore relying on the teacher to lead and manage discussions. I aimed to move away from this model towards a 'dialogic' one, in which 'both teachers and students make substantial and significant contributions and through which children's thinking on a given idea or theme is helped to move forward.' (Mercer, 2003).

Intervention

A range of strategies were utilised over the course of the project, each with a focus on the explicit teaching of oracy skills to enable students to manage their own discussions. All of the students in the class took part in group talk lessons. My hope was that I would record the focus group again in week six and would observe a much more collaborative and productive approach to group learning. I hoped to see a shift away from off-topic conversations and idea stating towards a dialogue that included students inviting each other to build upon their ideas, provide explanations and engage with each other's ideas, agreeing and disagreeing with one another. Data were collected in December 2019 and in March 2020. The intervention took place between January and February across a wide variety of lessons.

All classes had previously created a set of discussion guidelines. I frequently shared and referred back to these when teaching during the project to remind students of expectations. I intended to help the students make the link between the discussion guidelines we had created and the interactions they had in all lessons.

Discussion role cards were developed to be specific to The Oaks. These were developed and distributed across the school, differentiated accordingly. I introduced the roles of Builder, Challenger, Summariser, Questioner, Motivator and Balancer. These were built into lessons throughout the project to familiarise and build students' skills and confidence in using talk with peers and in whole-class discussion. When using these at first, some coaching was given based on these and the sentence stems that accompany each role. The group discussion would then follow immediately after.

I used "talk detectives" to employ a small group of students to listen to interactions, noting positives and targets for the class. I found that this encouraged students to adopt positive behaviours in order to receive praise. It also led to students having a firmer understanding of what makes a good discussion and what this looks like in practice.

Teacher modelling was key throughout the project. My LSA and I would model effective talk, which the students would then emulate. Students would be given specific roles in their pairs to aid them in their focus for the talk. For example, one student would describe their process of answering a maths problem and the other would ask probing questions such as "Why would you...?" and "What made you think...?"


Impact

After the six weeks of intervention, I recorded the focus group of children engaging in talk-based activities in lessons. Once again, I used the T-SEDA coding framework to analyse these interactions.

☆ **Science: I am learning to describe the orbits of the Earth and its moon.** ☆

Starter: with your learning partner, sort these statements into true or false.

Using secondary sources to create a model and use it to explain.



Our solar system is called the galaxy. The smallest planet is Mars. The sun is at the centre of our solar system. The sun is a planet.

The biggest planet is Jupiter. The Moon is a planet. There are eight planets in our solar system.

Class teacher: As a starter today, I want to see what you can remember. With your learning partner, sort these statements into true or false.

Student 1: (Reading) Our solar system is called the galaxy. Hmm I'm not sure...

Student 2: Why aren't you sure?

Student 1: It is a galaxy but I don't think it is called the galaxy.

Student 2: I agree. I think it might be called the Milky Way.

Student 1: Yes. I think you are right. So is it true or false?

Student 2: I think the statement is false. Because it isn't called the galaxy.

Student 1: What about the next one? The smallest planet is Mars?

Student 2: I think that's false because look at the pictures on the wall. It's not the smallest.

Student 1: Which one is the smallest? Is it Mercury?

Student 2: Yes. It's also the closest to the Sun.

Student 1: So it's false again. (Reading) The biggest planet is Jupiter. That's true. It's a gas giant and you can also see on the picture it's the biggest. So...true?

Student 2: Yes, I agree. The moon isn't a planet so that's false. What about the next one? There are eight planets in the solar system.

Student 1: (Counting) My very easy method just speeds up naming planets. Nine. There are nine, it's false.

Student 2: But planets is Pluto.

Student 1: Yeah?

Student 2: And Pluto is a dwarf planet. So technically not a planet. So it is eight. Do you see why?

Student 1: Yeah. I forgot.

Transcript 1

In this discussion between Student 1 and Student 2, there are no off-topic interactions. The students regularly question each other and interact with each other's ideas, rather than accepting them as fact. Working as a partnership, they took their time in engaging with each statement, explaining their reasoning and questioning one another.

