

**UCL Institute of Education, University of London**

**Teachers' narratives of classroom talk: what are  
the challenges?**

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**This thesis is submitted for the degree of PhD**

# Teachers' narratives of classroom talk: what are the challenges?

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## **Abstract**

This study seeks to explore English teachers' understandings of the challenges of classroom talk. A key assumption is that while many teachers and researchers view talk for learning as valuable, there is still a problem when it comes to actually using talk and small group learning widely. There are many different challenges that emerge when teachers try to promote this type of learning. Rather than study classroom discourse therefore, I wanted to focus on teachers' understandings of how talk works in the classroom. This was the problem I wanted to research in more depth.

I start the study with my own talk autobiography. I reflect on my own life in education and my life as a teacher in urban schools and highlight the role of talk, language and learning in my intellectual development. Having done this I identify the questions I wanted to ask teachers. I wanted to hear their stories of talk as pupils and as teachers. I chose to talk to six teachers at different stages of their careers in different phases of education. Later, I return to the teachers and ask them to video a lesson and identify what I am calling 'a critical moment for talk'. We then evaluate such moments collaboratively.

The study is sociocultural in approach. Further, the life narrative case studies draw on traditions of practitioner and feminist research with the aim of making teachers' expertise more visible in wider debates about classroom talk. The analysis of the case studies suggests that a teacher's own experiences in education and their values influence pedagogy and specifically their approach to talk. They reveal the challenges of dealing with conflicting power relationships within group work and during whole class dialogue and consider some solutions. The era and context are shown as particularly powerful factors in influencing pedagogy.

Today what I refer to as the 'talk for learning model' is under attack and the focus has returned to the promotion of standard English. The aim of the study is make teachers' intuitions and insights available about the place of talk and what they have found challenging about organising talk for learning.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

'But it was not until I started, as a practising teacher, to attend CPD sessions, led by the National Oracy Project, that I really began to learn how to plan and had the opportunity to practice or rehearse for lessons based on pupil-led talk..... I produced materials for a lesson based on a Jigsaw to develop reader response to a chapter of *Gowie Corby Plays Chicken* that was noted as innovative in an inspection report at the time. The report did not detail how the HMI had had to encourage one pupil to get up off the floor to join the group discussion and how difficult it was to attempt such exercises in a mixed ability all boys' group in this particular school; even with two teachers and one inspector involved in the lesson.'

(Chapter 2)

### 1.1 Where it all began and where my interest in this topic came from?

The story of this project began with the challenges I confronted in teaching English and Media Studies and attempting to use talk and small group learning in London secondary schools in the 1980's, 1990's and early 2000's. I felt that I enjoyed many successes and that talk enriched the experience of learning for both the pupils and the teacher as we encountered texts new and old: but I also encountered many difficulties as the talk autobiography and poem (Chapter 2) suggests. Although in the earlier decades of my teaching, in the 80's and early 90's, pupil led talk was endorsed by many English departments and the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA), there was still much to learn about how to plan for effective talk. There was also some scepticism about my ambitious aims from some staff around me, both staff teaching English and other subjects.

The scepticism was perhaps particularly the case in the London secondary schools in which I worked, in Tower Hamlets, Lewisham, Islington, Lambeth and Croydon, because many children I taught came from socially disadvantaged backgrounds and some of them brought social problems and poor listening, reading and writing skills with them into the classroom.

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The behavioural challenges made many teachers try to revert to the transmission mode as the best way to teach in this context (Coultas, 2007b). But many of these children had great strengths in spoken language that needed to be used to empower them as language users in the other modes of language, reading and writing. I therefore argued (Coultas, 2007b) that a key part of the English teacher's role was to unlock this untapped potential through planning for talk. I wrote two pamphlets advocating talk for learning as a Head of English (Coultas, 2001) in two different secondary schools.

My interest and commitment to teaching using talk-based lessons as a teacher in schools and in higher education was therefore strong and I felt that I needed, as a teacher educator, to study the topic in more depth and find out more about what other English teachers thought about how talk worked in the classroom and the challenges of talk. As I read and re-read the literature and wrote down more about my own ideas on this subject (Coultas, 2006b, 2007b, 2009b), I found that many researchers were also saying, perhaps in a more coded way, that setting up classroom based talk was difficult to do well in many situations. For example, ensuring that pupils worked effectively in groups and engaged in purposeful and reasoned discussion (Mercer, 2000) was not easy and that group work in schools was not always productive.

This is a study of teachers' insights and understandings of how talk works in the classroom and the challenges it presents. The overall approach I have adopted in exploring teacher knowledge is based on practitioner research. I have chosen to work with six teachers who taught alongside me in schools or universities or who were tutored by me as beginning teachers. I wanted to probe their understandings and make their knowledge more public. I applied Elliot's (1994) suggestion that helping teachers become more aware of what they are doing rather than telling them what they should be doing is a particularly useful way of carrying out research on teacher knowledge of talk, a complex area of pedagogy that has proved very resistant to change. This has influenced the talk autobiography, the life narrative design of the case studies and the decision to allow the teachers to choose their own critical moment for talk. But I also argue that teachers' insider knowledge of classroom interactions (Saunders, 2012) adds a new dimension to this topic.

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## 1.2 Clarifying key terms and definitions: what kind of talk?

I use the word 'talk' throughout this study so what type of talk am I referring to? To answer this question I drew on the clearest description I could find. It came from Barnes (1971) writing up a speech made to a National Association for the Teaching of English (NATE) Language across the Curriculum conference.

'The English teacher needs to set up learning situations which will help the pupils to learn as productively as possible ....to plan so that classroom activities can move between small group exploration, planned reportage and discussion in full class, with elements of individual work entering preparation and final reporting stages.'

(p34)

Barnes had started to implement these ideas in the classroom in the 1950's and 1960's and also carried out research as a teacher educator in this area. This is a very clear but fluid definition of the role that talk should play in the classroom. It shows an understanding of the tentative and hesitant processes involved in small group work and the relationship between the small group and other modes of organising learning in the classroom. Individual work such as reading a picture or a text or thinking or writing alone can prepare group work; group work can prepare reading and writing, and whole class discussion can be promoted by group discussion or drama to explore and prepare ideas.

A Doncaster Local Education Authority (LEA) booklet, (undated) but written a while ago, also introduces the English teacher to the idea that spoken English or talk has 'a uniquely significant part to play', in English lessons. This pamphlet helps to clarify the type of talk the English teacher needs to promote, by discussing how spoken English needs to have a dual and broader focus and be integrated with the other stands of English:

'We are conscious of the dual role of talk in the learning process, especially in English lessons: at the same time as they are learning to talk more effectively pupils should be talking to learn more effectively. Thus we see talk as supporting and

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being supported by other English activities. The implication is that for the most part it is best for talk to be integrated with other aspects of English, namely reading and writing'. (p1)

As Grainger (2000) points out, this dual role of talk has never been fully reflected in the English National Curriculum where the emphasis has often been placed on a basic skills view of the spoken word, where spoken English needs to be improved rather than the notion of promoting oracy as a tool for thinking, speaking and learning.

In order to promote this wider notion of 'learning talk' or 'oracy', a term first introduced by Wilkinson (1965), the teacher has to be able to organise the learning so that pupils have the opportunity to explore thoughts and ideas in smaller units to clarify, extend, deepen thinking or express doubts and preferences. In 2008, Barnes returns to this discussion of the definition of talk and reinforces his earlier points about the need for the teacher to understand the nature of classroom talk more fully. He suggests (2008) that the teacher needs to be aware of the difference between exploratory and presentational talk, suggesting that teachers often move towards presentational talk too quickly before they have built up the pupils' understanding:

'The communication system that a teacher sets up in a lesson shapes the roles the pupils can play' and that the management of both the content of the lesson and the social relations in the classroom 'is central to the skill of teaching' (p2). .. 'Group discussion should never be used as a laissez faire option. Successful group work requires preparation, guidance and supervision, and needs to be embedded in an extended sequence of work that includes other patterns of communication'. (p7)

### 1.3 My principal research question

My aim is to capture and document some teachers' voices in the discussion about talk and small group learning. My main question is: what do teachers find challenging about classroom talk? I want to find out if there are any common patterns of experience or

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common challenges to enrich teacher awareness of how talk works in the classroom and aid teachers in promoting classroom dialogue and learning talk. My subsidiary questions are to do with the role talk played in the teacher's life in education? What role does it play now as teachers? What problems do teachers have in setting up and managing classroom talk and how could they be helped to make classroom talk more effective? (Chapter 5).

I have chosen to focus on talk separately from the other stands of English but I am fully aware of the interrelationship between these modes and the way in which reading and writing float on a sea of talk (Britton, 1970, Martin et al, 1976). I have written elsewhere about how the different modes of language interrelate and how reading literary, media and non-fiction texts and writing can be enhanced through classroom talk and how writing and reading can act as a stimulus for talk (2006b, 2007b). The centrality of reading and discussing a wide range of literature to promoting purposeful talk was a recurring theme of the early writers who promoted learning talk, as I discuss in chapter 2.

I have therefore chosen to concentrate on two specific areas: on reading about the evolution of the talk debate among influential writers on this topic and English teachers; and secondly, reflecting on my own experiences and talking with and listening to teachers as I think they are well placed to give some rich descriptions and life narrative stories of what they see happening with talk in their own lives in education and in the classroom.

### **1.4 Chapter 2: Talk autobiography**

In my talk autobiography, I am looking back and retelling my story from the particular viewpoint of my older self and the writing suggests that my route as a teacher was very much a process of uneven and combined development with talk. I confronted many obstacles, but was able to seek some support, from the LEA and other teachers, in overcoming some of my challenges to develop my subject knowledge in this area. But I was also working in a context that allowed me to seek support for this child centred approach to pedagogy. I have therefore approached my autobiography by focusing on talk in my learning and intellectual development.

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Placing the talk autobiography at the beginning of my study allowed me to tell a more coherent story of my research as this was the stimulus for the rest of the chosen research approaches. By making my experiences the launching pad for this investigation, to clearly identify it as practitioner research, where the aim is to evaluate and develop good practice both for myself and for others, I felt more comfortable with the investigation itself. I soon began to start my presentations with a story of a particular moment in my life or a story of a particular teacher's class in the study and I found that my research immediately had greater resonance.

### **1.5 Chapter 3: Revisiting debates on oracy: classroom talk-moving towards a democratic pedagogy?**

In this literature review I have traced some of the research and discussions among writers and academics, about talk since the Second World War. This in no sense represents all the views and I have had to select a range of views that I believe have influenced the work of English teachers in the classroom; to give the reader some sense of the breadth of the discussion. I have gained a greater sense of how different disciplines have contributed to this discussion and how ideas have built on one another. And, through reflecting on my own experiences and looking at documentary evidence, how English teachers have drawn on these different theories of language and learning; ideas about literature; wider debates about education and society and their classroom experiences to develop their own ideas about pedagogy. This chapter also unpicks some of the new debates on talk and dialogue and asserts that the definition of talk and its dual role in the English classroom is very important, particularly as this model of 'learning talk' has come under fire in the new English curriculum (DfE, 2013).



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### **1.6 Chapter 4: Classroom talk: are we listening to teachers' voices?**

Before I embarked on my case studies, I wanted to closely interrogate existing research on talk to see how far it directly addressed the challenges of talk from the teachers' point of view, the central topic of my study. My aim with the study was to focus the discussion in a new area and reflect on some of the constraints and difficulties teachers confront to try and add more realism, and more awareness of context, into the discussion as I believed that teachers' views of talk were quite distinctive and not always fully considered by researchers. A revised version of this chapter was published as an academic article (Coulton, 2012).

### **1.7 Chapter 5: On method: life narrative case studies of classroom talk**

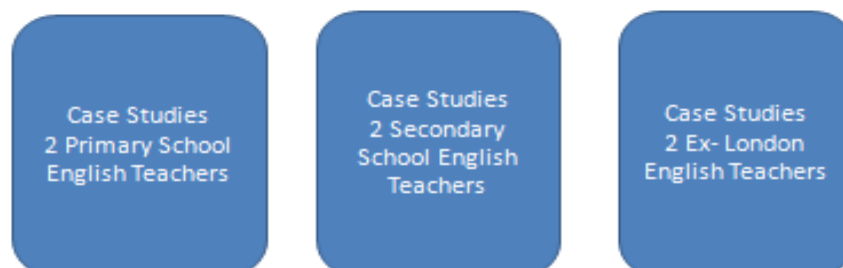
This study involves a close focus on teachers' spoken narratives and reflections about what they find challenging about talk in the classroom. My main method is to interview teachers and ask them to record an episode in their teaching. My aim was to create case studies that make teachers' voices count for something in the debates surrounding talk in classrooms.

The Research Design

Figure 1: Six Case Studies

The figure below shows how the project comprises six case studies

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From the outset I wanted to involve English teachers working in different phases of education and at different stages of their careers. I started by writing my talk autobiography, reflecting on the role talk had played in my life in education. I then carried out interviews with the six other English teachers; two teachers from primary schools; two teachers from secondary schools and two ex-London teachers who are at advanced stages of their careers. By such means, I hoped to capture not only stories from contemporary classrooms but also stories from the past to bring out the nature of the perceived challenges of talk.

My main interest is to try and shed some more light on the gap between the official endorsement of talk in policy over several decades and the persistence of the didactic mode of teaching in classrooms and the problems this poses even for those teachers committed to talk for learning.

I was aware that the interviews would enable teachers to express their views on the value and challenges of talk but that the stories would be more rounded if there was an opportunity for teachers to make a detailed reflection on their practice in this area. So I

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asked them to identify a critical moment for talk in a lesson and critically evaluate that moment with me. This could enrich what they said in the interview about their challenges.

### **1.8 Chapter 6: The case studies**

The data collected in this study has created six case studies of teachers' views of what they find challenging about classroom talk. In Chapter 6a I tell the teachers' stories of talk through summarising the interviews. In Chapter 6b I tell the stories of the teachers' evaluations of their critical moments. The aim was to try and understand how teachers come to make their choices in the classroom about talk. Each critical moment made some clear links between what the teachers said and what they actually did with talk and also highlighted very specific challenges that arise out of their unique situations. For both the interview and the critical moment I kept asking the question: what have I learnt that adds to research on the challenges of talk in classrooms? This then informed the summary at the end of each section.

### **1.9 Chapter 6: What the teachers said about the nature of the signals coming from the outside that influenced their challenges with classroom talk**

In this chapter I identify what the case studies revealed about teachers' understanding of the wider nature of the signals coming from outside the classroom, that influence their challenges with talk. The teachers' perceptions of the challenges of talk are therefore grouped into the following areas: the way in which the era and context strongly influenced the teachers' approach to classroom talk; the challenges of dialogue and traditional expectations of classroom discourse; the challenges of dealing with the power relationships that become more transparent with talk. Finally, I discuss the challenges of talk that were revealed in the teachers' own educational life experiences.

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### **1.10 Chapter 7: The implications of this study and what the teachers suggested might help them in promoting talk more effectively in classrooms**

Despite the focus on and discussion of the challenges of classroom talk, paradoxically, we can learn something from this study of where teachers feel more confident about promoting talk in the classroom. In this final chapter, I discuss the implications of the research and where the teachers felt confident in using talk and what they thought might enhance their ability to use talk more effectively. I also consider the limitations and strengths of the enquiry and discuss the usefulness and topicality of the research carried out.

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## **Chapter 2: Talk autobiography from a socialist feminist perspective. December, 2007**

### **2.1 Introduction**

'how our understandings and pedagogies take account of subjectivities and critical reflections on our understandings' (David, 2003)

This talk autobiography was written at the beginning of my study. I wanted to reflect on my own life in education and my life as a teacher before identifying the questions I wanted to ask other teachers about the challenges of talk. This talk autobiography captures my memories of education as a pupil and a teacher at a certain period of time and would be different if it has been written at a different time. Even as I re-read it, there are features of my life in education that are missing that I would now add in. This is why, any piece of autobiography is inevitably a subjective selection of past experiences as we look back critically on our lives as David (2003) suggests above. So my talk autobiography makes it clear, that I am looking back and retelling my story from a particular viewpoint of my older self: so it only represents a snapshot of my thinking at the time.

While writing my talk autobiography, I read an article by Miller (1995) where she outlines her ideas on the autobiography of the question as a way of beginning a long essay or research study:

'We suggest to students that they start by telling the story of their interest in the question..... We justify this to our students, who are teachers.....as a way of historicising the questions they are addressing, and of setting their lives and educational history within contexts more capacious than their own' (p 23).

She considers the criticisms of this approach to research, for example as 'an incitement to self-indulgent introspection' (p23) and explores the different arguments that have been made for it: saying that she wishes to go beyond the argument that it 'just seems to work'

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(p23). She seems to be doing what many teachers do: as Barnes (2000) suggests looking back on a new practice and theorising it after the choices have been made:

‘Teaching encourages teachers to think in an essentially pragmatic way: the action comes long before its justification.’ (p 58).

Barnes (2000), points out that there are many influences on the teacher's choices that ‘play a part in the actions they choose to take, but the influence is often less than fully conscious-shaped by those preconceptions that Donald Schon calls “theory in action”’(p58).

Nevertheless some of Miller's (Ibid) justifications of this change in academic writing techniques and genres are very interesting. She suggests for example ‘that feminist educators and writers have been searching their teaching and their writing for less positivistic and reductive accounts of what goes on in education’(p 23). She argues (1995) that this process is not ‘a short cut to a tidy truth’ but rather a way of confronting the ‘difficulty of embarking on any kind of serious investigation of education’ (p 26).

My talk autobiography was also written as a way of introducing the topic of my research and why I decided to choose the particular area of the challenges of promoting talk in classrooms.

But it also stands as a piece of research for the following reasons: Firstly, it is a useful exercise in itself. I asked pupils to write language autobiographies in an earlier period of teaching when they were preparing English coursework for GCSE and I have used it successfully in the university to allow undergraduates and post graduates to reflect on the role that talk plays in learning, using the stimulus sheet in Appendix 1. But primarily, the autobiographical approach allowed me to reflect on the role that talk has played in my own social, emotional and intellectual development and how it came to assume such an important place in the teaching approaches I adopted in the classroom. I have selected some critical moments, or key events, that can allow for reflection.

Secondly; it has acted as a stimulus in the research process and helped me to identify the questions that I wanted to ask about the role of talk in the past and present lives of teachers

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and both to focus on and situate the challenges that talk presents (see chapter 6). The autobiography therefore serves to emphasise that the interviews and the evaluations in this study are also a form of practitioner research, something I discuss in more detail in chapter 5: trying to deepen insight and understanding of the teacher's role in promoting small group learning and talk in the classroom.

Thirdly; this study is informed by the view that 'personal' experience, the subjective and affective domain, influences our philosophical outlook, our own attitudes to learning and the forms of pedagogy we promote. Vygotsky, (1986) argued that thought is prompted by motivation by our desires, needs, interests and emotions. He is suggesting that personal motivation, desires, needs, interests, emotions are intrinsic to learning and I have suggested that it is often through exploratory talk in small groups in the classroom, or other kinds of pupil-led talk, that we are most likely to articulate these personal, affective aspects of learning and bring them into a social forum Coultas (2007b). Part of this study will reveal some of the problems with more didactic modes of pedagogy that can suppress these aspects of learning and the negative effect that simply using didactic modes may have on self-esteem and intellectual development. It also explores how alternative spaces often emerge outside mainstream forums that create new spaces for informal literacy practices, discussion and thought.

### **2:2 Talk autobiography**

An embarrassing incident in my early childhood placed 'talk' in the spotlight for me. A recitation of a poem, at the age of 6, to a large audience in a church hall was interrupted when I realised that my colleague had spoken her lines incorrectly. 'You have got that completely wrong', I informed my young colleague loudly, to the surprise and amusement of the audience and the chagrin of my co-performer. I do not know whether I was ever forgiven but this embarrassing incident will not disappear from my memory.

The Methodist church provided many opportunities for the use of my voice. At an even younger age, of 3 or 4 years, I had been allowed to stand on the seats of the City Temple in London to join in the singing of the communal hymns. Later, at 8, I sang a psalm at a

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Methodist church eisteddfod and won a prize. The public bible readings, the hymns and the choric chanting of the Lord's Prayer were early 'out of school' literacy experiences that influenced my view of the spoken word. Not only did I listen to long sermons from male preachers but some from women too. Such public literacy events in early childhood can be seen to have important influences on attitudes to literacy and the spoken word (Brice Heath, 1983).

Primary school offered some further opportunities for reading aloud, particularly to the teacher, for asking questions and engaging in the occasional discussion during practical activities. PE lessons and netball games stand as prominent examples of spaces where talk was allowed.

But the first three years of secondary school, a Grammar School, were disappointing and my academic performance was in slow decline. The spoken word was very much confined to extracurricular activities. In the fourth year, I once again auditioned for the school play and was given a small part. There were not many parts for girls and there always appeared to be others, more composed and practised than I, who were chosen for the bigger parts. In the same year, I remember a career's interviewer squashing my hopes of being a journalist when he told me that only girls of 'very high' ability could aspire to that.

Most of my memories of these early years in secondary school were of teachers in gowns dictating notes from their university files. We had to write extremely fast to keep up. We listened to Chaucer being read aloud on tape and then made notes as the teacher translated the text for us. We had one English teacher who allowed us to have a debate but this was a rare luxury and most of the time we read excerpts from texts, completed comprehension exercises and précis and were given titles for 'one-shot' creative or essay writing.

It was only in the sixth form that 'talk' again began to flow in the classroom. A level English lessons became much more open-ended, if rather rambling, as we were invited to discuss and comment on the modern set texts such as *Brave New World* and *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. I enjoyed these discussions and our opinions, mainly girls in the group with a male teacher, seemed valued. In A level French lessons one boy was highly



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adept at getting the teacher to talk 'off-task' about his holidays in France rather than try and teach us French and we quickly started to follow his lead in asking further questions to keep our teacher eulogising about French life and culture. History was another subject where we were allowed to talk a little. The teacher, another man, was very passionate about his subject and would reply to questions with a long detailed, monologue in response. Here were models of language use and extended talk from adults but we were not given explicit opportunities to develop our discussion skills.