I am learning to recognise Great British values and traditions. GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP

In Britain, we have lots of special traditions.

- Wearing a poppy on Remembrance Day.
- Having a royal family.
- Guy Fawkes night (Bonfire night).
- Having a roast dinner on a Sunday.
- Honours from the Queen.
- The Queen opening Parliament.

With your partner, why do you think these traditions are important?

...is important to me because... tradition celebrate

We...because...so it's important because... annual history

Class teacher: In Britain, we have lots of special traditions, like wearing a poppy on Remembrance Day, having a royal family and the others here on the board. I would like you to discuss with your partner why these traditions are important. See if you can use my sentence stems to help guide you.

Student 5: Having a roast dinner on a Sunday is important to me because it's time I spend with my family. My nanny and grandad come over too.

Student 4: I also think it's important. We do the same. It is a tradition.

Student 5: Having a royal family is also important to me because the Queen makes laws and keeps us safe.

Student 3: I don't think she does. I think the royal family are important but the government make our laws. What do you think?

Student 4: I see why you think she makes laws because she meets with the Prime Minister but actually she doesn't. I think the royal family are important because of the tourism they bring to Great Britain.

Student 5: Can you explain more about tourism?

Student 3: I think she means they bring a lot of money. People come to see them and spend money at the Tower of London and castles learning about history.

Student 5: True, yeah. I've been to the London Dungeon and learned about Kings and Queens and that was expensive. If lots of people do it, it probably makes loads of money.

Student 4: What do we think about wearing a poppy?

Student 3: It's really important. We do it every year.

Student 5: Why though?

Student 3: We wear poppies because they are a symbol of a World War. So it's important because we remember the people that fought and died.

Student 4: Yeah. We always have a big assembly about it and wear poppies. They grew in the battle fields.

Transcript 2

In this transcript, Students share their ideas again and explain their reasoning to each other. I found it interesting that Student 4, who was previously the main disruptor of the group, now redirects the conversation back to the task, asking, "What do we think about wearing a poppy?" In this interaction, I feel as though the students gain a deeper understanding of the British traditions, particularly Student 5, who appears not to understand the meaning of tourism or why poppies are worn on Remembrance Day. His learning partners explain this to him clearly.

In these transcripts, the number of off-topic interactions fell from nine to zero. Children clearly invite others to share or explain their reasoning, and children are on task, regularly referring back and guiding the dialogue.

T-SEDA Dialogue categories	Baseline task	Post intervention task
IEL – Invite elaboration, building on or clarifying ideas	1	5
EL – Elaborate ideas	0	5
Q – Querying, questioning, disagreeing with or challenging an idea	0	4
IRE – Invite reasoning	0	2
R – Make reasoning explicit	0	2
CA – Co-ordination of ideas and agreement	0	3
RD – Reflect on dialogue or activity	0	0
C – Connect	1	1
G – Guide direction of dialogue or activity	2	3
E – Express or invite ideas	4	5
OT – Off-topic	9	0
Total interactions	17	30

Research ethics

As my research project focussed on teaching my own students in a regular classroom setting and I wanted to obtain recordings of their everyday interactions, I explained to them that I would be undertaking a project that required recordings of their conversations. I explained that nobody else would hear these recordings and that they would be typed as anonymised transcripts. I discussed the matter and presented my project outline to my head teacher who then discussed it with school governors and SLT who all provided verbal consent. In order to maintain the privacy of the target group of students, I collected recordings of the whole class and the children did not receive any additional intervention or testing.

Evaluation

During this project, when completing learning walks and speaking with colleagues, we started to see that students were contributing to discussions more than before and were adopting the discussion roles into their everyday speech. Students regularly built upon each other's ideas and challenged one another. Teachers awarded celebration certificates to students for being articulate. The culture of the school felt as though it had taken a step towards embracing oracy. We are still very much on our oracy journey at The Oaks and are very proud of our achievements so far. Looking at the T-SEDA data, however, it is clear that a next step for us will be to encourage children to reflect on their discussions more. The transcripts suggest an improvement in students' collaborative talk, though if I were to carry out a similar project in the future, I would be keen to also collect assessment data, to see whether this had improved their academic results.

References

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