Earlier in my school career a mock general election had been staged; something I was later to arrange in several schools as a teacher. The sixth form society also allowed some pupils a forum for the development of discussion and debate and the topics were of interest to me. But, apart from the occasional comment, I remained too shy to put myself forward for a wider role in either of these projects.

It was the luck of the draw, literally my name being pulled out of a hat, which enabled me to become a student delegate to the National Union of Students (NUS) conference at 18 years old and really introduced me to a world full of talk and debate. Jack Straw, the NUS President at that time, kept on pulling an imaginary pipe out of his mouth, and pretending to be Harold Wilson to the amusement of the delegates. This was a wonderful opportunity to see my elder peers in debate. I greatly enjoyed listening to the challenges from the floor, the clever and critical points of order, the repartee and the bold interrogation of the platform. This was a meaningful kind of talk, the kind I had briefly witnessed in the sixth form society, but now on a much larger stage.

I was determined that I should participate more fully in this NUS world. My first opportunity to debate at university came with an invite, to put the case for or against joining the European Economic Community (EEC). It was far from normal for a female student to lead a debate, certainly not someone from my social class, lower middle class, or at my age of 19. But I had to have a go. I was so frightened of standing up and speaking on my own that I went to the bar and drank 3 brandies immediately one after the other! Dutch courage was needed to attempt this new challenge and although I was able to state my case against

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joining, my lack of geographical knowledge must have caused some amusement. These problems did not matter however. The important step had been taken. For the first time ever, I had been able to introduce a discussion with my own thoughts and ideas.

I soon became heavily involved in the extracurricular world of the university and participated in informal, 'red circle' debates and discussions and listened to many formal speeches and literacy events. These discussions were very dominated by men and it was only when I discovered the women's consciousness raising groups of the new feminist movement that I found that many other women felt rather excluded by the highly adversarial style of traditional socialist discourse. In these groups women were able to discuss their life experiences and ways in which institutions and cultural practices discriminated against them and try to invent new forms of expression and protest (and later new methods of research) to challenge their oppression.

There was a concern to involve women more in student activities at this time and I soon found myself participating in campaigns: including street-based performance art; giving talks and making speeches and beginning to write articles and pamphlets. Eventually I stood for a place on the NUS executive and had to address 2,000 students. I felt very passionately about the issues under discussion, particularly the Irish question and other international issues and this, combined with a growing understanding of the different speech styles and repertoires and a little help from my peers, made it possible for me to be elected. These gave me the opportunity to speak and write to and for a range of audiences and eventually, work for a while as a freelance journalist.

My PGCE course had introduced me to the theories of the sociocultural researchers and sociolinguists and the ideas and themes of *Language, the Learner and the School* (Barnes et al, 1969) were a central reference point of the course. But it was not until I started, as a practising teacher to attend CPD sessions, led by the National Oracy Project, that I really began to learn how to plan and had the opportunity to practice or rehearse for lessons based on pupil-led talk. Rex Gibson led an unforgettable training session promoting the choric reading of Shakespeare and at another session led by a NOP trainer, I was introduced to the

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concepts of the jigsaw arrangement (Coultras, 2007b: 67-69) for effective group work and began to try it out in my teaching. I eagerly applied the principles of dramatic and choric reading to a lesson on Mark Anthony's speech when teaching *Julius Caesar* in a year 7 class. I produced materials for a lesson based on a jigsaw to develop reader response to a chapter of *Gowie Corby Plays Chicken* that was noted as innovative in an inspection report at the time. The report did not detail how the Inspector, an HMI, had had to encourage one pupil to get up off the floor to join the group discussion and how difficult it was to attempt such exercises in a mixed ability all boys' group in this particular school: even with two teachers and one inspector involved in the lesson.

When I eventually became a Head of English, I was determined to make oracy and speaking and listening a central theme of my department's work as we re-wrote our curriculum in the early 1990's to incorporate the aims of the new National Curriculum. Looking back, I was committed to this approach for a number of reasons some philosophical and some practical.

Philosophically, I felt that small group learning allowed for a child-centred approach to teaching as the pupils had more input into lessons where they were allowed to talk. This linked back to my own experience of school where I had felt that my voice had often been ignored or dismissed and my intellectual development impeded by the formality and abstractions (and sexist assumptions) of the school and the classroom. It also reflected a belief that all children were 'bright' and wanted to learn and this stance was a conscious rejection of elitist ideas about the inferiority of certain groups of children based on class, gender or race. I had re-joined the teaching profession in the mid-eighties and found a network of London teachers, working in urban comprehensives, who believed that working class, female and ethnic minority students and pupils with English as an Additional Language (EAL), should have their own voices and cultural practices recognised in the classroom. There was a strong collective ethos of teachers working together to transform teaching and develop new ideas in the classroom.

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Practically, I had begun to try out a variety of approaches and even in the most difficult classes, the response of the pupils was positive when the task was well structured, really required collaboration and had a real purpose. Such an approach seemed to improve relationships in the classroom and also allowed for all children to gain more support for reading and writing.

I had always been keen to try out new ideas and evaluate them with other colleagues and as an English teacher I had often worked with other staff, particularly English as Additional Language (EAL) specialists. When I began re-writing the curriculum I made sure that this was a co-operative endeavour, involving teachers with (EAL) specialism and English teachers, (Coultas, 2006b). We were able to produce some extended oral assignments that focused on oral outcomes that gave a highly distinctive flavour to both the GCSE course and the KS3 schemes of work and drew on the pupils' interests, motivation and imagination. We developed a practice of producing schemes of work that were quite broad in scope and gave teachers options about how to teach. We also produced banks of materials that included packs for each oral assignment to encourage staff to take the plunge and plan a series of lessons with *only* oral outcomes (Coultas, 2006b). We linked this to the assessment of En 1 (Speaking and Listening) in the new GCSE course at Key Stage 4 (KS4) and the response to reading and preparation for writing, but also adopted a similar approach for Key Stage 3 (KS3).

As a teacher; Head of English, and later Senior Teacher, I was able to promote many school wide initiatives that encouraged pupils from a range of backgrounds to use talk for learning and create opportunities for developing oral language skills. Informal talk was valued and pupils were encouraged to express feelings and preferences in responding to stories and texts; class discussion and debate, pair and group work, simulations, drama, panels and presentations were promoted across the school. Pupils were encouraged to present ideas and stories to other classes and children in primary schools. They were supported in giving assemblies often on a theme of particular interest to them, given prizes for progress and success in oral language and pupils were entered for debating competitions. Drama workshops and storytelling were introduced to a range of classes and year groups. Tape and

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video recordings allowed pupils to reflect on the quality of their work, including taping them talking about their favourite books and authors. I also created aide memoires (Coultas, 2007b:124) to encourage individual recording and reflections on oral work. In some instances it was possible to get pupils to complete an Oral Diary (Coultas, 2007b:125) to stimulate a wider discussion on the role that talk played in learning across the curriculum.

I also produced a pamphlet in two schools promoting speaking and listening and oracy to encourage staff to develop their use of 'talk for learning'. When I was given responsibility for Continuing Professional Development (CPD), I was able to introduce staff training on *Oracy across the Curriculum* (Coultas, 2001).

When the National Literacy project was piloted in the Local Education Authority (LEA) my department was able to work with other colleagues in creating a new year 7 course that continued to make oracy a central feature of the learning process. However, when the KS3 strategy DfES (2001) emerged; speaking and listening had been relegated to the 'third' strand. As a senior teacher and Head of English, I encouraged the department to continue to place speaking and listening as first among equals and helped them resist pressure to re-write schemes of work along strategy lines. As English results remained higher than the other core subjects, in an all boys' school, my head teacher did not insist that the department should make major changes to the English curriculum.

As a university teacher I have been able to adapt some of the ideas used in the classroom to a new setting. Speaking and listening or oracy continues to play an important role in planning sessions for undergraduates and postgraduates. The NOP model for small group learning (Cook et al, 1989, see appendix two) and ideas about experiential learning have influenced my approach to planning for adult learners in Teacher Education. Where relevant, I have made my model of planning for the lecture explicit to the students, a technique sometimes called a training loop (Coultas, 2007b), so that they can deconstruct it and use it in their own situation if they wish to.

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Using students' prior knowledge and personal experience and making links between my experience and theirs, also strongly influences the aims of my sessions. Anecdotes are allowed and sometimes encouraged when they serve to illustrate a particular point. There are many opportunities for pair work; jigsaw reading, small group discussion, whole group debate and discussion, storytelling, simulations, presentations and drama, peer support for writing and personal reflection on how we learn. I am committed to modelling the practice student teachers and experienced teachers might wish to use in the classroom. There are also workshop opportunities for sharing in the process of writing in which all members participate as equals. I also give students the opportunity to rehearse the use of such teaching techniques in a supportive environment. While it is necessary to explore and interrogate ideas in more depth, I find that I cannot abandon many of the approaches I developed in schools.

I have come to believe strongly that we all learn best when we are able to use 'talk for learning' in all subjects, but that it is particularly empowering to use talk if we wish students to gain confidence in using language. My own talk autobiography suggests that talk has been influential in helping me become both a more confident language user and a more experimental teacher.

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### **2.3 Urban School Poem**

The last lesson of the afternoon: flying darts and aeroplanes

It was the last lesson of the afternoon  
And there she stood upon the plinth  
In a classroom cluttered with teenage boys  
Paper flew around  
Her requests falling on deaf ears

Each time she turned around to write  
The game began again  
Paper became darts and aeroplanes  
In a campaign of disdain  
But, perhaps, she was at fault  
Had she appeared to favour the reading of one or two?

At first there were a few  
But gradually they grew  
Into a host of aeroplanes as even the boffins joined in  
What could she do?  
Could she sit and wait for the bell?  
No-stay behind she yelled, we will have to do it all again  
But-alas-the aeroplanes still flew.....

Valerie Coultas

June 2001

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### **2.4 Commentary: What does this talk autobiography reveal about my experiences and challenges with classroom talk?**

The decision to start with this autobiography is based on the value of autobiography in understanding how our present practice with language and our knowledge as teachers is informed by our past lives and the era or circumstances in which we have lived. As stated at the beginning it strongly influences the topic of the study, the questions I have asked and the life narrative approach adopted in the case studies (Chapter 5).

This personal language autobiography approach to the spoken word and writing draws upon thoughts about language suggested by James Britton (1970), whose ideas were influential in English teaching, particularly in the 60's, 70's and 80's. Looking at language development in children in a holistic way; the whole language approach, Britton (ibid) divided talk and writing into two continua. He suggested that the most accessible form of language is expressive language and that we use language at one end of the continuum as participants to get things done and that, at the other end, we use language as spectators of our past experiences and here we use language to 'enjoy, savour, and interpret' (p101).

Talk and language autobiographies are an expressive form of writing that becomes more carefully crafted as this writing moves into a more public domain and language autobiographies can be used at different stages of education to allow for a deeper understanding of our lives. This can create a resource for many different forms of language use and educational exploration.

But the autobiographical approach in this study is also influenced by the innovative view of feminist educators that personal experience and experiential knowledge, should be acknowledged and valued in the academic world (Miller, 1995, Rowbotham, 2001) and that this form of knowledge can contribute to the building of theory. As Coffey (1999) also suggests:

'the literary turn in ethnography has made it easier to utilize genres such as the auto/biographical and the personal narrative/confessional' (p10).



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This talk autobiography documents my life and classroom experiences with talk. It has established the value of talk, in formal and informal contexts, as developing, personal self-esteem and intellectual self-confidence for me as a learner when at school and in Higher Education and the way it hindered that development when it was absent or suppressed. The themes of gender, power and class identity influence self-esteem and our view of ourselves as learners as Bruner (1996) suggests. The importance of informal learning was also strong in my autobiography. I was interested to see if any of my insights had a resonance with others.

Both in the classroom and in the university, I have encouraged reflection on the role that talk and language has played in students' learning and development through the use of oral reflection records, talk diaries and language autobiographies (Coultas, 2006b, 2007b, 2013b); as this can elicit personal reflection but also systematic reflection on institutional aspects of schooling.

Looking back; as I have done in this autobiography; it is clear to me now that my then seemingly intuitive or pragmatic, classroom practice was partly a result of my own life experiences in education and the context and the time period of the 80's and 90's; my formative years as a teacher. There was still quite a rich discussion of language and learning in comprehensive schools in London at that time (Chapter 3) and curriculum development was still centrally part of a teacher's role and less influenced by senior managers, inspectors and ministers. And it is also clear to me now that, during that period, I was also directly influenced by the work of the National Oracy Project: the example of the jigsaw lesson mentioned in the HMI report gives evidence of this, as do the pamphlets I published as a school teacher (2001) and the work published in 2006b and 2007. The NOP project raised teacher self-confidence with talk: encouraged teachers to rehearse; plan for a range of talk repertoires and to evaluate both the pupils' use of oral language and the teacher's talk in the classroom.

The problems I confronted as a learner with didactic modes of pedagogy; that suppressed pupil talk; are clear in the autobiography and the ways in which girls' voices were less

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likely to be celebrated in the Grammar School than boys at that time, become apparent. The problem for girls of participation in presentational talk in educational institutions is also evident. Even in the Sixth form the teacher led discussions are more open but do not necessarily recognise the value of exploratory talk, a mode of talk which gives pupils the opportunity to learn from each other and try out ideas in a more emotionally secure context.

The on-going difficulties with planning for talk as a teacher in urban classrooms also come to the fore in the autobiography and the poem at the end; particularly the ways in which individual students and even whole classes can disrupt and rebel against teachers' well intentioned plans. The attempts that I made to use talk in the classroom were valuable but they did not always work out as intended and often required reflection, modification and development and education of the students in the reasons for this mode of learning. The challenging contexts I worked within, mainly in inner London, where pupils brought a wide variety of language experiences with them into schools, made talk particularly important but also unpredictable. The reflections on the jigsaw lesson based on *Gowie Corby Plays Chicken* and the Poem at the end illustrate some of this unpredictability.

My study therefore, begins to establish the centrality of identity, familiarity, trust and context in promoting talk for learning. It highlights the on-going importance of choosing topics and tasks that are relevant and interesting, planning 'real group work' (Coultas, 2007) for the students that make them think for themselves and talk to each other. It implicitly suggests that teachers should share expertise to promote talk both within English and across the curriculum.

But also that; towards the latter end of my career as a school teacher, I was beginning to notice the new constraints on English teaching in the early 2000's, (Coultas, 2007a, 2007b), as a result of the growing performativity culture with the imposition of the SATS (1993), the National Literacy Strategy DfES (1998) and the Key Stage 3 Strategy DfES (2000). These initiatives, designed to raise standards, imposed a narrow view of English as 'literacy' on English teachers and paved the way for some of the gains of comprehensive

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education and the progressive language and learning era to be eroded, particularly with regard to speaking and listening (Coultras, 2007b, 2009b and c, 2013 ).

I began with Miller's remarks about the importance of telling the story of the researcher's interest in the question. This autobiography is therefore a starting point for this study as it tries to show openly 'where [I am] coming from' and 'what [my] strengths and weaknesses are as [a commentator]' (Miller, Ibid, p26) in the discussion of classroom talk. I have tried to historicise my question of the challenges of talk by setting my educational life history in 'contexts more capacious than my own'. Miller's (1995) remarks about feminists 'searching their teaching and their writing for less positivistic and reductive accounts of what goes on in education'(p23), have influenced the design of my project as a whole. The life narrative Case Studies follow from this, as a means of inviting interviewees to speak about their lives and educational histories and place them in a wider context.

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## **Chapter 3: Revisiting debates on oracy: classroom talk-moving towards a democratic pedagogy?**

'In sum, the need for mutual understanding in collaborative talk requires each participant to make his or her meaning clear to the other, and hence also to him or herself, with the result *that thinking itself is made explicit* and thus available for inspection and if necessary, for extension, modification or correction'. (Chang and Wells, 1988:99)

In the last chapter, I explored the role of talk in my life as a pupil and a teacher. In this chapter I will look at how writers and researchers, from different fields of knowledge, offered teachers' perspectives on the place of classroom talk in learning. I then review the contribution of English teachers to this discussion, mainly focusing on the 1980s to the early 2000s in London schools, where I was able to develop my own practice in this area.

The selection from the literature is framed by Vygotsky's view (1978:89) that 'human learning is specifically social in nature' and that talk is essential in organising our thoughts and developing our thinking: and that school literacy practices must therefore build on home literacy practices to utilise the rich oral skills that all pupils bring with them into schools.

### **3.1 How have writers and researchers approached the discussion on spoken language, talk and learning in the post war period?**

There is a vast area of writing and research on the issue of talk and spoken language, even if we confine the discussion to the post-war period. Researchers and theorists have been interested in talk and learning from many different disciplines and perspectives. I will look at a selection of these writers that I believe had an impact on debates among English teachers before focusing more closely on the curriculum and policy implications of these theoretical discussions for teachers wishing to promote classroom talk.

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Sociologists, for example, such as Bernstein (1964, 1971) were concerned about the underachievement of working class pupils in state schools. He drew on traditions in sociology, linguistics and psychology to develop a theory about language and social class and developed the notion of an elaborated and restricted code. The elaborated code was used by middle class pupils and this code made them more familiar with the more formal, abstract language of schooling. The restricted code, a more personal and colloquial form of language, which assumed shared reference points, was used by working class pupils. This made the elaborate language of the school more inaccessible for working class pupils and acted as a barrier to their achievement. Bernstein developed his ideas over the course of his life and the links that he made between language use and social background have formed the basis for much discussion about spoken language in schools. There is evidence, in Bernstein's later writing, that he had read Vygotsky where, for example, he seeks to link thinking, feeling and communication with institutional contexts:

‘Once attention is given to the regulation of pedagogic discourse....then perhaps we may be a little nearer to understanding the Vygotskian tool as a social and historical construction’ (Bernstein, 1993: xx )

Although Bernstein's ideas have been the source of controversy, it is interesting to note that many writers agree that different linguistic and cultural practices do inform children's attitudes to school and that there is a culture clash between the values and practices in schools for some students and less so for others. Bourdieu (1993), for example, a sociologist who was also interested in trying to understand how education reproduces inequality, developed his cultural capital thesis. He suggested that students, from middle class and professional backgrounds, had cultural and linguistic capital and were often at ease in dealing with authority and that this allowed them to take advantage of school knowledge. For other students however, from working class backgrounds:

‘school knowledge represents an unfamiliar or alien culture... and they cannot engage with it as easily’ and ‘schools and the curriculum represent a culture shock’ (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2004: 203).

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So we can see that Bourdieu is also suggesting that the cultural literacy practices of schools may be more alien to some students than to others and that schools do not always give recognition to a wide enough range of literacy practices, including, to situate the discussion in this study, schools placing a lower value on oracy than literacy. Bourdieu's focus on the institutional factors in schools that favour the cultural capital of the middle/upper class and reproduce inequality has been an influential idea among modern educational researchers.

Psychologists approached the discussion about language through the lens of child development. Piaget (1971) a constructivist, had argued that through exploration and discovery learning, children came to a point where they would experiment with their environment, constructing and incorporating new spontaneous ideas to achieve new levels of understanding. This enabled them to use language in new ways at each stage of development. For instance a baby at the motor sensory stage from 4-18 months would try and understand the environment around them by attempting to recover an object from their field of perception and begin to point and later talk to do this. As children reached the age of 11-12 years their thinking is able to move from the concrete to the abstract and they are more likely to be able to hypothesise and develop purely abstract concepts.

When Vygotsky's work (1986) was translated and widely published in the West, it became clear that Vygotsky had read, enriched and challenged Piaget's ideas by highlighting the importance of the child's social experience in acquiring language; suggesting that what a child learns from social interaction 'shapes ...the way they think as individuals' (Hardman, 2008:134). Vygotsky was a psychologist with a social view of the learner; he was trying to find a better way of organizing pedagogy that adapts to the learners' needs. According to Mercer (2009) a psychologist influenced by the work of Barnes (2008), Vygotsky developed a 'conceptual model' to help us understand 'why talk is important' and 'how we use language to think together'. Vygotsky's view about pupils' use of their own language in learning can be contrasted with Bernstein's more abstract view of working class speech.

Vygotsky suggested that children develop both non-spontaneous concepts and spontaneous concepts, ideas taken from other people; for example teachers and parents but that they

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need time to ground them in their own experience. As Sutherland (2010) suggests, although some thought takes place before speech:

‘the main way that children acquire new concepts is through language as words synthesise concepts based on experience’ and eventually this ‘also enable(s) them to gain ideas from others without direct experience’ (p.97).

Britton (1970) suggested that human beings have a basic need to represent or symbolise their experience. He maintained that the young child does not simply use speech to fulfil practical needs but gains ‘evident pleasure in pretending to speak’(p34) and as powers of speech develop, the child realises that ‘everything has a name’ and a child ‘ can represent his experience in words’(p34). This speech in infants therefore lays the foundations for thinking in later life:

‘for in a more universal sense human consciousness is achieved by the internalisation of shared behaviour’ (Britton, 1994: 261).

This is very close to what Vygotsky (1978) stated:

‘Human learning presupposes a specifically social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life around them’ (p89).

The role of the knowledgeable other, in guiding the child to the next stage of cognitive development, the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), the level of potential development through problem solving with the support of a more knowledgeable other, has been a very influential idea taken from Vygotsky’s work (Vygotsky, *ibid* ). Less detailed attention has been paid to Vygotsky’s scientific experimental work (Vygotsky and Luria, 1984), based on a dialectical approach, which attempted to reconstruct the ways in which humans develop language. Through these experiments, Vygotsky attempted to explain the differences between animals and humans and how humans, unlike animals, create a psychological tool, language, which they use for thinking and mediating thought in order to

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gain more control over their environment and to represent their experiences. Vygotsky and Luria (1984) emphasise the distinctively human aspects of language development in the child:

‘by creating through words a certain intention, the child achieves a much broader range of activity... as can be useful in the solution... and planning its future actions’. Symbolic signs, such as speech, also ‘serve the child as a means of social contact with the surrounding people’ (p110).

But the Marxist collectivist principles of Vygotsky's work are often downplayed according to Alexander (2004) and Brown and Dowling (1998) and his underlying theoretical framework, in dialectical materialism and enlightenment philosophy, is not always fully acknowledged. Waugh argues that ‘the ideas in *Thought and Language* are not merely an extension of this materialist tradition but are specifically Marxist. Rahal (2013) also insists on ‘the Marxist roots of Vygotsky's theory ...as an application of dialectical materialism to the analysis of psychological phenomena’. According to Hardcastle (2009), Vygotsky's distinctive contribution was that he sought ‘to recover a history of ideas about the role of signs in the development of the mind’ (p195) and that, building on the insights of European writers of his time, he was trying to understand the relationship ‘between thought, word and meaning’ (p183). Van de Veer 1984, (cited by Hardcastle, 2009), suggests Vygotsky did this by combining two different strands of thought: a strand from European thinkers in the Enlightenment and the other developed by Marxist philosophers. It is therefore the dialectical relationship between thought and language that explains the significance of Vygotsky's contribution, for as we speak to others and use words to solve problems we reformulate and refine our ideas even creating new words, meanings or symbols when necessary.

Thompson (2009), in referring to Vygotsky's work, or interpretations of Vygotsky; highlights Elber's 1992 suggestion that there is a need for sociocultural researchers to value diversity and conflict in learning conversations and study ‘disagreements, arguments and failures in understanding’(p33). Thompson (2009) challenges the ‘unidirectional



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teleology' (p 33) of some interpretations of Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development as 'regression is just as likely to occur as cognitive progress' (ibid: 33).

Bakhtin's work on dialogue (Bakhtin, 1929) can be seen as complementing Vygotsky's work: suggesting that young children learn to speak by ventriloquizing or appropriating the voices of others as they develop their own voice and forms of language expression. Pearson (2010) in a paper researching literature circles in Scottish Primary schools, illustrates this process suggesting that as the pupils she observed began to discuss literature they did not move straight towards exploratory talk but started to play with the language of the text. They may appear to be off task or in dispute perhaps; but in fact they were acting out, reciting and ventriloquizing the voices and characters in the text, in order to gain a deeper engagement with the narrative.

Linguists, like Chomsky (1972) also developed new ways of studying language that challenged previous ideas, in his case, the behaviourists. Behaviourists, such as Skinner (1954) had suggested that language acquisition in children was the result of imitation of adults and positive reinforcement. Chomsky argued that language was creative and that each individual has a Language Acquisition Device (LAD), an internal mechanism in the brain, which allowed children in all languages to develop their own words, phrases and sentences, testing out patterns in language, and drawing their own conclusions and abstract rules from this language. Chomsky established the universality of language acquisition and the LAD for all nationalities and races suggesting that all human beings had an instinct for language. In attempting to generalise about the past tense for example the young child might suggest that they 'had putted the bat down', adding the 'ed' as an attempt to use the past tense. Listening to the response from the adult, they would realise that their suggestion might need to be modified. Chomsky did not deny that children imitated adult speech but he suggested that children were also capable of unique utterances in speech because of the inner workings of their mind.

Chomsky focused on the individual speaker's or hearer's competency or knowledge about language: but although according to Knight (2010); Chomsky's work had great impact 'in

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revolutionising linguistics and establishing it as a modern science' (p5); he was not concerned with 'the relationship between language, thought and social life' (ibid). In this sense, Chomsky's stance can be contrasted with the view of psychologists writing about language and child development and social life discussed above such as Piaget and Vygotsky.

Linguists like Halliday (1978) had a more functional approach to language and argued that language was dependent on social context and that the interaction between participants played an important role. The structure of language, the words and the sounds are all chosen for meaning in a particular context. Hymes (1972) had a similar view stressing this idea of communicative competence; arguing that it was not so much what a child knew about language but what they do with language that is important.

Interactionists like Berko-Gleason (1977) emphasised that children were not simply 'miniature grammarians working on a corpus composed of adult discourse' (p 199) and that young children acquire language through interactions with others. Mothers respond to smiles, pointing gestures and talk back to very young children. Researchers, by analysing 'Motherese'; the highly pitched, exaggerated speech of the caretaker or mother looking after the child, showed for example how children were exposed to many simple sentences, questions and imperatives but few conjunctions, complex sentences and that it is the child who often cues the adult into 'motherese'. Evelyn Hatch (1978) pointed out that the need to converse preceded the development of language. She suggests that:

'One learns how to do conversation, one learns how to act verbally, and out of this interaction syntactic structures are developed.'(p 404)

Bruner (1986) another psychologist, who saw meaning as the central concept in psychology, modified the work of Chomsky using the Vygotskyian concept of 'scaffolding' language. Bruner (Ibid) consciously built on Vygotsky's ideas suggesting that:

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‘most learning in most settings is a communal activity, a sharing of the culture’. (p 187)

Bruner identified a Language Acquisition Support System (LASS) to classify the type of support and prompting the adult gives to develop the speech and thinking of the child.

Cazden (1983:9) another researcher like Bruner working in the USA, looking at interactions from the perspective of psycho-linguistics, further refines these ideas and talks of ‘referential scaffolding’ in taking account of a child’s existing knowledge and reference points as they acquire new knowledge, ‘sequential scaffolding’ in routinised activities such as bathroom routines and ‘vertical scaffolding’ that takes place when the adult probes the child with further questions. Cazden also suggested that the adult provided children with language models and direct instruction e.g. say ‘bye, bye’. Cazden is influenced by Vygotsky’s ideas and she has a strong interest in children’s learning and development in schools.

Researchers such as Labov (1972) and Brice-Heath (1983) were particularly interested in language use in particular communities. Labov, a sociolinguist, studied the Black English Vernacular (BEV) in New York and challenged Bernstein’s ‘deficit’ view of, in this case, urban black working class language; arguing that ideas about elaborated and restricted codes need to be sensitive to speech variation. He found for example the narratives used among storytellers in Harlem to be sophisticated and linguistically rich. Brice-Heath (1983) was an ethnographer who was interested in the way in which the public education system served different communities. Working in the USA and studying poor white and black families she found many different literacy practices in different communities. She gives anthropologically ‘thick’ descriptions of what goes on in the home and the community. She suggested that the community literacy events in church or other forms of public literacy practices were important in themselves but they were not always mirrored in the literacy practices of schools. She emphasised the point that many public literacy events involved talk not writing. Wells, in *The Meaning Makers* ( 1987) also challenged the commonly held view of a language deficit among working class children when, in a study of Bristol

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families, he also showed that there was a rich oral tradition in working class homes. This latter text had wide resonance in the teaching community in Britain.

Grainger (2000:55) cites Ball (1994) who comments on the warm, demanding and holistic nature of adult talk at home and that a five year old arriving at school brings a strong experience of oral interaction in the home. But researchers, such as Tizard and Hughes (1984) had found that the high levels of interaction and intellectual effort witnessed in the home were not often reproduced in school. Teacher talk in early schooling focused more on classroom management and the questioning of pupils, who were less involved in decision-making and negotiation than at home.

These studies of the rich nature of many home literacy practices underline the argument that spoken language is developed and consolidated through social interaction within communities and this shapes the way people think. The above ideas are also useful in revealing the different kind of prompts children need to progress in language use. The implication of this work is that while recognising that the child can identify patterns in language independently, the type of support the parent lends the child in the home needs to be planned for by the teacher, albeit in the different context of the classroom, at different stages in the pupil's life in school to shape and support the learner.

The work of philosophers, sociolinguists, psycho-linguists, sociologists and anthropologists, who were concerned with analysing the act of speech and the circumstances that gave meaning to words, gave rise to the development of discourse analysis (Schiffrin, 1987, 2003). Schiffrin suggests that while discourse 'began with linguistics' it provides 'a natural interface between sociology and linguistics' (1987: 1). Anthropologists such as Hymes 1974, who were interested in the social aspects of language rather than just general linguistics, had highlighted the 'culturally relative realization of ways of acting and being' (cited by Schiffrin, 1987: 1) in naturally occurring conversations in different cultures. Within philosophy, writing on speech acts by Austin 1962 and Grice 1975 (cited by Schiffrin, 1987) also focused attention on the use of language. The phenomenological movement within philosophy placed emphasis on the 'common sense

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procedures used by individuals to construct the social world' (Schiffrin, 1987: 2) and discourse analysis provided a tool for interrogating those procedures and understanding how our social worlds are constructed.

Gary Thomas (2009) makes a distinction between the approach of psychologists to discourse analysis, where there is a micro analysis of the words that are chosen and the intonation of the speaker and the macro analysis of the sociologists, who are looking at forms of language use that define power relationships. According to Thomas (ibid), critical discourse analysis has developed as an approach that attempts to combine both traditions in studying spoken language. Such an approach which treats the text as a cultural artefact would therefore combine a description of the language of the text (type of rhetoric; use of words; figures of speech) an interpretation of the reader or speaker's interaction with the text and a consideration of the relationship between the discursive processes and the social context or social processes. This allows researchers to record and transcribe conversations paying close attention to interruptions, silences, and non-verbal messages as well as the choice of words, alongside recognition of the context of the interaction. But this approach does not focus on the role of language in learning in the way in which Vygotsky did.

Feminists, such as Spender, had looked at oracy and *Man Made Language* (1980) from yet another perspective that of language, gender and power. By taping many conversations between men and women in mixed sex conversations she showed how men are more likely to initiate or control a topic for discussion than women in a domestic setting. Investigating gender and talk in classrooms Stanworth (1987) suggested that boys were more likely to participate in whole class discussions than girls and that they received more of the teacher's attention. Crawford (1995) also pointed out that boys can dominate in the classroom and even in pair and group work. Swann (1992) maintains that teacher questions to boys can be more cognitively challenging than to girls.

A recent survey of 6,000 8-16 year olds by the Communication Trust and the National Literacy Trust (BBC News, 2011) reaffirmed the overall emphasis of these findings suggesting 'that more boys than girls feel confident expressing their views in class and

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social situations'. Dance et al (2007) were also involved in an interesting project on speaking and listening with single sex year 7 groups in a knowledge transfer project. The girls felt that they learnt better and the class was quieter without the boys and that girls' talk was validated. But the girls also noted that in mixed groups the boys were funny and girls could be nastier without boys around. The teachers felt that the girls became less compliant in single sex groups and that the wider variety of formats adopted for talk was able to engage the boys. But the teachers also said that it was necessary to sell activities to girls as academically relevant as many girls 'were obsessed with fulfilling the criteria' and that among the girls 'there was a conformity' and that 'they tended to lack originality'. (Dance et al, 2007: 51)

As a school teacher, I was involved in a single sex project in a London coeducational school for an equal opportunity sex and careers education course using drama for year 9 (Coults, 2009c). The small size of the groups, the pedagogy used and the relevance of the topics discussed engaged both boys and girls in free and frank exchanges with their teachers and each other. The male and female teachers were able to meet each week to evaluate this course and this provided a collaborative framework for reflection and for planning lessons.

Feminist researchers have often focused on informal talk when considering the spoken word. Jennifer Coates (2011) a sociolinguist interested in gender, looked at the language of boy and girl peer sub cultural groups and found that boys tended to play in larger, more hierarchical groups and girls in smaller groups. While girls and boys use many common strategies, she drew attention to the collaboration-oriented characteristics of girls' talk and the competition-orientated characteristics of boys' groups. Girls found ways to criticise each other in acceptable ways and excluded other girls from play but were also concerned to maintain harmonious relationships. Boys were more willing to engage in physical force. There is also a new discussion among sociolinguists working around gender as to whether other social factors such as social class or status might also influence peer sub cultures and different patterns of language use between men and women.

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Linguistic ethnographers, such as Janet Maybin (2006), who is interested in classroom talk and literacy in the home, has suggested that classroom discourse researchers have perhaps focused too strongly on cognitive, curriculum focused talk and that more attention needs to be paid to the affective and broader socio-cultural nature of literacy learning both inside and outside the classroom. In studying children's voices inside and outside the classroom in the middle years and describing their constant search for identity, Maybin (2006) suggests that classroom language is a hybrid of referential (representing the world); interpersonal (creating relations with others) and emotive forms (expressing inner states in the speaker). These informal discussions among the children Maybin studied are often divergent; rather than convergent as 'the human subject is rarely constituted through consensus and convergence' (Thompson, 2009:36) but the conversations are always evaluative.

As suggested earlier, with reference to Vygotsky; Thompson (2009) highlights European discourse researchers' interest in studying failures of communication between children as well as studying effective communication. Smolka et al (1995) for example, suggests that 'intersubjectivity so often takes the form of divergent perspectives' (p 172). The European researchers are also aware that it is rare for children to fully incorporate their teacher's definition of a situation and this idea of pupil independence; resistance, non-deference; or the need to allow children the space to reframe learning in their own language; is particularly interesting for this study where I am focusing on some of the challenges of classroom talk.

Other Linguistic ethnographers such as Lefstein (2010) and Rampton and Harris (2008) have also tried to synthesise different traditions of research on language and identified what they describe as the changing patterns of classroom interaction and non-deferential modes of learning in urban classrooms in London. This more recent research among socio-cultural researchers and linguistic ethnographers will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2. This writing takes more account of the real contexts and conflicts in classrooms and therefore can help to develop understanding of when and how to promote or allow for effective and purposeful talk in the classroom.

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Writers who were concerned with the empowerment of pupils with English as an Additional language (EAL) suggested that children learning a new language need opportunities to mirror the acquisition of their first language and this would require scaffolding from peers and adults in meaningful social contexts. Gregory (1996), a linguist, uses Brice-Heath's concept of 'literacy events' to look at multilingual classrooms, for example, focusing on the importance of peer interaction in learning a new language. This is interesting and particularly pertinent to this study which seeks to discuss how to promote effective talk in diverse classrooms.

Perhaps in a similar way in which non-standard speech patterns are undervalued in traditional school cultures, Dodwell (1999) has also suggested that there can be a tendency to adopt a deficit model of bilingual learners by focusing on what pupils with EAL cannot do or viewing bilingualism as a problem. Cinamon (1994) argues that bilingualism should be viewed positively as a linguistic asset and Dodwell (ibid) agrees suggesting that these children should 'be encouraged to use their preferred language' (p 19). Far from dual language use confusing the learner as some have suggested, Browne (1996) points out that 'speakers who are proficient in more than one language have a greater linguistic awareness than monolingual speakers' and 'a more conscious understanding of linguistic patterns' (p 149). We can also unconsciously adopt different attitudes to multilingualism depending on the value we attach to the different languages spoken, European languages can be given a higher status than non-European languages for example.

Cinamon (1994), makes a very strong case for collaborative work in small groups being particularly supportive for bilingual learners as 'their receptive language is in advance of their productive speech' (p73) and this means that they can take part at their level, experiment with language and engage in a variety of tasks. The Collaborative Learning Project (2011), first established in 1983; has been a long term advocate of work in small groups by using information gap and sequencing activities for example for bilingual learners. This project also emphasises the importance of visual prompts for collaborative talk for learners new to English:



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‘Children new to English need exposure to visually stimulating collaborative talk activities in short sessions throughout their learning if they are going to be able to draw on their prior knowledge and skills’.

This project also suggests these activities enrich the classroom experience of all learners through:

‘developing sustained shared thinking and also helps retention of information through pleasurable repetition’.

Cortazzi (2002) similarly reinforces and develops some of these principles in suggesting how teachers might plan opportunities for pupils with EAL to rehearse spoken language. He suggests that teachers should help learners with EAL to link spoken language with visual cues, paying attention to meaning and relevance and engaging learners in intellectual challenge. He suggests that teachers should use modelling which combines repetition with variation. Cummings (2000) has also written extensively on how students with EAL need opportunities to develop the required academic language to engage in class discussions. Jill Bourne (2002) writes about planning and explicitly modelling this academic language in whole class and small group learning situations.

Gibbons (2009) who is critical of modern ‘one-size-fits-all teaching gimmicks’(p 3), has described good practice in supporting learners with EAL as teachers setting tasks with high intellectual challenge but also giving learners high support to be able to complete the tasks. This involves for example designing tasks that require talk not just invite it. The task she reminds us, however, must have some intrinsic value to the learners. She suggests that an effective curriculum for EFL learners should be a ‘Janus Curriculum’ which faces in two ways, where ‘prior learning and the everyday language.....provide a bridge to new learning’ (p59).

It would be very remiss to exclude insights from drama specialists in a discussion about debates on spoken language. According to Neelands (2000) there has always been ‘a

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symbiotic relationship between English and Drama in Secondary Schools' (p73) but Drama became a separate subject during the 1980s and 1990s. Moffett (2011) argues that:

‘ drama is life made conscious....No other activity... puts such constant pressure on the participants to think on their feet, make spontaneous decisions, exercise independence, and respond to the unexpected in a flexible, creative way as dramatic invention does’. (p1)

For the drama to be authentic Neelands (2011) suggests that ‘young people must bring what they collectively know about human behaviour to a newly created situation, which requires their verbal and physical responses’ (p 2).

A key theorist in drama education was Heathcote (1991). Her idea of the ‘mantle of the expert’ (MOE) broke new ground in developing ‘a holistic learning system where talk and writing could take place in a situated context’. (Sayers, 2011: 21). MOE creates a simulated learning situation where pupils and teachers agree roles and imagine themselves to be a group of experts who have to take on a particular task. These ideas came to be associated with the idea of process drama (O'Neill 1983, Howell and Heap, 2001) which caused much discussion and debate among drama teachers in a process versus performance controversy. The relevance of Heathcote's work to this study however lies in the many opportunities for authentic talk and writing in role such a project can open up for example: telephone conversations; informal and formal meetings; panel discussions; press conferences; expert witnesses and for collaboration around film and media work. Many of those who pioneered new work in media education in the 80s for example utilised some of these ideas very successfully for devising simulations in introducing media units into English (Grahame 1991, Bazalgette, 1986).

The relationship between drama and play can also be seen as a particularly important link with the discussion of spoken language development. Earlier, I highlighted Piaget's insights on early language development, indicating that pointing towards a desired or disappearing

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object plays an important role in the earliest forms of interaction between baby and carer. And as Vygotsky argued:

‘imaginative movement and social interactions are mental tools for making sense of language’ (Edmision and McKibben , 2011: 91).

In drama, these writers suggest that participants are released from having to act like pupils in the classroom and instead are allowed to play like young children who adhere to social rules in imagined contexts but their roles are guided and structured by the world of the characters in the new situation.

The use of non-verbal and symbolic forms of communication are very important in drama as movement, intonation, body language and ritual are used and evaluated as ways of making meaning. According to Goodwin (2004) drama therefore utilises not only the enactive and expressive mode of learning but also the symbolic mode and this allows children to see, feel and hear the full use of language, as for example the voice of the author or character in the text comes alive. Winston and Tandy (2009) also suggest that drama allows for even young children to gain a deeper understanding of the plot and to ‘be able to explore feelings and emotions within the text’ (p 80).

Grainger (2000) emphasises that Drama:

‘prompts pupils to use a broader linguistic range than is normally accessible, gives the experience of extended utterance and challenges them to view the world from different standpoints’ (p 67).

Many of these ideas about language, language acquisition, literature and oracy have had a strong influence on curriculum and policy developments in education in the post-war period. I shall now turn towards these policy contexts and discuss, in more detail, how I see these ideas shaping discussions about talk and oracy in schools.

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### **3. 2 How have these ideas influenced the curriculum and ideas about talk and learning in schools? Changing views on talk, oracy and literacy in the progressive comprehensive school era**

Howe (1992), a founder member of the Wiltshire Oracy project in 1983, describes some traditional attitudes towards spoken English. The Newbolt Report 1921, in advocating speech training, suggested:

‘The great difficulty of teachers in elementary schools... is that they have to fight against the evil habits of speech contracted in the home and street’ (cited by Howe, 1992:2)

In 1941 he states that the Norwood Report referred to:

‘lip-laziness, vulgarisms, easy-going colloquialisms and slang that should never be tolerated’ (cited by Howe, 1992:2).

In 1984 a letter in the Times Educational Supplement, referring to a broadcast where school leavers were asked their opinions, the writer applauded their ‘confidence’ but suggested that he ‘could not understand a word they were saying due to the slovenliness of their speech’ (cited by Howe, *ibid*: 4). This view of oracy is seen as suppressing the children’s voice from the home and the street and replacing incorrect language with correct language through ‘drills, recitation...routines and strictures’ (Howe, *ibid*: 4). It was this view of spoken language that teachers and teacher educators challenged in the post-war period as educational institutions became more democratic and progressive. And it is now a view that has become more dominant in the proposed new English Curriculum’s view of Spoken English (DfE, 2013).

Wilkinson (1965) for example, took issue with the traditional view of talk. He saw the development of spoken language as a natural process if the teacher provided opportunities for talk in schools. He argued that the language potential of the child develops through

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‘unconscious imitation’ and that it ‘is stimulated by the responses of others and speech becomes clearer in the necessity for communication’ (cited by Howe, 1992: 6).

Wilkinson was very concerned that, in schools, oracy and literacy were too often viewed as enemies and he suggested that instead they should be viewed as allies and that developing the use of the spoken word naturally complimented and supported the process of learning to read and write. He was very critical of past practice in English teaching, practice that had allowed literature and grammar teaching to dominate and excluded or marginalised the other modes of language, speech and writing. According to Corden (1988), Wilkinson coined the word ‘oracy’ when he suggested that ‘the educated person needs to be numerate, literate and orate’ (p1) and he saw oracy as an issue for all teachers and the whole school. Wilkinson boldly stated that:

‘oracy was not a subject’ but ‘a condition of learning...it is not a “frill” but a state of being in which the whole school must operate’ (cited by Corden,1988:1).

The need to pay attention to spoken language was recognised by the newly formed Schools Council which funded the work on oracy that Wilkinson went onto develop. Later this work on oracy would influence GCSE English Examinations at 16 and discussions around a National Curriculum for English.

With the rise of the comprehensive school a group of London English teachers had emerged who argued that the home language of the child should be valued and utilised to promote ‘real talk’ in the classroom between pupils and between teachers and pupils. This debate on language use was part of a broader discussion about English teaching and was linked to the need to change and adapt the curriculum to a new comprehensive era of schooling. As John Dixon suggests in an article discussing the history of the London Association of the Teaching of English (LATE):

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‘the immediate problem was what should you do in a comprehensive school about the curriculum, particularly with an English curriculum, how would you reshape it so you didn’t have a division’. (Gibbons, 2008: 124)

As the old divisions between grammar and secondary modern schools were disappearing, new forms of curricular, pedagogy and assessment were required. Dixon continues, discussing one of the first comprehensive schools in Holloway, Islington:

‘Changing the whole structure arose because of the post-war feeling that renewal was necessary and cultural renewal as necessary’ (Gibbons: *ibid*: 124).

This new type of schooling therefore informed the debate on spoken language. According to Jones (1988), Britton had suggested that language in the classroom needed to become an instrument of learning not of teaching. This meant that the language potential of the child should be utilised and that the informal language of the home should be allowed to inform discussion and group interaction in the classroom. It involved recognising that ‘school knowledge’ needed to be opened up to incorporate new forms of knowledge.

But, while we can see in hindsight that grammar schools were elitist institutions, these schools had also opened up secondary, post-16 and university education to a wider social group; some of whom had been excluded from access to higher learning in the early part of the century. Quite a number of working class pupils entered grammar schools after the 1944 Education Act. And these pupils had even more right to be in these Grammar schools when they became part of the Local Education Authority and working class pupils did not suffer the direct discrimination of the ‘scholarship boy’ (or girl) in the grammar school prior to this Act (Coultas, 1987). According to Barnes (2000), some English teachers in these post-war grammar schools found that teaching was quite easy because the pupils were well motivated and they had time to think of ways to experiment with teaching.

Discussions among these teachers and others in the new Comprehensive schools helped to establish the London Association for the Teaching of English (LATE) in 1948. Barnes,

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(2000), suggests that working at a time of relative economic prosperity gave English teachers optimistic ideas about democratising education. They began to introduce texts and topics that were more relevant to students' lives. Some of these teachers were therefore able to contribute, alongside teachers teaching in the first comprehensive schools, to many of the new debates about literature, language and learning.

As Barnes (2000) in his Autobiography writes:

'The 60's saw radical changes in the teaching of English. They were not random: we saw much that was wrong in the previous English Curriculum and actively sought change' (p3).

Later he explains:

'It seems that in the sixties we were moving further and further away from an English that was a precious possession of the few, and seeking to place the subject firmly in the lives we saw about us, and we were doing this with an unmistakeable moral passion' (Barnes, 2000:86).

He continues:

'The 60's have been reinvented as a time of uncontrolled self-indulgence but I do not believe that what happened in English teaching fits that account. What we were looking for was an English curriculum that recognised and strengthened all young people's ability through language to think and feel responsibly about the world they were living in and we believed that literature had a major part to play in this.'  
(Barnes, 2000:3)

What Barnes describes here about his discussions with pupils around literature is mirrored in the interview with Stuart and Stephen (Chapter 6) and the talk autobiography (Chapter

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2), teachers attending Grammar School 6<sup>th</sup> forms in the 60's and early 70's. With regards to the debate about learning talk he comments in his autobiography that:

‘Making our thinking public through discussion turned the thinking itself into the object of our attention. That is, the essential outcome of the talking was reflection.... It was this principle-the importance of developing understanding and insight through reflecting aloud in collaboration with others....that represents the culmination of my teaching of English in schools’ (Barnes, 2000: 4).

Barnes developed his ideas with two other writers, Britton and Rosen (1969) in a book *Language, the Learner and the School* that had a major impact at the time. Here the authors try and analyse the importance of small group learning conversations in the classroom in giving the pupils the time and opportunity to interrogate new knowledge:

‘We sharpen our understanding by telling or attempting to explain to others. As we hear ourselves say what we think we can monitor this objectification of our thoughts...Without plentiful experience of talking things through we would be denied access to that inner speech through which we organise our thinking’ (p 13).

In this book, the authors argue that if spoken language shapes the way we think and helps us to internalise new concepts, all forms of talk should be valued in the classroom. The language from the home should not be suppressed by the dominance of didactic closed questioning; but real talk be encouraged through allowing pupils to engage in purposeful discussions in a variety of informal and formal modes of talk. Valuing ‘real talk’ the authors meant the range of language forms that are used in real life by all social groups, for example: the informal language used in the home and tentative, exploratory talk; anecdote and storytelling should be valued alongside more formal presentational modes of language and the language of instruction.

These ideas about language and learning have been very influential in debates about English teaching in London schools but have also had an impact on views of English



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teaching across the United Kingdom and English speaking countries. A new project *Social Change and English* that will further document these debates by aiming to 'produce a history of the developments in the teaching of English in 3 London Secondary Schools in the twenty years after the war' (Leverhulme Trust et al, 2011:1) has been established. The 3 London schools chosen for this project made a particularly strong contribution to some of the developments outlined above.

Although much of the inspiration for change came from pragmatic adaptation to the needs of the students 'because [learning conversations] produced better work from pupils' (Barnes, 2000: 99) there are also clear links here between the ideas of constructivist and sociocultural psychologists such as Piaget and Vygotsky and researchers like Labov and Shirley Brice Heath and these English teachers and teacher educators. This notion of encouraging real talk and small group learning and valuing all voices and dialects equally was a challenge, not only to old elitist views of tri-partite education but also, as some suggest, to the ideas of sociologists such as Bernstein (1964) who had suggested that working class pupils have an oral language 'deficit'.

If we compare this view of spoken language and its role in learning with that advocated in the Newbolt and Norwood Reports mentioned earlier; we can see how this ran into conflict with a prescriptive view that maintained that standard English had a superior linguistic status to other, non-standard dialects. In the Norwood Report, Howe (1992) highlights how the writers had suggested that 'refinement of speech indicates a certain graciousness of thought' (p1). The suggestion that the children's home language should be valued and not considered as linguistically inferior and that the teacher should not insensitively 'correct' the child's home language; but rather provide opportunities for the use of different registers in different contexts and for audiences was a strong challenge to the traditional view of spoken language. Howe (ibid) suggests that the new view of talk marked a change from:

'an elocution model of spoken language....to a view of talk' as the way children "represent" the world...by telling someone about it and in so doing clarifying it for ourselves' (Howe, 1992:5).

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This concept of the appropriateness of language, as opposed to the 'correct' use of language and the superiority of standard English, continues to be a source of controversy in the discussion of spoken English today (Davies, 2000, Wyse and Jones, 2001). According to Scott (2007), one of the few changes made by Margaret Thatcher to the draft of the English curriculum in 1989 was to delete the words 'where appropriate' at the end of the sentence that stated that children should be taught to use Standard English. Nor is this view just an old fashioned one. Alexander points out (2008) that even very recently National Strategy English advisers to a 'centralising and controlling government' have attempted to reduce his notion of dialogue to 'using formal language and spoken standard English' (p 54). I have argued recently (Coultas, 2012a) that the new Coalition Curriculum is attempting to restore this elocution model of talk.

Thus the issue of the definition of talk and oracy the dual nature of talk in the English classroom, as I have emphasised earlier, are still at the heart of the discussion of how we can promote talk and oracy in schools:

'For as at the same time as they are learning to talk more effectively pupils should be talking to learn more effectively.' (Doncaster LEA, Undated: 1).

And writers and teachers who have argued the case for talk, while recognising the need to plan for a wide repertoire of talk based activities, are not at ease with the heavy emphasis placed by some on correcting spoken English in informal talk or by focusing primarily on the more presentational types of talk that require the use of formal language and standard English. Many teachers and writers would challenge those who suggest that standard English is an inherently superior dialect. Rather they argue that standard English is one form of dialect that pupils should be familiar with, but that it is not intrinsically superior to other forms of dialect.

The point that the London English teachers in LATE were making about language in the classroom; was that schooling needed to change, to value, nurture and develop the language skills that all children brought to school. They were excited by the new language in the

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classroom and used tape recorders to transcribe and analyse children's speech. They also highlighted the important role the more learned adult or teacher had in valuing, guiding and prompting all children's language development.

Wyse and Jones (2001); taking a slightly different approach to Alan Howe, emphasise that although early educational reports, such as the second Hadow Report (1931), suggested that spoken English should be corrected; they also recommended that oral composition, where children spoke on a topic, and reproduction, where children recounted the lesson, should be encouraged. Writing at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Wyse and Jones are able to contrast the mid twentieth century approach to primary education to the prescriptive era of the 1990s and suggesting that:

‘The central years of the 20th century can be characterised as the years of progressive education as far as primary language was concerned’(p21).

They point out that some of these documents were remarkably progressive documents for their time but they also comment that the 1944 Education Act offered little advice about the curriculum with the exception of religious education. They go on to emphasise that, with the ending of the 11 plus in the 1960s:

‘the primary curriculum was technically freed from all constraint’ almost a ‘secret garden’ as one politician at the time commented (Gorden, P et al 1991 cited by Wyse and Jones 2001:21).

The Plowden Report (1967) was clearly influenced by the debates about discovery learning and the Piagetian ideas of the stages of children's language development. This report placed the child at the centre of the educational process in primary schools and stated that ‘spoken language plays a central role in learning’ and welcomed the wider use of creative writing. Later, the Bullock Report, *A Language for Life* (1975) suggested that language competence grows ‘in the course of using it’(p 520) and through the interaction of writing; talk, reading

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and experience. This report suggested that teachers should ask children to consider what kind of talk is appropriate in different contexts.

Classroom practice in relation to talk began to change but some have suggested that the change was quite slow and piecemeal. Frater (1988) for example, stated inspection reports indicated that while primary school inspections identified quite a lot of opportunities for talk and listening in Secondary schools the spoken word is generally undervalued in English teaching. There were also fewer instances of the use of the spoken word across the whole curriculum. Where there were examples of good practice the talk had a clear purpose, group sizes were varied and good links were made with reading. Simulations and drama were also used effectively where they had been planned. Grainger (2000) suggests that:

‘the majority of primary teachers, while utilising the transmission mode of teaching on occasion, also provide some hands on experiential learning as part of their repertoire’(p 64).

She highlights the tension between the traditional role of the teacher as an authority figure who is charged with what is now called curriculum delivery and ‘ a more progressive ideology, in which teachers attempt to facilitate the active construction of knowledge’(p64). However if the social factors influencing the work of teachers in urban schools are considered and the published work of subject associations and networks of teachers are taken into account, this helps to build up a slightly different, perhaps more optimistic picture of secondary school classroom practice in promoting classroom talk, particularly in urban areas such as London at the time in which Frater was writing. As has been intimated the mixed class, multi-cultural, multi-ethnic character of these urban schools posed some interesting opportunities and problems for teachers who wished to empower pupils as language users. A new generation of teachers was emerging in the 60's and 70's with more egalitarian principles, who wanted to unite the child-centred pedagogies of the primary and secondary modern schools with the academic rigour of the grammar school (Simon cited by Hart et al, 2004) and, as they tried to do this, they wanted to use and develop new theories of learning. They drew on different academic disciplines as discussed earlier but also

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looked towards the 'real worlds of children' and 'the culture of subordinate groups as sources of educational inspiration' (Jones, 1983, 2011).

One example of this is the Talk Workshop Group established at Vauxhall Manor school in Lambeth in 1976 (Eyers and Richmond, 1982). Here the teachers got together to ask themselves some questions about the 'efficacy of group work and the role of pupil talk in learning' (Sarland, 2010: 173). They were also interested in the other strands of English and how to empower pupils as readers and writers. There were English teachers in the group and teachers of other subjects and their work was assisted by having a local English Centre in their school and the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) oracy project as a source of support. While this was not called action research, at the time, it had many of the features of practitioner or action research as teachers were leading the enquiry into their own practice and then evaluating it. Sarland (ibid: 182) suggests that:

'it is...possible to read the project as exemplifying that set of child-centred, radical liberal educational values that are supposed to have been characteristic of the 1960's and 1970's'.

The Motherland project and video (1985) that was produced as a result of a Wise Woman investigation in this South London school, where Caribbean female students interviewed their mothers about their early days in England and then wrote a script and produced a film based on this project, is an inspiring piece of documentary evidence of the type of English and drama teaching, using oral history and pupils' autobiographies, that was possible at that time.

Some of these London teachers viewed social equality or, at least, equal opportunity, in education as desirable goals and believed that working class and minority culture had expressive forms and aesthetic value both orally and in writing and that the role of the teacher was to help create a forum in the classroom for that cultural expression (Coultas, 2005, Coultas, 2007b). Classroom talk and the role language played in learning was part of a broader discussion on more active and democratic forms of pedagogy; forms of pedagogy

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that built on the oral and cultural traditions of all the pupils in urban comprehensive schools (Jones, 1989). Baron et al (1981) discussing schooling and social democracy remark that this 'practical radicalism within teaching is largely hidden' (p 93). But they also suggest that this radicalism was 'a marked feature of the 60's and 70's [as there was] a space for the development of non-capitalist elements in the curricula and some limited transformations of the authority- relations of teachers and taught' (p93).

We can find also documentary evidence of a commitment to pupil self-expression and exploration of culture and identity through the use of more active forms of pedagogy in early editions of *English in Education* for example a conference discussion; Barnes (1971), of the role of Language across the Curriculum referred to in the introduction. The *ILEA English Magazine* is another journal where pupil led discussions (Richmond, 1988) role play (O'Neill, 1983) and critical talk were given prominence and suggestions were made for classroom practice, including new ideas for assessing talk (Fuller, 1987). These journals form early examples of action research by teachers who were making direct reflections on their own classroom practice as they tried out new ideas in the classroom. The ILEA English Centre also published pupils' autobiographical writing which celebrated the diversity of pupils' lives and experiences and raised awareness of the benefits of multiculturalism. Jon Davidson, looking back at this period, cited in an article by Shepherd (2004); also supports this view of a dynamic, thoughtful discourse among young English teachers working in London at that time. He praises the work of the ILEA with probationary teachers for introducing new ideas about research and celebrating the linguistic and cultural richness of London's school children.

Networks of English and EAL teachers developed and flourished at this time working with teacher's centres such as the ILEA English Centre, now the English and Media Centre, and subject associations such as LATE and the National Association for the Teaching of English (NATE). Organisations such as the Collaborative Learning Project referred to earlier in this chapter, launched in 1983, building on English as a Foreign Language traditions, focused on creating tight talk activities or tasks that required, not just invited pupils to collaborate and use spoken language in learning (Gibbons, 2009).

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Alongside these developments local LEA based oracy projects emerged and then a national project was initiated by the School Curriculum Development Committee - the National Oracy Project (1987-1993). Teachers gathered evidence of talk using a variety of methods. For example they observed individual children at intervals during a day or a week and tape recorded children working together or followed one pupil for a day recording their talk. Some of the teachers recorded themselves working with children and asked pupils about their perceptions of talk (Johnson, 1994). They also posed questions about language in school asking if there were differences between the way boys and girls talked and tried to find out what sorts of talk happens in different activities. Interestingly, for this study, the teachers were also encouraged to think about their own talk and whether they listened to children's talk and the answers they gave in class. The project helped teachers to research and become more aware of planned and unplanned talk in schools and to find out who talks; where and what about, whether it was related to work and to find out if some children used another language in school.

The NOP developed a model of learning that promoted collaboration and the use of spoken language and suggested that the small group should become the basic unit of classroom organisation (Cook et al, 1989), advocated at the time as a way of widening the teacher's repertoire. This model (Appendix 3) took the pupils through several stages of learning engagement, exploration, transformation, presentation and review (Cook et al, 1989, Corden, 2000) and encouraged teachers to focus on the process of learning and through both induction into group work and reflection after group work, aimed to help pupils to understand why they should use talk for learning. The influence of this project on particularly English teachers at the time was very important and my talk autobiography demonstrates the effect of the NOP on my teaching in the 1980's and 1990's and later.

As a result of the Kingman Report (DES 1988), the Language in the National Curriculum (LINC) Project (Carter 1990) was launched alongside the English National Curriculum to the subject knowledge of English teachers. It was also based on some important principles, including the idea of valuing of pupils' oral language. It suggested that teaching should start positively from what children could do and that language should be explored in real

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purposeful situations not analysed out of context. This project also maintained that the experience of using language should precede analysis and that an understanding of language would help children learn more about values and beliefs (Wyse and Jones, 2001). An example from the LINC video, teachers and pupils talking (1987), shows that this project incorporated a large variety of training materials that could support teachers in planning to create opportunities for a range of talk repertoires in the classroom. For example after viewing video footage of two teachers talking with students in a small group the viewers are asked to compare the two discussions and consider what sort of talk the teachers are concerned to promote and how far the teacher's contributions facilitate or restrict the discussion. This comparison allows teachers to understand the effect of the Instruction Response Feedback (IRF) exchange in limiting pupil responses and how a small number of open ended prompts and statements can allow for a freer discussion with much more pupil input. The notes accompanying the extracts are careful to point out that there will be instances when more direct instruction and the IRF exchange is appropriate, however.

The materials produced by this project, influenced by the work of sociolinguists such as Michael Halliday, were censored in 1991 by the Conservative Government. These materials have been circulated as a Samizdat LINC video with accompanying resources ever since and have been widely used in English teacher training. Cox (1996) who chaired the English National Curriculum working party, suggested that after the original English in the National Curriculum was published, DES (1990), the curriculum was subject to a takeover by a small extreme, right-wing group who favoured a return to traditional grammar teaching and that this group was disdainful of the teaching profession. Recently some of these LINC materials have been reissued as a DVD (Carter, 2006) and they provide excellent classroom examples of teacher and pupils talking together that can still be used to analyse different talk repertoires and demonstrate whole class and small group learning through talk in primary and secondary schools.



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### **3.3 The cultural restorationist challenge to progressive ideas among English teachers**

Turning from the consensus and history of the work on language and learning I have been describing above, it is interesting to consider the views of those who were critical of the new 'child-centred approach' to English teaching. In 1969 two university English lecturers (Cox and Dyson, 1971) wrote the first of a number of essays, called the Black Papers, developing a critique of progressive education. Arguing for a slower pace to Labour's educational reforms they defended Public Schools and a small grammar school sector and suggested the need for more discipline and streaming in state comprehensive schools (Jones, 1988). The first two Black papers sold 80,000 copies. By 1975, Boyson had become joint editor with Cox and the later papers had a wider reach with ideas that foreshadowed much of Conservative Education policy. For example tests for 7,11,14 year olds with published results, a core curriculum of literacy and numeracy; the establishment of body of knowledge we should all acquire; an apprenticeship model of teacher training and a system shaped by some form of parental choice (Jones, 1988).

The Centre for Policy Studies took up this critique and building on these discontents turned it into a full frontal attack on progressive teaching in comprehensive schools, what John Marenbon (1987, 1994) dubbed 'the new orthodoxy.' Child-centred English teachers, Marenbon argued, were too concerned with ideas of personal growth, Dixon, (1967). English he suggested was about teaching a body of knowledge, which involved re-establishing the pre-eminence of the English Literary Heritage and the explicit teaching of grammar and standard English.

These authors also began to establish the importance of 'standards' by arguing that standards would only be maintained in schools if they were clearly and publically defined. Part of this critique included an attack on classroom talk for example by Lawlor who suggested that there was 'no reason to suggest that children learn from talking' (Lawlor, cited by Jones, 1989:66). John Marenbon (1994:19/20) appears to agree when he argued that the notion of oracy is redundant since:

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‘children learn to speak and listen by being present at these activities... The fashionable emphasis on ‘oracy’ is in part a product of the tendency to regard English, not as a subject, but as an opportunity to acquire a haphazard collection of virtues... and in part an attempt to reduce the importance of Standard English.’

Here, for the first time the case for talk was being directly challenged.

These philosophical viewpoints were considered extreme at the time but some of these ideas, particularly the idea of accountability and publically defined ‘standards’ have influenced government policy over recent decades and may become more influential in the new policy of the coalition government. The Education Minister; Michael Gove, (2009) is adamant that educational policy has been in thrall to progressives who believe that ‘children should be left to discover at their own pace to follow their own hearts.’ (Gove cited by White, 2010:304). White (Ibid) argues that Gove has a rigid rather than a rigorous approach and that he is opposed to interdisciplinary collaboration and to areas that he conceives of as ‘soft’ knowledge, such as Media Studies.

The links to the authors of the Black Papers and the Centre for Policy Studies, who were strong defenders of the English Literary heritage, are therefore clear and Jones (1989) and Ball (1994) have defined this traditional approach as cultural restorationist. Gove for example; combines an elitist approach to language with an elitist approach to literature:

‘Our literature is the best in the world... It is every child’s birth right and we should be proud to teach it in every school’ (2010: 41).

### **3.4 The arrival of standards and league tables and a neo-comprehensive era**

Jones (1989) argued that it was only towards the end of the Conservative administration that aspects of this critique of comprehensive ideals found their way into any tangible government policy for example the promotion of City Technology Colleges, the pre cursor of Academies. The Conservative party; he suggests, took quite a long time to develop an

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education policy that distinguished itself from previous Labour governments. This was partly because of conflicts between 'modernists' and 'cultural restorationists' among Conservative party members but another reason for this delay was the popularity of the comprehensive ideal. Another feature of the move towards more intervention in the school curriculum though was Britain's decline in the world economy and the need to retreat on government spending. As Wyse and Jones point out effective child-centred education is teacher intensive and this necessitates expensive small class sizes.

After much debate and long deliberations a National Curriculum was agreed in 1989. There were mixed reactions to English in the National Curriculum (DES, 1990) as; although it began to mark out a body of knowledge in English and contained an implicit defence of the English Literary heritage; it was not heavily prescriptive and the document did acknowledge the important role of the spoken word in the teaching of English.

But, according to Cox (1991), those advocating the standards agenda were impatient with the ambiguity and liberalism of the original National Curriculum. Even the curriculum and SATS advocated by Cox gave teachers too much control (Cox, 1991, 1996) and instead the government moved towards pen and paper tests to ensure that standards could be made public and measurable through league tables. By 1995 a new highly prescriptive era began for English teachers with the English literary canon imposed from above, new pen and paper tests and public league tables that measured performance in reading and writing at KS1, 2, 3 in every school. The imposition of a prescribed literary canon and the need to prepare for narrow literacy based tests began to squeeze out space and time for talk, the discussion of literature and the exploration of social issues. The type of English teaching described by Barnes earlier in this chapter became more difficult. Jones (2011) argues that the 'white terror of conservatism' began to block the discussion about language and learning and the interest in subordinated cultures was no longer allowed. The conservatives had introduced the SATS and the league tables and the focus now began to shift decisively to school effectiveness as New Labour came to power, now clearly on the defensive about comprehensive schooling (Coulthas, 2013b).

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In 1998 the National Literacy Strategy (DfES, 1998) was launched to further improve standards in literacy, defined as reading and writing. Although some argued that the new Literacy strategy involved interactive teaching (Wilson, 2001, Bunting, 2000) it contained no specific strand or guidance over the teaching of speaking and listening in the primary school so strong was the focus on improving performance and setting targets in literacy (Wyse and Jones, 2001). The Key Stage 3 Strategy (2001) also put the emphasis on literacy, placing speaking and listening in the last column (Bousted, 2003). While other European countries and Wales continued to value the relationship between oracy and literacy (Alexander, 2001a,b, ACCAC, 2000), school teachers in England were now being advised, according to Alexander (2009) to adopt a state theory of learning and concentrate on a much narrower version of English as 'Literacy'. The NLS was very clearly located in a school effectiveness framework and represented a break from child centred approaches to English teaching towards an adult needs' view (Coultas, 2007b, 2009 c, d).

### **3.5 Where are we now?**

Many experienced English classroom teachers and teacher educators were sharply critical of the National Literacy Strategy (DfES, 1998) and the Key Stage three Strategy (2001) particularly in this area of the lack of advice on speaking and listening. They highlighted the damage done with 'ill-informed but authoritative advice' (Coultas interview with Scott, 2009d: 7) that neglected previous research and writing and failed to value the child's oral language skills or give teachers adequate guidance in this area (Bousted, 2003, Hunt, 2003, Coultas, 2007b, Wyse and Jones, 2001, Smith and Hardman, 2000, Riley and Elmer, 2001, Grainger, 2000, Scott, 2007). I have written of how the National Literacy Strategy was informed by an adult needs and school improvement approach and not one based on expertise in language in education Coultas (2009c). Wyse and Jones (2001) point to the instrumental character of the advice on talk in the original NLS (1998) where teachers are advised to use talk simply 'to enhance the skills of reading and writing' and suggest that the allocation of 'objectives to school years and terms is unprecedented in the history of English teaching'(p 21).

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However, in recent years, those supporting the sociocultural perspective have continued to attempt to develop the discussion on classroom talk. Robin Alexander, in his study of five different continents (2001a), where he demonstrated how for example in French and Russian classrooms oracy and literacy are closely linked together, through his input into the Cambridge Review (Alexander, 2009) and his work with Local Authorities in North Yorkshire and Barking and Dagenham, has continued to make a strong case for dialogic learning. He defines dialogic talk as reasoned dialogue (2004) where both teachers and pupils make significant contributions. Writers such as Mercer (2000) and Alexander (2001b) have begun to look more closely at what makes group discussions effective and analyse the different purposes of a teacher's discourse in the classroom.

Neil Mercer, in his *Talk and Reasoning at the Computer* (TRAC) project (2000), defines four types of talk: playful; disputational; cumulative and exploratory. He suggests that pupils need explicit teaching of the 'ground rules' to engage in successful exploratory talk and that if given this explicit training, pupils' talk will be more effective: that pupils are more likely to retain knowledge from group work over a period and be more willing to disagree. Roy Corden (2000) reviews the different reasons why group work does not always work well unless pupils become more conscious of the process; their role within it and the outcome and reiterates the advice from the National Oracy Project about how to plan for effective group work. He encourages teachers to create opportunities for children 'to develop a language or metalanguage to talk about different types of talk' (p86). My own writing and Goldstein's (2008) research for example, place emphasis on a slightly different point, suggesting that when pupils are given structured opportunities, when the task is clear and tight and the topic is relevant, children will engage in reasoned discussion in small groups.

At the QCA conferences on Spoken English, which took place in 2001- 2003 ; the papers circulated on whole class discussion revealed some interesting points, for example; the strategies pupils use to avoid answering questions in whole class settings (Galton, 2002). The writers at these conferences emphasised the importance of explicit reasoning in dialogic learning; the higher order cognition that this type of learning can promote. In this

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area of whole class discussion, these writers once again, return to the nature of the traditional Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) exchange to consider how teachers can promote dialogic talk with pupils as a whole class. Alexander has suggested that speculative and exploratory talk can take place in whole class discussion as well as in small groups but that it needs to be planned so that children can give answers where they think and reason.

This requires the teacher to prepare for interaction and engagement in the discussion by planning to ask open as well as closed questions; make statements and comments and ask for evidence from children to back up their answers. It also requires the teacher to listen carefully and respond appropriately, so as to build on and prompt further thought and by doing this they will encourage extended answers from the pupils. Alexander admits that promoting dialogue is 'not an easy task' in practice (2008:110) and that he concludes that, even when the ethos is right, the teacher's responses to extended answers are a key area of challenge as they can easily fall back into traditional patterns.

Mortimer and Scott (2003) have built on Alexander's idea of dialogue by suggesting that teacher and pupil interactions could be viewed on a spectrum of four different dimensions interactive and non-interactive and dialogic and authoritative. So a teacher can move from being dialogic and interactive to becoming more authoritative interactive at the end of more conversational encounter when they move into a more instructional mode. This rather complex analysis is perhaps suggesting that the teacher's role needs to vary in whole class discussions and be responsive to the situation and responses of the children.

Gudgeon et al (1998) have also used the idea of dialogic learning to revisit the process of guided reading, one of the less utilised ideas in the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) she points out, suggesting that this was an excellent opportunity to promote open ended discussion between teachers and pupils and she documents and describes a good example of such a discussion with a picture book first produced in the 60s, *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak (2000). Guided group work is an interesting area for talk. When working closely with a small group with whom you are familiar good questioning and

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response strategies can be developed more naturally for the teacher. But, paradoxically guided group work can also present difficulties for teachers, who have to maintain control over the whole group and this can be particularly difficult if a teacher follows the NLS suggestion that the rest of the children should be doing individual work. In reality it is more likely that the teacher will attempt to actively lead a guided group reading and discussion session when the rest of the class is engaged with group tasks.

Sutherland, (2006) conducted some interesting research on the promotion of small group talk and higher order thinking for the Teacher Development Agency (TDA). In secondary schools she found that exploratory and tentative talk was most likely to take place in small groups rather than whole class discussion, as pupils expressed a preference for group talk as opposed to class talk because they felt excluded from class talk and this could make them feel bored or frustrated. They also appeared unhappy about the no hands rule and were wary of strategies that forced them to join in as it could add to feelings of anxiety or embarrassment. The teachers in this study also identified the setting of collaborative problem solving tasks and knowing when and how to intervene in group discussions as key problems.

Carter (2002) has developed his work around the grammar of talk suggesting that spoken language is, as Halliday suggested language at full stretch, and that the spontaneous nature of spoken language should not give it an inferior status but rather schools should encourage pupils to develop a greater range, delicacy and complexity to speaker choice.

This brings me back to Maybin's (2006) work which emphasises the affective and socio-cultural aspects of talk that foreground issues of identity formation rather than the cognitive aspects of talk focused on by Alexander. Other linguistic ethnographers such as Lefstein (2010) emphasise the difficulties of dialogue, suggesting, from the teacher's perspective, it may be more of a problem than a solution, a problem that can help us think about classroom interactions more carefully. These different approaches to the challenges of classroom talk will be interrogated much more closely in the next chapter.

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Wegerif (2008) introduces yet another nuance into the discussion suggesting that difficult puzzles may be solved by children in groups out of a particular kind of silence and space for reflection including purposeful concentration on a problem rather than through the explicit reasoning that Mercer (2000) highlights as a feature of exploratory talk. However, in the examples discussed, the social context for promoting this kind of thought remained the intimacy of the small group and this may have created a social space for thinking and even using non-verbal modes of communication that still allowed children implicitly to think together.

This work on dialogic learning had some impact and the new Primary and Secondary Strategies eventually adopted a more positive stance towards speaking and listening (DfES, 2003d). But while references to dialogue were drawn into this framework, Alexander (2008:115) vehemently referred to the QCA 'appropriation' and 'bowdlerisation' of dialogic teaching because he believed that dialogue had been reduced to using standard English. This misrepresentation has happened, he suggests, because government advisors are trying to set his notion of dialogue in a prescriptive framework where it does not belong. He also points out (ibid) that government policy on testing threatens teaching's collective classroom ethic. The SATS, the controlled assignments, and the GCSE Exams, as written pen and paper tests of 'literacy', remain a strong barrier to schools giving time and thought to this mode of learning at all key stages (Coulthas, 2007b, 2009). In contrast, in Wales, teachers' judgements have been trusted and supported in promoting oracy (ACCAC, 2000).

Fleming (1997) suggests that a new consensus has been established about the teaching of drama in schools and that the controversy between process and performance has died down.

'Publications in drama now largely take a more inclusive view of the subject which sees a place for all manifestations of drama in schools' (p85).

Interestingly, Neelands (2011) contends that the wide range of issues tackled in drama lessons; imply that drama is filling the space that English once had in the curriculum in the



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past where teachers were able to use literary and non-fiction texts to explore social and cultural issues.

While many English teachers find themselves teaching drama (Coultras, 2007b) and drama teachers are also asked to teach English classes; these two groups of teachers are still very often trained separately. When they meet, however, interesting conversations can take place. For example English and drama teachers talking together about drama and English teaching underline Neelands point highlighting the 'freedom to explore in drama' using a specific convention whereas in English teaching you are limited by a very prescriptive form of objective led teaching where you are 'still bound by having to cover the National Curriculum and an assessment focus' (Pitfield, 2011:65). Initial teacher education courses for primary teachers can include drama and arts education for all students, however. The cross fertilisation of knowledge between English and Drama teachers and teachers in other subjects could clearly assist in the promotion of effective open ended talk in schools (Gibson,1998, Grainger, 2000). Although English teachers' self confidence in using a 'largely oral tool for learning' (Grainger, *ibid*: 67), is an issue for consideration here (Coultras, 2007b).

Hewitt, writing for the QCA conference 2002, focuses on the aesthetic traditions of oral performance highlighting three areas that he feels have been neglected in the 60's and 70's where the emphasis was on shared talk rooted in notions of community. These are recitation of for example classic poetry, the discursive tradition of school, house or class debate and individual talk on a chosen topic where the logic and clarity of the argument are important. These are the presentational skills that are used in the 'high culture' of universities, the law courts and parliament and anticipate the aspects of spoken language foregrounded in the new English Curriculum (DfE, 2013). Hewitt, however, recognises that these earlier forms are not totally absent from the modern approach but 'only as rhetorical shadows of their former selves'. The language of the writer situates the argument in a defensive mode but the points are interesting and the work of Gibson (1998) perhaps draws on aspects of this tradition, for example the choric reading and recitation of Shakespeare and Poetry, with a more democratic and culturally inclusive emphasis.

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The oral response option for GCSE English literature provided a fertile ground for new classroom approaches to setting up learning opportunities for discussion and individual and group presentations in response to literary texts. For example pupils could prepare a monologue, be in the hot seat in role as author, become the expert as a playwright or film director or make group presentations of a radio review show (Coultas, 2007b). But this option will be ended with the New English Literature GCSE that has abolished coursework and the oral response. There is also a danger with the new GCSE examinations at 16, and the pressure of the League Tables that focus exclusively on results in English, that the study of literature will return to its elitist status although many teachers will try hard to avoid this (Gibbons, 2009).

Spoken Language study has now been introduced as a component of the new GCSE (Atherton, 2009, AQA, 2009) to prepare students who wish to opt for A level English language and this is a step forward but it is a strand of language study that is distinct from the broader notion of using talk for learning. Most worrying however is the absence of the speaking and listening strand from the new proposed English Curriculum even at Key Stage 4 (DfE, 2013b) and the priority given to the promotion of standard English Coultas (2012). Disturbingly, the speaking and listening or spoken language mark will no longer contribute to the overall grade for the English GCSE exam (DfE, 2013b).

### **3.6 Conclusion: talk allows for learning as a meaning making process**

The case for promoting pupil talk and small group learning in the classroom is embedded in a Piagetian and sociocultural view of learning, a view that is premised on a model of learners working together to actively construct meaning. This is because as Barnes (2008) argues, 'school learning is at once individual and social' (p. 9) and that when pupils work together, as Chang and Wells (1988) suggest, literate thinking can be developed through collaborative talk.

As this chapter has shown, the promotion of small group learning and the discussion of how to use a wider range of talk repertoires in the classroom began as English teachers tried

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to come to terms with the culture of the pupils in their classrooms and developed new ideas about education during the rise of the comprehensive era of schooling. These teachers:

‘sought inspiration from the real worlds of children.... as sources of educational inspiration’ (Jones, 2011).

These teachers were attempting to value and develop the language skills of all the children, including children from working class homes, in their classrooms. They drew on theoretical insights from a range of disciplines and perspectives to justify these new approaches to using language and to exploring literature and social issues in the classroom believing that it was the job of the teacher to promote and construct the type of meaningful social interactions in the classroom that could allow new learning to take place for all children. Pair and small group talk were identified as a ‘powerful arena for learning’ at this time (Fountain, 1994: 57). The use of the small group would slow down and deepen the learning process so that ‘a larger proportion of the class will be actively involved in thinking aloud’ (Ibid).

Many writers since the 1960’s have therefore developed a sophisticated understanding of the dual role that talk plays in learning and recognised the need for teachers to plan for a range of classroom activities to promote talk or ‘learning situations where the pupils can learn as much as possible’ (Barnes, 1971:24). Wilkinson (1990), as I have highlighted in this chapter, was particularly insistent that ‘oracy and democracy are closely related’ (P39). But since the early 90’s, during a neo- comprehensive era, the English curriculum has been dominated by the necessity to raise standards in ‘literacy’ and a highly prescriptive curriculum (Goodson, 1992) has restricted teachers’ time, autonomy and limited debate and experimentation with talk for learning. The coalition government’s education policy now favours a form of rigid, adult led knowledge in English and will seek to impose standard English and restore the elocution model of talk where children’s speech is corrected (Coultras, 2012a, 2013a).

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The role of the teacher and teacher agency, however, has always been a central feature in these discussions in planning for meaningful social interactions in the classroom. The teacher still retains the power to use the social situation in the classroom to the best effect. As Barnes (2000) asserts he had no doubt that the role of the teacher 'was crucial' for they set up the learning, 'shape and direct it' (p98).

Recent research and writing among sociocultural educators has continued to develop new insights into the teacher's role in promoting pupils' reasoning skills in whole class debate and questioning and how to develop opportunities for effective participation in small group discussion. Linguistic ethnographers have pointed to the richness of pupils' informal talk and shown that researchers should avoid overly consensual models as conflict can help to clarify thought. Barnes, 2008, has reminded us that the forms of pedagogy advocated in this study, are 'a valuable resource in a teacher's repertoire but not a universal remedy'(p7) and that group work is not an easy or laissez faire option but needs to be embedded in meaningful discussion for pupils 'as part of an extended sequence of work'(p7).

The continued controversy about pupils' spoken language and renewed attempts to downgrade speaking and listening in the English curriculum (Coultas, 2012a) therefore make it particularly important to revisit the literature and documentation on classroom talk and to insist on clear definitions in this debate. There is a continual and frustrating emphasis on 'improving', a basic skills view, or 'correcting' children's spoken language; what Howe (1992) refers to as 'an elocution model of spoken language'(p5). This elocution model is counter posed to the 'talk for learning model' that has a much more sophisticated approach to the role of spoken language in learning as it sees talk 'as the way children "represent" the world...by telling someone about it and in so doing clarifying it for ourselves' (Howe, 1992:5). The latter model assumes that children develop their skills in spoken language organically both by using talk to learn and by being given a range of opportunities to use different talk repertoires. The overall argument of this chapter has been that it is this idea of authentic 'learning talk' that makes it a potentially democratic pedagogy.

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The powerful thread of research, writing and classroom practice, 'an articulate and moving consensus' (Jones, 1988: 21), that has promoted, debated and developed the discussion on talk and small group must therefore not be lost. So, once again I suggest that, although there should be a balance between activities in the classroom, it must be remembered that it is within the small group, where children engage in exploratory talk, that thinking can become explicit for all (Chang and Wells, 1988).

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## **Chapter 4: Classroom talk: are we listening to teachers' voices?**

'Education and creativity are always tragic processes; in as much as they...always arise out of discontent, troubles, from discord'. (Vygotsky cited by Rampton and Harris 2008:19/20)

I am investigating what teachers say about classroom talk through interviews and the study of a critical moment in a lesson to find out what they consider to be the challenges. In the last chapter I revisited the case for talk but, in this chapter, I aim to interrogate existing research to see how far it directly addresses the challenges of talk from the teachers' point of view, the topic of my study.

Given the strong case that has been made by linguists, social cultural researchers and a wide range of educators over a prolonged period (See Chapter 2) for promoting the collaborative use of language in the classroom and its emphasis in some of the policy documentation of the previous government (DFES/QCA, 2003d, DCSF, 2008) why then have many teachers, even English teachers, been wary or hesitant in fully embracing talk for learning? (Ofsted, 2005, Coultas, 2007b). English teachers in schools have been interested in classroom talk for a long period of time and I am trying to focus on where the problems the teacher confronts have been considered.

The question of what teachers find challenging about classroom talk will therefore be introduced here and there will be an attempt to discuss this issue from a researcher and a teacher's perspective before trying to bring those two perspectives together.

### **4.1 Writer and Researcher identified challenges of classroom talk**

#### **Oracy undervalued**

The transience and spontaneity of talk in comparison with writing, is clear. Writing is permanent and consciously crafted both in formal modes and even in the most informal exchanges such as text and email. While email and text messages are closer to the

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informality of the spoken word they are still more permanent forms of communication as many of us come to realise after dashing off an impulsive email response. Talk is usually spontaneous, reactive and in particular, is accompanied by non-verbal modes of expression, modes that can be quickly adapted in response to the reactions of the recipient.

These specific features of talk are therefore both strength and a challenge for the teacher.

Ron Carter (2002) has continued to emphasise how talk is undervalued, how literacy and literature are accorded a higher status and how pre-planned forms of speech are more valued than 'conversation' in all spheres. The constant undervaluing of talk has meant that the overwhelming emphasis in the academic literature has therefore been focused on making the case that talk 'is arguably the true foundation of learning' (Alexander, 2004:9). Against this background, writers and researchers in the UK have had to work hard to try and establish the relationship between talking and thinking and learning and the need to plan for the joint construction of knowledge between pupils in the classroom.

### **4.1.1 New research on exploratory talk-the poor quality of classroom talk**

An important contribution to the debate on the problems of talk and the quality of talk in classrooms was made by Mercer (2000). As mentioned in the previous chapter, he identified four types of talk when children were working in small groups at the computer: disputational talk; cumulative talk; playful and exploratory talk. Disputational talk involves pupils disagreeing but not discussing or acknowledging other points of view; cumulative talk involves pupils in reiterating other points made by their friends and trying to avoid conflict. Exploratory talk involves sharing ideas and giving reasons for them and this is the kind of talk that allows for cognitive challenge and development. This exploratory talk is the type of talk that leads to the guided construction of knowledge that can develop pupils' thinking. Mercer argued therefore that children needed to understand the need for common ground rules and develop their own rules for exploratory talk in order to improve the quality of group interaction. He also discussed playful talk in this study but this category has been less widely discussed. Mercer's ideas have had quite a strong impact on discussions about speaking and listening within the English Curriculum (DfES/QCA, 2003d).

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In a more recent contribution, Mercer (2008) stresses the importance of establishing 'a suitable context of shared understanding' for 'the development of extended responses and tentative contributions' (p64) in a report back or whole class discussion. There are several aspects of Mercer's research that can impact on teacher confidence in using talk for learning, for example the idea of induction and preparation of the class for a particular talk task by explaining the implicit conventions or ground rules for that form of discourse. Some of these ideas link back to the advice given to teachers during the National Oracy project discussed later in this article.

### **4.1.2 Planning for small group talk through scaffolding**

In another article, applying some of Mercer's ideas about exploratory talk with teachers in Mexico, Peon et al (2004) point out that:

'scaffolding is an easy strategy to understand but difficult to apply adequately because it interferes with ingrained teaching practices' (p 554).

Scaffolding is the process where the adult provides prompts or cues to guide children's spoken language. The teachers in the study accepted that the children needed support in developing their skills of argument but 'many teachers find it difficult to provide effective scaffolding' because 'it takes considerable time' (p 554). Some teachers also found it difficult to 'make their students reflect on experiences or involve them in a process of argumentation that allows for knowledge construction' and therefore opt 'for providing answers or solutions rather than scaffolding students' performance' (p 554).

In Sutherland's study (2006), the teachers also identified managing the groups and the ability to set tasks that provided an appropriate challenge for problem solving in groups as two key issues they struggled with. So while the benefits of small group exploratory talk are understood many teachers still seemed to find setting appropriate tasks a difficulty.



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### **4.1.3 The Initiation Response Feedback (IRF) exchange and problems of effective whole class discussion and dialogue**

One of the reasons for this might be that, as Mercer and Dawes (2010) point out, a certain type of talk appears to be a more natural mode of discourse in the classroom with a large group of children. Many studies of classroom talk have highlighted the continued domination of teacher talk and the Initiation, Response, Feedback (IRF) exchange:

**Teacher:** What's the capital of Argentina? (**Initiation**)

**Pupil:** Buenos Aires (**Response**)

**Teacher:** Yes, well done (**Feedback**)' (Mercer and Dawes, 2010:1)

Indeed, the IRF pattern was taken by analysts of classroom discourse as a defining feature of classroom talk. The pattern was first identified by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), linguists using classroom talk as a source of data. Through systematic classroom observations, the Oracle study, cited by Galton (2002), also found that the proportion of closed questions was much greater than the number of open questions used by teachers. Hardman (2008), after taping lessons, found a similar pattern, although open questions were used more in KS1 than KS2. Riley and Elmer (2001) in their research on the literacy hour found a similarly small number of open questions. Tony Edwards (2002) suggests that this transmission mode creates 'very unequal communicative rights' (p55) in classrooms between teachers and children. Alexander (2004) talks of 'the relative scarcity of talk which really challenges children to think for themselves' and the 'low level of cognitive challenge in many classroom questions' (p14). Yet according to Mercer and Dawes, (2010);

'many teachers (even those who qualified in recent decades) have not heard of it [the IRF pattern of classroom discourse]' (p1).

Researchers have pointed to the fact that pupils are not only aware of this IRF pattern but quite adept at developing strategies to avoid taking part in this classroom ritual. Galton

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(2002) asked pupils how and why they avoided being picked on to answer questions and they gave a number of interesting responses. They 'gave an impression that they required more thinking time' and suggested that they were in danger of being identified as 'boffins' if they 'volunteered answers too quickly' (p52). They said being asked a difficult question was 'like walking on a tight rope' (p 52) and that it was safer to get teachers to answer their own questions. With new teachers Galton suggests that a process of exchange bargaining took place where patterns of discourse were negotiated. Walter Doyle cited by Galton (2002, Ibid) found similarly sophisticated patterns of pupil behaviour; finding that some pupils would admit to putting hands up quickly to avoid being picked on and put their hands down if it looked like the teacher would ask them the question.

These findings are quite significant in describing and explaining much of what happens in classrooms and why even pupil expectations make breaking with this IRF pattern difficult. There is more discussion of how teacher and pupils' conversations in classrooms are more artificial than exchanges in smaller groups or informal one-to-one exchanges later in this chapter.

### **4.1.4 Reframing open into closed questions**

Lefstein (2008), using critical discourse analysis to closely analyse transcripts of exchanges in classrooms, is interested in finding out how teachers mediate the curriculum, in this case the National Literacy Strategy (DfEE, 1998), in real classroom contexts. He also asserts that the pupils play a role in determining the forms of discourse. For example; in an extended case study of one class in one primary school the teacher observed by Lefstein (2008); Mr Thompson reframes open questions into closed questions, sometimes in response to the absence of responses from the pupils; through the process of narrowing the scope of the question; hinting at how the answer may be found; leaving the question unanswered or answering the questions himself and breaking down the open question into a series of closed questions. In an interesting discussion after the lesson, the teacher suggests that he is unhappy with segmenting the reading experience into too much study and

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annotation of separate parts of the text as recommended by the National Literacy Strategy guidance for year 6.

### **4.1.5 Dialogic talk**

Alexander (2001a) in his comparative study of five continents; documents the variety of patterns of classroom discourse in different national settings, showing that in countries such as France and Russia where oral language has a higher status in the curriculum than in the UK, pupils are more likely to make extended contributions. He agrees that dialogue can take place in small groups but when teachers can prompt pupils to make extended and evaluative comments in whole class discussion, this can also be called 'dialogic talk'. This idea of dialogue therefore involves both teachers and pupils being able to make extended contributions and for the class as a whole to demonstrate progression in their thinking. Writing after working with several Local Authorities on dialogic learning; Alexander (2008) admits that achieving a dialogic classroom is no easy task as it 'is in effect a transformation of the culture of talk' (p110) in british classrooms. He suggests that it might be a first step to concentrate 'on getting the ethos, dynamics and the affective climate right; that is by making talk collective, reciprocal and supportive'(p110).

Alexander's work has influenced debates among educators and also has had some impact on the English curriculum before the Coalition Government came to power but he still expressed worries that official agencies may have 'bowdlerised' dialogic teaching not because they fail to understand it but 'as a conscious attempt to force it to fit a framework, and a view of education, with which it is not really compatible' (Alexander, 2008:113).

### **4.1.6 Psychological processes**

However there are indeed many complexities to group work and team building that are discussed in the context of adult learning. Douglas (1991), for example, identifies some common problems of group work even for adult learners such as domination, lack of trust, hidden agendas, disruptive behaviour and scapegoating. This implies that the facilitator

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always has an important role in monitoring and intervening to guide the groups in a positive direction and should also be prepared to reform groupings as and when necessary.

### **4.1.7 Practical problems identified in the National Oracy Project (NOP) era**

Some of the most interesting advice on the practical problems the teacher faces still comes from the National Oracy Project era (1986-1992). This was a period when a new English National Curriculum was being discussed and a number of important national projects were initiated to develop teachers' English subject knowledge, the LINC project for example (Carter, 1990). It should be remembered that during the 1970s and 80s there had been space for teachers to experiment with teaching approaches as the curriculum was less prescriptive and there is clear evidence of classroom based investigation of talk with Local Authority advisors working alongside teachers, an emergent form of action research (Sarland, 2011). Cook et al (1989) devote a whole chapter to some of the practical problems of talk. For example they recommend that disruptive pupils should be allowed to work together to produce a positive outcome and thereby show these pupils that co-operation works in practice. They propose that there should be a separate table to allow pupils to work alone as necessary even during group work. It is also suggested that the teacher should not appoint a leader but allow the group to form their own structures. This contrasts with the role the teacher plays in the QCA Speaking and Listening documentation and video (DfES/QCA 2003d) where the teacher; preparing pupils for group work to plan a stage design for a pantomime; very carefully ascribes particular roles to each participant as chair, mentor, scribe etc. Cook et al (1989) suggest a programme of activities to introduce children to group work where the class creates its own ground rules. These writers also suggest that the NOP model of planning: engagement, exploration, transformation, presentation and review (see Appendix 3) can allow the teacher to:

‘structure the work of the classroom so that significant learning, which generally involves time, effort and a measure of struggle, will occur’ (p15).

A key feature of this model is the focus on the process of how pupils are using spoken language to learn. For example in the transformation stage the teacher has to think about

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the precise ways in which the students will be asked to transform knowledge: through ranking; re-ordering; re-working the genre; putting the pieces of a puzzle together. It is this planning process of interrogating the cognitive challenge in the task that can make the teacher scaffolding of the group work successful. This is what can help to make for; what I call, *real* group work (Coultas, 2007b) and Barnes (1976) refers to as 'exploratory talk' or 'learning conversations'.

Also as Cook et al suggest the teacher always needs to think about which mode of learning is appropriate for different tasks. Cook et al (Ibid) also usefully highlight some really good practical ideas for promoting effective whole class discussion suggesting new audiences for the report back stage such as breaking students up into new groups, providing for a circle or semi-circle format at the end to promote a more evaluative and democratic discussion.

Sociocultural writers like Mercer and Alexander have therefore helped to maintain a focus on speaking and listening in the face of a retreat into literacy teaching in recent times: but the work of the National Oracy Project (Norman, 1992) is also an invaluable resource that should continue to be utilised in the discussion about planning for effective talk in classrooms.

### **4.2. Teacher-identified challenges**

The role of the teacher remains central in all of these instances however, in choosing the topic and the stimulus, deciding on and preparing the pupils for group work, arranging the groups, planning the task and the kind of questions that can orchestrate and promote pupils' collaborative knowledge construction. I am interviewing teachers to find out how they describe the problems and dilemmas of setting up productive classroom talk. Therefore, it is to the role of the teacher in terms of their subjective attitudes to talk and the influences surrounding them that we now turn. I have grouped the kinds of problems that teachers identify under some initial headings based on my own experience as a school and university teacher and informal discussions with other teachers.

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### **4.2.1 Social Processes**

Long ago; Douglas Barnes, who worked as a teacher for many years before becoming a teacher educator; in an interview in the English Magazine with Hardcastle and Simons (1988), suggested that perhaps there had been too much focus on the cognitive dimension of language in the classroom and not enough attention had been paid to 'the need to manage a class and all the other social pressures that one's coping with' (p4). In retrospect he suggested that the early writers on language and learning were 'talking about helping youngsters get access to knowledge and the ways in which various mechanisms were keeping them out and making them dance to teachers' tunes'(p4). Overall, he was critical of schooling 'for presenting kids with the result of someone else's thinking instead of taking them through the steps where they could get there for themselves' (p 5). Still encouraging teachers to develop new pedagogies and active learning strategies, he suggested he would now want to 'give more space to the nature of the signals coming (to teachers) from outside' (p5).

This concern with the signals coming from outside the classroom is a useful way of looking at some of the subjective problems and constraints that teachers may have faced in developing collaborative and exploratory talk in the classroom.

### **4.2.2 Practical problems**

Discussions with teachers and beginning teachers have highlighted the many practical issues the classroom teacher confronts when planning for talk and small group learning. These teachers point to issues such as getting the attention of the whole group to start the activity; how the children should be grouped; how the children should be put into the groups and how to check the learning when they are working in groups. On this latter point beginning teachers in London and in Denmark both raised a similar point. For example, the teachers raised the question that the children may be sitting in groups but how do I know they are working as a group? (Coultas, 2008). The teachers also wanted to know how group

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work should be assessed. Dealing with the dominant or shy child, the child new to English use was also a concern and the fear that it may be difficult to get the children listening to each other when they report back. In short, teachers could be saying; does not trying to plan for talk and small group learning make my job much harder?

These problems are there for all teachers planning for talk in any setting. How much greater must the difficulties for teachers working with challenging children in pre-adolescent and adolescent settings be; where behavioural issues make it particularly hard to teach effectively?

### **4.2.3 Peer judgements**

The teacher's self-confidence and the attitudes of others in the school can have a dramatic effect on promoting small group learning and exploratory talk. Judgements by your peers influence your approach in the classroom in many subtle and important ways. Beginning teachers and teachers new to a school are often acutely aware of these judgements. A quiet class; reading or writing silently in junior and secondary classrooms; is often a highly prized trophy to which many would aspire. And, indeed, there are lessons and moments in lessons where teachers will need to have a silent class. But perhaps successful lessons need not necessarily lie with continual silence but with a variety of modes of teaching and with students engaged in the activities that the teacher sets. Teachers are aware that while they may have the opportunity to promote their own classroom ethos; it is harder task to achieve an ethos that encourages talk if others in the school undervalue talk for learning.

### **4.2.4 Controlling the class**

However it would be also be very wrong to underestimate the problem of control of the class, or the difficulties of gaining pupil engagement, in different settings. I have written a more personal account of the extreme challenges of some mixed ability settings, lower sets, lively junior school groups and even early years teachers comment on the challenge that some pupils can present (Coulthas, 2007b, Chapter 2). Goldstein (2008); working with

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middle school beginning teachers; found that her teachers could be divided into 3 groups in their attitudes to cooperative learning. The first group were practising cooperative learning. The second group had tried but were not successful and the third group admitted they were 'afraid of trying; since they fear chaos and loss of control' (p2). She highlights the need for teachers to 'experiment, develop a comfort zone and adjust to the learning needs and styles of the students' (p2).

The huge success of texts such as *Getting the Buggers to Behave* (Cowley, 2001) and the wide variety of literature on behaviour management (Canter, 1992, Marland 1991, Blum, 2006) suggests that this is a central concern of many teachers in all schools but particularly so in urban primary and secondary schools serving disadvantaged communities. It has even become an issue in 6<sup>th</sup> forms and universities as a wider range of students have begun to participate in post-16 education.

A paradox exists here: small group learning and exploratory talk are vital to allow all pupils to learn effectively and use language for thinking, yet sometimes the resistance to learning appears to be strong among adolescents and it can be hard to persuade them to learn like this. While those advocating talk point to the long term benefits of greater pupil independence and self- control; it should be recognised that teachers require a lot of courage and support to attempt this type of learning with some groups of children (Richmond, 1982, Coultas, 2007b). Yet it is rare that we see academic writing on talk that acknowledges these issues.

### 4.2.5 The isolation of the teacher

Teachers will also refer to their isolation in the classroom and how pupil expectations; formed by other practices; also contribute to their difficulties in developing new styles of pedagogy. As discussed above, the teacher committed to small group learning often works against the strain and the overall culture of the school. Pupils can be encouraged to accept new ways of working over a period of time but the individual teacher is often battling against the expectations of the pupils derived from other, more traditional, perhaps



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patriarchal, approaches. Female teachers in all boys' secondary schools for example can experience quite extreme reactions including sexual harassment to different, apparently 'softer', modes of learning (Coultas, 1993). As a Head of English, in the 90's it was possible to encourage teachers to use a wider range of speaking and listening activities. For example developing a series of lessons and resources with oral outcomes to support the immersion in a Shakespeare text, (Coultas, 2006b). But conversations with secondary English trainees suggest that time for English departments to collectively produce and evaluate schemes of work with, for example, a strong oral focus, may not now be so easily available in many schools. While a recent Ofsted English document (2011) tends to imply that speaking and listening is embedded in good English practice; many schools appear to try and impose other priorities on English teachers, often concerning pupil tracking, assessment and teaching writing skills for exam preparation.

### **4.2.6 Fear of humiliating children**

The IRF can remain dominant for some quite sophisticated reasons. A teacher may want to be sure the class as a whole has fully grasped complex developments in a narrative and this requires some closed questioning. As colleagues with specialist knowledge of pupils with EAL and SEN recommend, Scott (2011): use of key words or visuals; information gap activities; time for thinking or re-reading aloud; or working in partners aid pupils in clarifying or holding the narrative. These opportunities to explore a text can then lead to more authentic questioning and more authentic answers from children whose understanding of the text or topic is more fully shared.

### **4.2.7 Planning, persistence and practice**

Stuart Scott argues (2007) that talk is 'too slippery' and 'difficult to control' for it to be easily promoted by managers in schools. This is where the objective and subjective problems collide for productive classroom talk cannot be packaged into a list of competencies or narrowly defined standards. What Scott is perhaps suggesting is that successful examples of classroom talk come in many different shapes and sizes and are

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often dependant on such unquantifiable features as the ethos and relationships in the classroom: oral language pedagogy therefore will be especially resistant to formulaic approaches. Sometimes a teacher can read aloud, talk or tell a story to children in a way that really engages or amuses the class and this can promote pupil response and interaction. At other times a teacher will need to allow for pupil talk in partners before gaining a response. It all depends on the context and choosing the right teaching repertoire for that task and that particular group. Productive talk cannot be imported or imposed on teachers in the classroom. It must be the teacher who chooses uses and refines this method.

What is being suggested here is that the teacher needs to be committed to talk to make it work and willing to practice, rehearse and try out different techniques and be willing to adapt and try again. Goldstein (2008) points out that in her discussions with trainees they suggested that great persistence was required to practice cooperative learning. Her trainees suggested it should be tried 20 times before they gave up and they also, once again, highlighted the fact that they had to take more care with planning to promote effective talk in classrooms.

### **4.2.8 Cultures of performativity and management judgements**

Talk is intrinsic to language development and to child development, personal growth and well-being. But teachers also understand that this type of teaching must come from below through sharing and developing not imposing good practice.

The terrible inconsistency of advice and policy on speaking and listening over the last two decades; for example in the National Literacy Strategy (1998); Key Stage 3 Strategy (2001) and the new top down business methods of training, have not supported the cultural practices in schools that could develop teacher self-confidence, creativity and intellectual engagement with this area. The emphasis in government policy in English teaching has been too narrowly focused on 'literacy' standards and targets, rather than looking at the relationships that support good teaching both between pupils, between pupils and teachers and between teachers and other teachers ( See Hart et al,2004). The traditional competitive

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structure of the UK and other Anglophone educational systems has been reinforced over recent decades with what Ivor Goodson (1992) has called 'Curriculum as Prescription' imposing top down models of teaching and learning. Discussions with trainee teachers seem to suggest that it is more difficult to get pupils to use language collaboratively in schools where; as Winston (2004) argues; lesson objectives emphasise the acquisition of skills or the secretarial aspects of English. This approach fails to value, alongside this, the more open ended outcomes of talk, drama and discussions of literature which enrich the learning process. As others suggest (Warner, 2008, Wrigley, 2002), the new performative hierarchies in education have also been imposed in a way that is likely to discourage teachers particularly in schools, but also to some extent in universities, from working collectively on curriculum development.

### **4.3 Research and teacher perceptions intersect. The debate on dialogue and classroom interactions: researchers begin to reframe the discussion in 21st century urban schools**

An interesting new discussion developed by linguistic ethnographers suggests that the debate on dialogue may be too idealistic a frame for contemporary urban classrooms (Lefstein, 2008). These ideas take more account of the issues that teachers have raised in the above section about the practical difficulties of behaviour management when engaging in small group learning and classroom dialogue.

Some important features of this debate include how we identify dialogue; an issue raised by Lefstein (2008) who asks whether dialogue should be identified by form or by spirit. Referring to Freire, Lefstein emphasises that dialogue should be viewed as an opportunity for critiquing dominant ideologies and a real forum for sharing knowledge, with teacher and student awareness of what they really do not know, not simply as a better means of transmitting knowledge. This is of course more likely to be possible in small groups or in classrooms where there is a strong degree of trust and familiarity. Discussing the complexities of dialogue he suggests that the 'more fragile the relationship... the more

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important rules and procedures become' (p20) but where relationships are strong the need for rules are lessened.

His writing is arresting because it reveals a more untidy, yet realistic, approach to patterns of classroom discourse. He suggests that in a discussion:

‘an emphatic statement.... can have a more powerful questioning effect’ (p11); it can open up debate not necessarily close it down. ‘Dialogue’, he argues, ‘should be viewed’ not ‘as an ideal’ but ‘as a problem-riddled with tensions-with which we are consistently confronted’ (p18).

He is perhaps implying that we need to avoid imposing artificial models of consensual discourse in classrooms when we do not necessarily expect these in other forums for discussion. He also suggests that emotional and power relations exist within all groups and these influence the tensions and difficulties present in classroom discourse. Dialogue, as previous points have emphasised, takes place in front of an audience. The teacher performs and orchestrates the dialogue in front of and interaction with the class. The class performs in front of the teacher and each other. Therefore dialogue is part of that performance as students take account of what their peers think about what they say, and how they are teased if too eager to please for example in replying to the teacher. As children get older their peer reference points become stronger as they take account of ‘side participants’, ‘eaves droppers and by-standers’ (Lefstein,2008:3) in their dealings with the teacher during classroom encounters.

The teacher may need a sophisticated awareness of the constraints of the performance factor and in order to illicit pupil participation in the discourse, may engage in playful repartee; jokes, storytelling, teacher in role or unusual responses to win the class over (Coultas,2007b). Familiarity with the group will usually make this easier.

Research by Rampton and Harris (2008) develops this argument in contemporary urban classrooms by comparing classroom interactions in different comprehensive schools; for

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example; an urban comprehensive Central High and a suburban comprehensive West Park. They argue that the IRF pattern is breaking down in Central High School; where 'instructional and regulative disciplinary talk, authority seemed to have become pluralized' (p3). The group of vocal male pupils at Central High, an urban school in an area of social disadvantage:

'jumped to complete their teachers' sentences.. told their teacher to carry on.. back channelled...provided evaluative feedback...contradicted and criticised what their teacher was saying... contested the teachers' comments and complained if they were ignored'. ... (Pp 3 / 4).

The researchers suggest that these pupils were engaged in what they describe as 'non-deferential learning' - and that their 'utterances' demonstrate 'an interest in artful performance as an option within the official lesson' and that 'they were bidding for acclaim for their quick droll wits' or 'embellishing the proceedings' and 'lightening the load'(p8).

Although the detailed way in which these modes of behaviour is described in this research is new, the 'non-deferential learning' itself is not. For these patterns of pupil behaviour have been identified by many writers on behaviour management over several decades and writers like Gilbert (2004), myself (2007b) and others have written individual and personal testimonies of this behaviour looking at such classroom scenarios from the teacher's perspective.

Later Rampton and Harris (2008) refer to Vygotsky's view of 'the atmosphere of tense social struggle in classrooms' (p18) and point out that these were mixed ability classrooms, with the more able or more articulate boys dominating, the girls silent and unwilling to participate and that their experienced teacher informants were 'not wholly at ease' (p18) in the contexts they were working in. They also point out later in the article that 'official policy treats urban classrooms as nothing more than the chaotic outcome of incompetent pedagogy' (p20) and that teachers working in these schools often have 'no space to reflect on their work with anything other than failure or shame' (p20). Their teacher respondent

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views highlight the inverted power relationships that can exist in challenging classrooms with pupils in the driving seat echoing other teachers' voices working in inner city schools.

Here we begin to see some of the fears and practical concerns of teachers intersect more directly with research. There is some acknowledgement that for example these teachers, working in urban schools in mixed ability classes with a high proportion of pupils from disadvantaged communities, face distinct problems in entering into a dialogue with their students. This contrasts with the situation of the teachers in suburban West Park, where there is a more socially advantaged school population and the IRF continues to dominate as the 'teachers could generally talk to the class for substantial periods relatively free from interruption'(p15).

It therefore becomes perhaps more understandable why many teachers in challenging urban schools, are nervous about using the more active types of pedagogy suggested by advocates of collaborative learning and exploratory talk. But my study suggests that by focusing on and probing some of these problems and others that teachers raise, and still being aware of the benefits of talk, we might encourage teachers to work through these problems.

This chapter has attempted to evaluate a variety of contributions to the debate on effective classroom talk. It has highlighted some initial thoughts on teachers' experiences with classroom talk and discussed some of the ways in which teachers may find talk a challenge. It is suggesting that looking at talk as researchers from outside the classroom gives us one view but I am suggesting that; on this complex topic; we need to listen more closely to teachers' voices to gain a deeper understanding of this issue. By compiling a series of case studies in my research I therefore hope to help develop a forum for a sympathetic but critical discussion that increases awareness of the challenges of classroom talk from the teacher's point of view.

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## Chapter 5: On method: life narrative case studies of classroom talk

‘..personal narratives and individual lives and experiences are located within the situated, political and local contexts of education and schools’ [and therefore] ‘identity biographical work of educational actors should therefore be both individual and social’ (Goodson, 1992:50).

### 5.1 On method

This study involves a close focus on teachers’ spoken narratives and their reflections about what they find challenging about talk in the classroom. My main method is to interview teachers and ask them to record an episode in their teaching. My aim was to create case studies that make teachers’ voices count for something in the debates surrounding talk in classrooms.

My main question is what do teachers find challenging about classroom talk? Earlier in the study, I tried to identify some of the theories that have influenced this discussion and charted the history and policy debate around the role of spoken language in learning in Chapter 2 and then began to develop some initial ideas about the challenges teachers face in Chapter 3. My subsidiary questions are to do with the role talk played in the teacher’s life in education? What role does it play now as teachers? What problems do teachers have in setting up and managing classroom talk and how could they be helped to make classroom talk more effective? (See Chapter 5).

I chose an interpretive research paradigm that sees the social world as fluid where individuals construct meaning in many different ways. But, as Jones, (89: 57) suggests, ‘the sense that individuals make of the world is saturated by the understandings made available to them by their culture’. So I have also given weight to how cultural contexts, social structures and processes influence and intersect with the teacher’s view of their classroom practice. For material circumstances, as Hall (1983) argues, are the ‘net of constraints, the

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conditions of existence for practical thought and calculation about society' (p 83) and these will influence teachers' views and options for pedagogy in the classroom.

My main interest is to try and shed some more light on the gap, or what Hymes (1996:5) refers to as a 'contrastive insight', between the official endorsement of talk in policy over several decades and the persistence of the didactic mode of teaching in classrooms. Both my own experience as a school and university teacher (Chapter 1) and recent research suggest that, while many teachers believe that learning talk is important, in practice they try to maintain tight control of the discussions in class and often resort to didactic methods (Barnes, 1976, Edwards and Furlong, 1978, Wells, 1987, Alexander, 2004, Mercer and Hodgkinson, 2008).

In this chapter I explain how I aimed to answer the questions I pose above by combining autobiography, life narrative interviews and the evaluation of a critical moment. In discussing the choice of methods I also outline my theoretical framework and the specific nature of this critical practitioner enquiry. I also discuss ethics and the audience of my research.

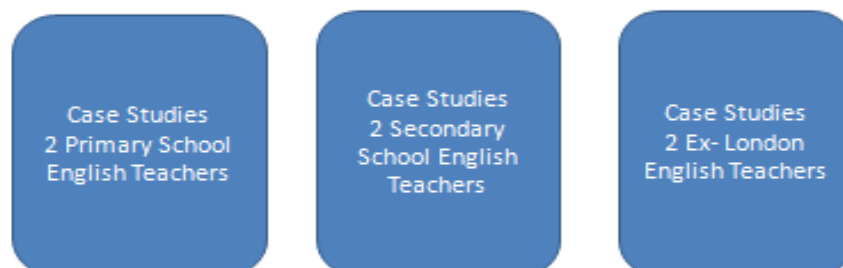
### **5.2 The research design**

Figure 1: six case studies

The figure below shows how the project comprises six case studies



## Teachers' narratives of classroom talk: what are the challenges?



From the outset, I wanted to involve English teachers working in different phases of education and at different stages of their careers. I also needed to keep the study manageable. Therefore I chose two teachers from primary schools, two teachers from secondary schools and two ex-London English teachers who are at advanced stages of their careers. By such means I hoped to capture not only stories from contemporary classrooms but also stories from the past to bring out the nature of the perceived challenges of talk.

I started by writing my talk autobiography, reflecting on the role talk had played in my life in education. I then carried out interviews with the 6 other English teachers. (See interview schedule in Chapter 6). At a later stage, I asked the teachers to video a lesson and identify a critical moment where they felt they had used talk well or where they wanted to reflect in more length on their experiences with talk in this particular lesson. Initially I tried out this approach with the evaluation of my own critical moment as a pilot for the research activity (See Appendix 4). I adopted the two phase approach because I was aware that the interviews would enable teachers to express their views on the value and challenges of talk but that the stories would be more rounded if there was an opportunity for teachers to make

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a detailed reflection on their practice in this area. This could enrich what they said in the interview about their challenges.

The idea of a critical moment for talk in a lesson built on Tripp's (1993) notion of a critical incident in teaching where you are able to look back and analyse a key moment in professional practice so that you can reflect and evaluate your practice in closer detail. I was not aiming to catch the teachers out by revealing gaps between what they said and did in the classroom. But I wanted to try and stimulate deeper reflections by allowing the familiar classroom setting to become a little more unfamiliar as teachers watched themselves and observed their teaching from a different vantage point than is normal. This could problematize and increase awareness of how talk works in the classroom.

The video and the short transcript therefore acted as a stimulus for the evaluations that took place jointly between the teacher and me as the researcher. I took detailed field notes of these discussions where I acted as a critical friend (See Appendix 5). At each stage in this process the teachers checked the interviews, the transcripts and the field notes. The final stage of the study was a small group discussion, with me, Cathy, a primary school teacher and Stephen an ex-secondary English teacher, to give me some more feedback on how I was presenting the data and the findings. This discussion gave me additional insights as it allowed interviewees to interact with each other and the findings of the study at that point. Field notes of this group discussion are included in Appendix 6.

### 5.3 Why life narrative case studies?

The 6 teachers in the Case Studies are at different stages of their careers in education but they have all taught English in schools in the Greater London area and all the teachers are interested in classroom talk. I knew that these interviews would require a degree of trust as we were going to discuss the challenges of talk. I felt that the focus on the challenges of talk were potentially problematic issues for teachers to address particularly in any one school setting as; in the present context of surveillance of teachers and competition between schools; this study might be perceived as having a negative effect on school image. I

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needed a group of teachers that I knew would be interested in this topic and that I could engage with as a fellow practitioner. So I chose a group of the teachers who have taught alongside me; or have been tutored by me at Kingston University. However the two Kingston University students were now NQTs and were no longer being taught or assessed by me.

This study therefore is shaped by interactions between me and the group of teachers and in this sense, represents a process of co-construction rather than simply the views of a single person, though the overview is my own. For example my discussions with Stephen Eysers made me aware of the wide range of freedoms that he as an English teacher enjoyed as part of the Talk Workshop at Vauxhall Manor School in the 1970s and how his approach to discovery learning and talk was even more open-ended and relaxed than my own approach, becoming a Head of English in 1994 just after the National Curriculum had been adopted. This re-emphasised for me how the era and context influences the choices you make as a teacher. And how fieldwork, as Coffey (1999) suggests, 'can shape, challenge, reproduce.....ourselves and the selves of others' (p6).

A pilot questionnaire with beginning teachers that I tried out; tested some of the questions and highlighted some of the practical difficulties of talk; for example choosing and managing the groups (Coulthas, 2008). But it did not reveal the kind of detailed information I was looking for about classroom interactions and the way in which even experienced and committed English teachers can still face contradictions and tensions when they try to promote small group learning and whole class dialogue. Neither would such a survey have allowed me to include a historical perspective on this topic which has been gained from using my autobiography and the interviews with the older teachers. I therefore chose to compile the case studies by working with a group of teachers, in different phases of their careers; to investigate and reflect on classroom talk in more detail over a longer period of time.

In choosing a life narrative approach and asking teachers questions about their life experiences in education and the role talk has played, I have incorporated some of the

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assumptions made by educators and socialist feminist writers such as those that highlighted the power of women's personal narratives. Rowbotham (2001) articulates these assumptions and places them historically when she reflects that feminists in the 70s were trying to demonstrate the value of their own observations and feelings in developing new understandings and concepts. In my Talk Autobiography, I refer to the ways in which consciousness raising groups in the 70s were able to provide new insights into female oppression and identify institutional and cultural practices that discriminated against women. Pinnegar and Danes (2007) also acknowledge that the civil rights movement and the women's liberation movement influenced social science research 'in key ways' (p24) helping to initiate the turn to narrative. Narrative enquiry, they suggest is able to:

'embrace the power of the particular for understanding experience' and provide 'powerful, authentic evidence of the need for..social change' (p24).

As Bruner suggested (1984) narrative operates on 'two planes, one of action and one of consciousness-that is of what those acting, know, think, or feel'. Life narrative stories of classroom talk therefore seemed particularly appropriate to try and understand the sometimes messy and unpredictable nature of teachers' classroom practice with talk. MacIntyre (1984) also contends that narrative research can give us greater insights:

'because ... we understand our own lives in terms of narrative ... narrative is appropriate for understanding...others' (p211-212).

The life narrative case study approach has therefore been chosen to gain an in-depth study of the particularities of classroom talk and the social and emotional factors that influence teachers' practice and challenges in a small set of cases.

By documenting the thoughts and experiences of teachers within the tradition of narrative enquiry and research into teachers' lives, I hope to 'gain a rich, detailed understanding (of each) of the cases' (Thomas, 2009: 115) of the challenges teachers face even when they are committed to promoting classroom talk. In this sense it is an instrumental study (Stake,

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1978) undertaken to gain more understanding and awareness of how talk works in the classroom.

### **5.3.1 Some issues with case studies**

Case studies are not without their critics. Stake (1978) alludes to the tendency of such studies to exaggerate the detail rather than look at the wider picture. Also the lack of precise 'quantifiable' evidence means that accounts can be characterised as 'subjective, biased, impressionistic, and idiosyncratic' (Cohen and Manion, 1994:110). But Clandinin and Connelly (2000), on the other hand, maintain that narratives of particular cases can promote reflection in action and that 'our professional memory (makes) it possible to return to experience, not as a black mark on the mental slate but as a resource for educational professionals' (p 38). Schon (2002) believes that reflection-in-action can allow teachers to arrive at a new theory as they articulate a feeling about a particular case and that this method avoids a separation between thinking and doing.

And while it is difficult to generalise from this small set of cases, it is possible for some of the features of the case studies to resonate with other teachers (Clandinin, 2000). In reporting this study to a range of teacher audiences, the relevance and authenticity of the discussion of classroom interactions has been acknowledged by other teachers and educational researchers (BERA, 2013). The teachers' stories of classroom talk highlight how each challenge is unique and yet how the teachers' reflections are also influenced by the social setting, context and the era in which they are working. The choice of a group of teachers working in education across different eras has given the study a sociocultural and historical perspective as this allows for consideration of different cultural and political influences on the work of teachers in classrooms. This contextual richness demonstrates the strengths of a case study approach to this topic and the influence of the era on the options teachers have, is reflected on in detail in the discussion of the data in Chapter 6. Here I consider the nature of the signals coming from outside that influence teachers' challenges with classroom talk.

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These case studies therefore have the potential to add to the body of knowledge that exists about the way in which talk works in the classroom. Many studies have looked at classroom talk from the child's point of view but this study aims to provide some detailed descriptions of how talk looks from the teacher's point of view.

### **5.4 Practitioner research as a form of creative dialogue**

This study is also an example of practitioner research because I am both seeking to evaluate my own practice and prompt other teachers to evaluate their practice in this area. As my talk autobiography and my writing (2007b) makes clear, the questions that I am asking have been generated from my own teaching in both schools and universities. I have asked myself how and why I have promoted talk in the classroom and what were and are my challenges and then asked these questions to the other teachers. I will therefore be 'an active agent in the process of gathering and interpreting' (Thomas, 2009:109) the data I collect.

McNiff (2007) contends that action research aims to improve practice and is a form of 'creative dialogue of equals in which both are trying to find the best way forward for themselves and each other' (p25). The aim of this study is to 'celebrate what [teachers] already know' about the way talk works in the classroom and perhaps 'generate some new knowledge' through the discussions (McNiff, 2007: 7) about the challenges it poses. This approach to scholarship and research builds on the ideas of Stenhouse (1970) who believed that 'it was not enough that teachers work should be studied but that they needed to study it themselves' (cited by McNiff, p 143). Importantly, McNiff suggests that Stenhouse's ideas about research were linked to his ideas about the curriculum and how it should be organised in a way that was 'relevant and meaningful to the students' (McNiff, 2007:12). Hodgkinson (1957) also highlights the progressive origins of action research in the USA suggesting that it flowed that from asking children to work together to solve problems that teachers should do the same.

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Those who criticise action research suggest that it can be idle contemplation and also that it is difficult to assess the 'impact' of the research or; as Winter 1982 suggests; carry out an analysis when there is no claim to be representative in this approach. Practitioner research can on the other hand; lead to change more quickly than traditional research as it is often hard to convince those inside the classroom that they should follow advice from those outside. McNiff (2002) understands this and highlights the potentially collective nature of action research as a mechanism for 'improving the quality of life for themselves and others'(p21) and as a way of assisting people in 'understanding how they can influence social change'(p21). However, she agrees that there is a need for practitioner research to be systematic and that evidence needs to be provided to support particular claims.

Research has been defined as:

‘the process of arriving at dependable solutions [or insights] to problems through the planned and systematic collection, analysis and interpretation of data’ (Cohen and Manion, 1994: 40).

Cohen and Manion (1994) suggest that the aims of practitioner or action research need to be clearly stated and a careful analysis made of the context for the research. The claim in this study is not to provide evidence of improved practice but to aim to increase awareness of how English teachers view talk in the classroom and to gain a wider understanding of the challenges it presents in different settings.

### **5.5 Phase 1: Talk autobiography and life narrative interviews**

I have written my own talk autobiography to start this study (Chapter 2). The decision to start with this; as explained at the beginning; was based on the value of autobiography in understanding how our present practice with language and our knowledge as teachers is informed by our past lives and the era or circumstances in which we have lived. As noted earlier, Coffey (1999) suggests that auto ethnography has become a more familiar feature of

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contemporary research making 'it easier to utilize genres such as the auto/biographical and the personal narrative/confessional' (p10).

My talk autobiography makes it clear that I am looking back and retelling my story from the particular viewpoint of my older self to find out more about my challenges with talk. This as Miller suggests, allows me to be more reflexive as it shows openly 'where [I am] coming from' and 'what [my] strengths and weaknesses are as [a commentator]' (Miller, Ibid, p26).

It made me more aware of the role of informal and exploratory talk and learning outside the classroom in my educational development, the way in which class and gender shaped my intellectual identity and my concept of myself as a learner and helped me understand the importance of trust in classroom relationships. It also began to make me more aware of the influence of government policy on schools and classrooms. Finally, by revealing the importance of learning talk for my intellectual and social development, it helped me decide on the life narrative approach and identify the kind of questions I wanted to ask other teachers.

### **5.5.1 Life narrative interviews**

My main method was the semi-structured oral interview. This combined 'the structure of a list to be covered with the freedom to follow up points' (Thomas, 2009:164). This enabled me to probe respondents and follow up answers that needed more clarification. I also decided to draw on life narrative approaches in posing the questions and creating the case studies to try and understand what different teachers find challenging about classroom talk. So, for example before I discuss the role of talk in the classroom, the interviewees were first asked the question: 'what role did talk play in your own life in education?' I was interested in hearing and documenting the teacher's views and I hoped to open a window into the personalities and motives of these teachers. This gave both more individuality and a wider context to the study as it allowed me to look at the teacher's life in education, their values as well as the challenges of talk.



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I wanted to find out more about what the teachers thought about the challenges of classroom based pupil talk. The choice of the word challenges allows me to analyse teachers' choices about pedagogy as a 'complex pattern of behaviours that are joined together through (the teacher's) consciousness' (Berlak and Berlak , 2002:9). This no blame approach recognises that teachers face many contradictions in their daily lives in the classroom (Cortazzi, cited by Pollard, 2002) and allows me to begin to see how teachers come to make their choices. Looking at the challenges and choices teachers face also 'enables us to consider the relationship of school to society' (Berlak and Berlak , 2002:10). So by reproducing a series of personal narratives, through these interviews, I hoped to produce a rich source of data that could explain individual choices about classroom practice but also take account of the effects of the institutional and cultural constraints that frame teachers' work.

### **5.5.2 Some issues involved in interviewing for this study**

The interviews have taken place in the schools or offices of the interviewees. In one case the interview has taken place in the home but this is also the office as Stuart now works as a consultant. The questions (See Chapter 6) were sent to the interviewees prior to the interview and this gave the teacher time to think back about their memories of school and their experiences as teachers in schools. The interviews were recorded both by taking notes and on a dictaphone as the questions were answered and I asked supplementary questions as needed. The interviewer's positive interest in classroom talk is declared and apparent from both the abstract and the first question. Kitwood, 1977 ( cited by Cohen and Manion, 1994) suggests that:

'if the interviewer does his (sic) job well (establishes rapport, asks questions in an acceptable manner etc.) and if the respondent is sincere and well-motivated, accurate data may be obtained' (p 274).

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But Cicourel, 1964 (cited by Cohen and Manion, 1994: 275) points out, as in everyday life conversations, there are many factors that make one interview differ from another and it is almost impossible to bring every aspect of the encounter within systematic control.

Passerini (1991) an Italian historian; also explores the idea that when you ask, for example; interviewees to look back; you have to consider the idea that memory itself can be a construct. For as teachers look back and I write my autobiography, this is done in the light of present realities. As Passerini (1991:3) suggests: 'memory is the tool we have in order to give meaning to our lives'. For as we discuss our past lives we tell stories about ourselves. This is why I chose the title of teachers' narratives of classroom talk.

Teachers will often view their past experiences and their younger selves in the classroom in a more romantic light than when they were actually experiencing those lessons. Queneau (cited by Passerini, 1991) suggests that when you have a past 'there are spots that seem so beautiful that one repaints them for himself every year' (p1). In this sense memory; according to Passerini, (1991) is a construct: 'people's memories of their past lives ...are' also 'shaped by their expectations for the future' (p2). Therefore when we ask anyone to look back on their lives we have to accept that 'remembering has to be conceived as a highly inter-subjective relationship' (p2). But we also know that remembering is vital if we wish to 'connect different generations, times and places' (p3) as I have tried to do with teachers in this study.

In one of her diary entries in another book *Autobiography of a Generation Italy 1968* (Passerini, 1996) writes about how the interviewees in Naples make her aware through their smiles of the 'distance between the story and the truth' (p 15). She suggests however; that what attracts her about memory 'is memory's insistence on creating history itself' (p 15). In my interviews I hope that the teachers' memories have come alive and created some history about teaching talk in school.

In conducting these interviews, I have found that aspects of everyday life were influencing my encounters. For example, I was adapting my original more facilitative approach and

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using a slightly more interrogative or dialogic style of interview with one of the interviewees, Stuart. This was because it enabled me to press him to consider, in more depth, some of the more practical issues that the teacher really confronts when attempting to promote talk and small group learning. So, for example; in his interview (Coultras, 2009a), I played devil's advocate several times in repeating the question about getting the class to listen and follow instructions in setting up a jigsaw extended oral activity in a lively classroom because I was interested in focusing the discussion on how pupils can undermine teacher's intentions however thorough the planning has been.

When I was interviewing the classroom teachers however; I did not adopt this interrogative mode because the practising teachers were more forthcoming about the challenges of talk and I did not want to interrupt their thought processes as they were, in general, less rehearsed in the debates. This latter approach conformed more directly to the semi-structured interview where I acted as a facilitator, prompting responses for clarification where appropriate.

This difference of approach was an explicit recognition of the contrasting power relationships between the interviewer and the interviewee. Walter Humes, (2010), suggests that you have to be aware of how 'powerful players [in] elite interviews' (p 12) can sometimes conceal views or exaggerate their own role or 'be careful to avoid saying anything too controversial, in case it harms their dealings with fellow professionals in the future' (p12). Although the relationship was slightly different in this context, I am aware that relationships and social status can influence the way knowledgeable interviewees respond. Importantly for this study, it also revealed that ex-school teachers, even those who have been long-term classroom teachers, can forget, or fail to appreciate the practical challenges a classroom teacher faces in setting up classroom talk as they become observers or assistants of teaching rather than the main participant in teaching children. But I also understand that the interviews with the older teachers have acted as a kind of mentoring experience for me as the insights have greatly enriched my reading and thinking in relation to talk for learning.

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So this study makes no assumptions about there being good or bad interviews in that bias is inevitable but suggests that it is important to acknowledge the various factors that are to be taken into account when interviewing. Key attributes to aim for in what Woods, 1986 (cited by Cohen and Manion, 1994) calls the ethnographic interview, are therefore trust that promotes a bond of friendship (a factor already present in this study) curiosity; a desire to know and hear the stories about talk and naturalness; that endeavours to secure what is in the minds of those being interviewed.

### **5. 6 Phase two: a critical moment for talk**

I wanted to steer the teachers towards practical issues to see what emerged when they spoke about a lesson they had taught to supplement the views they expressed about the place of talk in learning and in their own lives. The second phase of the research therefore took more account of teachers' classroom practice and their problems arising directly from practice, by asking them to record and transcribe a 'critical moment' in their teaching. To pilot the second phase I recorded a joint teaching session with Stuart in a university seminar as we had both been English teachers who were now training English teachers. This was a poetry lecture we planned together. I started the session and Stuart led the second half of the session. Both teachers were recorded teaching and then chose a critical moment to transcribe. My critical moment, at the beginning of the session, allowed me to pilot the approach I was using to establish whether it would be effective in encouraging teachers to evaluate classroom talk (see Appendix 4). I was not happy with just trying out a critical moment on others before using this tool of analysis to reflect on my own teaching. Stuart's critical moment, in the second half of the session, provided the basis for the discussion recorded in the data chapter in phase two (Stuart, 2011). I could now cascade the 'critical moment' idea down to others having used it myself and with Stuart. This followed on from the practitioner research focus where I was not just researching the teaching of others but also seeking to develop my own practice.

So, in phase two therefore, I worked with the teachers to record a teaching session, identify a critical moment for talk and then transcribe and evaluate that moment. The teachers chose

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a moment in this recorded lesson that they defined as 'critical' because when viewing the video they identified this moment as an opportunity to learn something about the way they used talk in the classroom. This moment was then transcribed. This text and the video then formed the stimulus for a non-judgemental collaborative evaluation between the teacher and researcher where the teachers 'can explore their handling of the case' (Schon, 2002:7) and 'subject themselves to critique'. The transcripts and field notes from this discussion were included in the data file and then added to each teacher's case study. With the School teachers, I transcribed that moment myself as we watched the video together but the 2 ex school teachers, who were very interested in the study and perhaps had more time as they were now working on a part-time basis, volunteered to transcribe their own moment.

Another way of describing this approach is stimulated recall. As O'Brien (1993) suggests the stimulated recall interview, 'has been used to attempt to find out what goes on inside someone's head while they are learning' (p214). Lyle (2003) contends that there are potential limitations to this method as the subjects:

'may re-order their accounts in response to activating deeper memory structures...Once information is established in the long term memory', he suggests; 'it ceases to be recall...but rather reflection or a combination of experience and other related memories' (p861).

There is also a danger of interviewees adding tacit knowledge that could therefore provide inaccurate reasons for their actions.

The use of the video and the transcript in the recall sessions however had the benefit of reintroducing the cues that were present in the lesson and gave the evaluation some immediacy and a real life context. The teachers were also in control of the recording and selection of the critical moment which acted as the stimulus for the evaluation. The aim was to gain the perspective of the teachers, their interpretation of the critical moment for talk. Indeed; the aim was not to exclude teacher's tacit; insider knowledge and expertise but to use it to promote critical reflection and evaluation in a specific context.

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Hardman, (2008) discussing the dominance of the IRF exchange in classroom interactions (See Chapter 3) and its resistance to change; insists that that sympathetic discussions about talk and 'supportive interactions with peers through modelling and feedback is necessary if the recitation script is to be changed'(p147). During the evaluation of the critical moment, I acted as a critical friend and prompted the teachers to stand back from the video and the transcript and look at it anew by exploring the positives, the constraints and the interesting and unexpected features of their practice. This thinking prompt was originally developed by De Bono (1987) and I had used this prompt with pupils in the classroom when interrogating literary texts to try and look at a topic or theme from different angles. Hardman (2008) posits that it is only if a teacher's thinking changes that their teaching approach will be altered. Moyles et al (2003) also suggest that video clips of their own practice; what they call video-stimulated reflection and dialogue, can be a powerful influence for encouraging critical reflection amongst teachers. As I have pointed out earlier, Elliott (1977) posits; a better way to improve teaching often lies in making people more aware of what they are doing rather than trying to control what they are doing. So I would argue that these collaborative but critically evaluative processes are particularly useful in an area of pedagogy that has proved so resistant to change over such a long period.

I hoped that the interviewees in the two interviews; would be able to speak and reflect on their experiences more openly and freely because it was clearly practitioner research and the common frame of experience; the knowledge of the teaching situation and the shared interest of wishing to promote talk in the classroom; would assist in making the teachers feel comfortable in talking about some of the complexities and difficult challenges of promoting talk in the classroom. There did appear to be a degree of trust. For example, one teacher after speaking strongly about the lack of democracy in schools today when asked if he had admitted to finding the interview process enlightening:

‘ Yes-It made me look at my teaching situation from outside and made some themes clearer-my lack of power, the restrictions I face in the present situation’(Peter, 2008).

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This method of data collection would present a rich account of the issues and problems of talk as these teachers perceived them. On the other hand it is recognised that; because of the personal contact; the desire to please or support the interviewer may have influenced the interviewees' answers and that different answers may have been given to an interviewer they had not met before.

Thus through the life narrative and the stimulated recall interview, I hoped to achieve my aim of gathering rich data for case studies that could interrogate the issue of what teachers find challenging about classroom talk on a deeper level than would be possible in a larger survey.

### **5.7 Ethics**

I have made all the interviewees aware of the aims of my research and gained written permission for each interview. The letter (Appendix 3) that each interviewee has signed guarantees that the schools they work in and their own names will remain anonymous and that they have the option to withdraw from the research at any time. In the case of two retired teachers, Stuart and Stephen, who have written widely on talk and learning, they gave me signed permission to use their name and publish these interviews in journals so I used their names in the study. The teachers that I taught were no longer my students when I interviewed them so they were not being assessed by me.

I have also tried to interrogate the broader ethical and moral implications of the research process itself by considering whether the interviews would have a positive or negative impact on the teacher interviewees and whether or not the research will be socially useful to the teaching profession and I discuss this in the final chapter.

### **5.8 Dissemination and analysis**

In disseminating some of the findings so far, I have used verbatim reports of the talk autobiography and the interviews. This approach draws on some of the insights of grounded theory where the interview can be seen as a place 'where knowledge is

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constructed' (Cohen and Manion, 1994:37), understanding that knowledge is constructed 'in a specific social situation' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and where unanticipated answers may suggest new relationships. The alienation that is expressed by one teacher in the first interview was even greater than I expected for example; where he talked of his lack of power. Early on in the study this alienation was not expressed so strongly in an interview with a primary teacher, but in the discussion group Cathy articulated some similar concerns and disquiet about a new regime of observations and learning walks in her school and the effects this might have on experimenting with talk. The spoken words of the teachers tell us that this is so. So I have used the pen portraits and the short transcripts from my field notes of the critical moments as plays that the audience can read aloud to give them a more detailed and authentic account of the challenges of talk in the classroom and the contexts the teachers are working within.

When presenting my findings the research has had resonance with English teachers and teachers of other subjects, particularly those who find themselves in challenging urban settings. But I have also found that, teachers who work in very high achieving schools or in HEIs have been very interested in my work because highly aspirant pupils are sometimes resistant to group work and lessons that focus on the process of acquiring knowledge. After compiling the case studies and summarising each teacher's interview and critical moment, I have used 'the constant comparative method' (Thomas, 2009: 198) looking for similar or contrasting statements in the interviews and the field notes of the critical moment. Cooper and McIntyre (1983) describe this approach to the analysis of qualitative data as empirical phenomenology, an iterative process as it is a result of a series of interactions between the reader and the text; where the researcher continually refines and tests the themes as they unfold; treating the participants accounts, and the case studies, as data. In this study, I have continually returned to and re-read the individual cases and interrogated the narratives for themes and contrasts but I also invited some of the teachers to feedback on the themes identified during the group discussion. (Appendix 6).

### **5.9 The audience of the research**



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How I would capture the teacher's voice concerned me because I was aware of the different audiences of my research. For while I realised that my study would be judged by the academic community; I wanted to choose a topic and a method of enquiry that involved active reflection as a teacher and would therefore potentially resonate with other teachers. I therefore drew on my own teaching experience and my thoughts about the difficulties of teaching using talk and wanting to develop my own practice in forming the topic and research questions. But the biographical identity work of for example Ivor Goodson (1992) also helped frame the research and led to the choice of narrative enquiry to allow teachers to talk to me about their lives in education in order to document a story of their experiences of talk as pupils, students and teachers.

Goodson (1992) posits that the audience of much educational research is fellow academics and that this can mean that research is inaccessible to teachers and outside their control. He argues for a 'teacher centred professional knowledge' (p15) and maintains that by studying teachers lives it might be possible 'to develop a modality of educational research which speaks both within and to the teacher' (p15).

A desire to understand some of the life and classroom experience of teachers in particular schools and universities and their challenges with classroom talk is where the enquiry began, (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). By talking to the subjects of educational reform and valuing the teachers' classroom experience and views on government policy, I hope to assist in the development of a critical discussion about talk in classrooms, aiding teachers in the development of some new understandings.

### 5.10 Summary

I have outlined my research design and my research questions and given a clear rationale for my choice of autobiography and the life narrative interview and the decision to ask teachers to identify a critical moment for talk in their own lessons to collect data to inform the individual case studies.

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These methods best serve the interest of my research which aims to highlight teachers' voices in the debates surrounding classroom talk and to develop my own understanding of how talk works in the classroom. But in order to maintain a critical stance it should also be remembered, as Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argue, that:

‘all field texts are elucidations of experience, the notes the recorder makes, the selection of video shots or transcript, the selection of documents ...are also constructed representations of experience’ (p106) and the researcher should always be ‘alive to partial, unreliable evidence wherever it raises its head’ (Cunningham and Gardner, 2004: 6).

Cunningham and Gardner suggest that documentary research might be used to modify or complement narrative research however as had been attempted in earlier parts of this study to give evidence of for example some of the rich debates that were taking place on talk and language among London English teachers in the 60s, 70s and 80s.

The theoretical justification of this methodology has drawn on Feminist theories, advocated by writers such as Rowbotham (2001), that foregrounded personal narrative as potentially giving greater insights into, in these cases teacher's lives in education and the challenges of talk. The sociocultural approach of this study views the individual as a social being teaching in a particular historical context and setting and considers the influence of this on the teachers' understandings of classroom talk. It also suggests that pupils and teachers both learn best when working together. In a tradition of advocacy narrative, the study poses questions and prompts reflections that allow the teachers to review their practice but also to highlight their present challenges, contradictions and the institutional constraints they may face in setting up productive talk in the classroom.

These case studies and evaluations of life and classroom experiences of talk and the challenges it presents for the teacher, have formed the essential field in this study. The ‘significant problem’ (Wright-Mills, 1970:136) is to consider why learning talk has not been so widely adopted, looking closely at the challenges and the institutional and social

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constraints teachers face when they wish to promote this type of learning. The 'passion in this study' (Wright-Mills, *ibid*, p 136) lies with the desire to highlight the continuing significance of 'talk for learning' and to give a voice to English teachers, who have been underrepresented in recent debates on talk and pedagogy. Hopefully the result will allow teachers and researchers to become more aware of how talk works from the teacher's point of view and how collaborative evaluations can assist critical reflection on talk.

# **Teachers' narratives of classroom talk: what are the challenges?**

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## **Chapter 6: Introduction to the case studies**

I have divided this chapter into two sections. In Chapter 6a, I present six interviews discussing the role that talk plays in teacher's lives. In Chapter 6b, I present the teachers' evaluations of their critical moment for talk in a lesson.

### **Chapter 6 a: The case studies: interviews**

I am going to present each of my case studies in turn and for each one I am going to summarise the narrative that the teachers tell about the role of talk in their lives as pupils, students and teachers. I have chosen to do this because in many cases this has a bearing on how they choose to use talk in the classroom and the seminar room. My overall aim was to get teachers to talk about the experiences and challenges they faced so that they could evaluate their successes as well as identify the challenges and constraints. I have included the interview schedule and the questions that I asked in the introduction to this chapter. These questions were the starting points for the discussion with the teachers.

The case studies are divided into the three different phases of primary, secondary and ex-London English teachers. In each interview I group the answers under similar headings stemming from the questions. I am presenting selections from the transcripts of the interviews under each heading. The answers I received presented me, in some instances, with interesting and unanticipated reflections. So in this chapter I take insights from each teacher's interview and summarise and comment on each case study in turn. In my summary, at the end of each case study, I discuss each teacher's understanding of the challenges of talk.

### **Primary Teachers**

Case study one-Cathy's story: primary English NQT

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Case study two-Gertrude's story: assistant head in a special school/ English and Early Years teacher

### **Secondary Teachers**

Case study three-Jean's story: English and Media secondary NQT

Case study four-Peter's story: secondary Deputy Head

### **ex-London English teachers**

Case study five-Stuart's story: ex-London English teacher, Director of the Collaborative Learning Project

Case study six-Stephen's story: ex- London English teacher, Head of Drama Vauxhall Manor School, Talk Workshop

### **Chapter 6b: The case studies: critical moments**

There has been an assumption made throughout this study that teachers' aspirations for pupil led interactions are not always followed through in practice (See Chapter 2 and 3). Each teacher in this study was asked to video a lesson and identify a critical moment for talk in that lesson. This is a telling moment which the teacher identifies and then shares with me after watching the video of their lesson. But these moments were not designed to catch teachers out but rather to enrich their evaluations of the challenges of talk in practice. I record the teacher's reasons for choosing this moment and make field notes of their evaluations of that moment in discussion with me.

As discussed in the previous chapter, by focusing on a short video clip of a critical moment for talk I aimed to stimulate extended discussion and reflection to enable the teachers to

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'stand outside [their] practice, take stock and review it' (Jones, 2002: 43) in discussion with myself as a critical friend.

In this chapter, I describe each teacher's critical moment for talk and explore what they have learnt from evaluating that moment. The transcripts presented are a shortened version of the teacher's chosen moment. The discussion around the video and the transcript with me allowed the teachers to consider their strengths, the constraints they felt were operating on them and what was most interesting about the moment, categories borrowed from De Bono (1987) as explained previously. This aimed to assist the teachers in evaluating the lesson in an open and self-critical manner. The reflections of the teacher after revisiting this moment provide vital insights into the challenges of using talk well in classrooms. I have selected what I consider to be the important reflections of the teachers. A full version of the field notes taken at the time is presented in Appendix 5.

The case studies, through the interviews and the comparison of the critical moments, were therefore designed to bring to the surface teachers' awareness of how talk works in the classroom and where the challenges lay for them.

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### 6.1 Interview and critical moment analysis schedule

Name	Age at interview	Date of interview	Date of Critical Moment Analysis
V. Coultas, talk autobiography	56	December 10th 2007	March 29th 2011
Peter, Deputy Head secondary school	46	April 8th 2008	October 10th 2011
Stuart Scott, ex English teacher, Director of Collaborative Learning	66	September 26th 2008	March 29th 2011
Cathy, primary NQT, and Year 4 class teacher	38	March 20th 2009	June 3rd 2012
Gertrude, Assistant Head Special school , English and Early Years specialist	45	March 20th 2009	May 5th 2013
Jean, secondary NQT, English and Media teacher	36	May 15th 2010	June 6th 2012
Stephen Eyers, ex-English Teacher, Talk Workshop, Vauxhall Manor School	69	July 19th 2012	December 12th 2012

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### **6.2 Questions: the semi-structured questions that were used in each of the interviews as a starting point for the discussion**

1. How important was talk and oracy for learning in your life before you became a teacher?
2. How important is talk to you now as a teacher?
3. Can you describe the problems you have in getting the class to listen to you and how you attempt to overcome these problems?
4. Do you have any problems in getting the pupils to work well in groups?
5. Are there any problems with gender or race and group work?
6. Think of a lesson where you planned for the pupils to use small group learning and describe it.
7. What would you like to do better in relation to talk and small group learning?
8. How might universities and schools support teachers in using talk and small group learning more effectively in classrooms?



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### **6a: The case studies: interviews**

#### **6a1 Cathy's story of talk: primary NQT Year 4 class teacher**

##### **6a1.1 Interview**

This interview was conducted in March 20th 2009 at the school where this teacher worked. The head teacher expressed interest in the research. The school was a Community Primary School in the Greater London area. The teacher was 38 years old and had been a mature student at Kingston University. She had been a student on a number of courses that I taught including the English Subject Specialist course of the BA Primary Teaching (QTS) degree. She also became a student on the MA Professional Studies in Education course at Kingston.

##### **6a 1.2/3 Talk in your life before you became a teacher and schooling and talk**

Cathy had had a very unusual experience of talk for learning at primary school. I see talk playing a central role in children's development both in and outside school. The language children bring from the home into the school is a resource for extending a child's linguistic and intellectual growth. But Cathy's memories of her primary and secondary schools were of very formal settings, where the teaching was very didactic and there was little talk allowed.

The schools that I attended seemed to suggest that we should sit very quietly. There was very didactic teaching going on, they wrote something on the board and we copied it down. If we were working independently there was no talking. Some of my memories of primary school are very much like that. (Cathy, March 20th 2009)

It was in her Post 16 college experiences that she began to use talk to learn. Her comments below suggest that she gained a lot from informal talk and learning from her peers on the course she took. Cathy felt that the more intimate, personal and exploratory context for talk

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had a dramatic effect on her intellectual self-confidence and that this enabled her to use talk in larger forums:

I think it was when I was studying to become a qualified dental surgeon assistant and attending a college course that I began to talk to learn. Just discussing the subject matter with other people was important to me and I used to communicate a lot with other people on the course. It was both formal and informal talk. We used to have coffee and talk about what had been discussed in the lectures and then talk about personal matters as well. This kind of talk had an effect on my intellectual self-confidence because I was able to verbalise on an intimate basis my thoughts on that subject rather than in a big class of twenty people and this gave me more confidence in the larger forum to put forward ideas or make suggestions (Cathy, March 20th 2009)

By the time this student arrived at university as a mature student she stated that she was very willing to participate in formal and informal discussions:

I think you are talking through what you heard and someone else sees it differently and it is just so interesting. (Cathy, March 20<sup>th</sup> 2009)

So Cathy's early experiences in schools can be contrasted with her experiences in Post 16 and university education. She clearly enjoyed and gained confidence from the intellectual stimulation of informal and formal talk later on in her life in education.

### **6a 1.4. Talk in your life as a teacher**

The classrooms that this teacher works in are full of talk and she makes a direct and conscious link between how talking to learn boosted her self-confidence and how she teaches now. She said that she wanted her pupils to have opportunities to use talk to learn and encourages talk partners to make sure pupils have tried out their own ideas. She suggests that this also helps them recognise what others bring to a conversation:

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I love talking classrooms. I will ask a question and see how many hands go up and if there aren't very many I say: 'Ok talk to the person next to you' and more often than not there are more hands up next time I ask the question. This goes back to my own experience, if you can verbalise something or hear someone else's view it gives you the confidence to speak up and express your view. So I think there is a direct link between your own experience of learning and how you teach children. Talk isn't just about pouring out your own ideas but perceiving other views in a dialogue. (Cathy, March 20th 2009)

### **6a1.5 Problems of talk, listening and group work**

She did not have problems of getting the attention of the class and in general she felt that her year 4 class listened well and were able to work successfully in groups. But she did admit that there were occasions when they were in a lively mood:

There are always times when the children talked 'off task' and interestingly, I found this more common after we had been on our residential trip. The children had become more familiar with each other and I suppose, had more to talk about personally. (Cathy, March 20th 2009)

But she also pointed to a few more social problems. One of the issues she highlighted was that of gender and she talked about how she dealt with this. She explains that she will allow the children to work in friendship groups but also encourage them to work in partners or in mixed groups in some instances:

Occasionally, there are some gender issues, boys and girls often want to go into separate groups. When they are put together sometimes some don't want to work like this. I like to encourage them to work as partners and then mix them up. In the morning they are in their literacy groups and sometimes they are in their groups

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where they move from 2s into 4s. I make a distinction between friendship groups (mixed ability for fun activities) and teachers' groupings (Cathy, March 20th 2009)

She highlighted some very interesting points about girls dumbing down their contributions so as not to alienate the boys. She was also aware that the boys can be very verbal and suggested that it was sometimes necessary to get the boys to be quiet and allow the girls to speak.

Sometimes very able girls in literacy groups dumb down their contributions not to alienate the boys. The boys are very verbal and demand prompting. You sometimes have to get them to be quiet to draw out the girls. The sharing ethos in the class helps to produce an even spread between boys and girls in class discussions. (Cathy, March 20<sup>th</sup>2009)

### **6a 1.6 Success with group work and talk**

She was very enthusiastic in talking about what worked well. She chose a non-fiction task that involved students researching a topic of their choice and presenting their findings to the group. She pointed out that she was building on work she has done as a beginning teacher at Kingston University.

This was a literacy lesson a part of a weeklong series of lessons. The pupils were researching their own topics and developing their note taking skills. They were allowed to choose their topic and choose their groups. They started thinking about what they already knew and began to organise their thoughts. They had to plan a power point on the topic and this involved them building up the information and then presenting it. This was fabulous. They had control over the group; the topic, how to present and all the pupils became actively involved. It reflected what we had done as students in our Year 2 presentation around Higher Order reading skills. (Cathy, March 20th 2009)

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She emphasises that giving pupils more choice and control over their learning can empower them as learners and that their peers provided a very interested audience:

They also had the experience of standing up in front of their peers who were a very interested audience as each topic was different. For me it emphasised how giving control really works. Choice empowered them (Cathy, March 20th 2009)

### **6a 1.7 How teachers could be helped to make classroom talk more effective?**

Cathy has obviously managed to develop a wide variety of teaching repertoires using talk for learning and was eager to further refine her styles of oral language pedagogy. She was interested in thinking about how to group the children more effectively:

I would like to plan for more strategic grouping for more effective learning. There are some very articulate boys and girls in my Y4 class. I want them to be able to share ideas and develop the confidence of all the pupils. (Cathy, March 20th 2009)

Cathy felt that her university course had assisted her in developing a range of teaching repertoires. She highlighted the modelling of group work such as envoy activities, the group presentations the students gave on teaching Higher Order Reading and the reflection on group work in sessions:

The School of Education did a good job of modelling different activities. For example-the envoy activity, where someone was sent out to find out what another group was doing, the presentations that we were encouraged to make, the issues around working in friendship groups that we had to reflect on. (Cathy, March 20th 2009)

But she also wanted to emphasise that beginning teachers also needed to learn from seeing talk used in the classroom. She wanted school partners to model this kind of pedagogy and encourage team teaching in lessons based around talk:

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Seeing classroom teachers' practicing this type of pedagogy is particularly good for beginning teachers. Partner schools could be asked to model this and encourage team teaching and planning these types of lessons with a more experienced colleague. I think that it all starts from the classroom ethos... (Cathy, March 20th 2009)

### 5a.1.8 Cathy's understanding of the challenges of talk

Cathy felt disempowered at school and found that talk in her Post 16 vocational training helped to boost her self-confidence as a learner. She went into university and into primary teaching on a mission to create 'talking classrooms' where pupils were encouraged to think aloud and get more out of lessons that she felt she had as a child. This reaffirms the view that our life experiences in education help form our identity as teachers.

The interview gives us a picture of Cathy as a self-confident teacher, who is very interested in oracy, working well with her classes and feeling confident about using a range of talk repertoires with the children. She is relaxed with her classes and identifies subtle nuances about girls dumbing down for boys for example and she realises that informal or exploratory talk is often the most effective form of dialogue in classrooms. Her reflections on gender and talk in the classroom are also interesting and unexpected although these are issues that were sometimes discussed in sessions on oracy in the university. She is open minded and wants to plan for more strategic grouping of the children showing that she is willing to look critically at her own practice.

Liveliness and off task talk is a continuum for teachers. It is always there to some extent but for Cathy this is not a major problem. Her good classroom control enables her to identify, in quite a detailed way, the subtle nuances of power relationships in classrooms. She suggests that 'boys and girls in year 4 often want to go into separate groups'. She was slightly worried that on some occasions 'very able girls in literacy groups dumb down their contributions not to alienate the boys' (Cathy, 2009). She is also aware of the need to get the boys quiet to listen to the girls. But again she highlights her power in using 'the sharing

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ethos in the class' to help 'to produce an even spread' (Cathy, 2009). This 'even spread' is an interesting aim that could be the subject of further research perhaps.

### **6a 2. Gertrude's story of talk: Assistant Head and Early Years specialist**

#### **5a 2.1 Phase one: interview**

This interview was conducted on March 16th 2009 in the Special School in London where Gertrude works as an Early Years teacher and as an Assistant Head in charge of staff training. Gertrude was 45 years old at the time and she had worked for many years as a teacher. Her school was involved in the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) of teachers in her school and at Kingston University. I had initially met her in this role as the staff development coordinator.

#### **6a 2.2/3 Talk in your life before you became a teacher and schooling and talk**

Gertrude recounted her early language history and revealed how she had not been a confident talker as a child. This was the result of the specificities of her family situation and the softness of her voice as she explains below.

I was always very shy and wouldn't speak up in class unless I was spoken to....I really wanted to but I found it difficult to be confident enough. I was happy to listen to others. I found it difficult to join in conversations because my tone of voice was too soft..... I was an only child in a small family and when my father and grandparents died I was on my own with my mum. My mum had a very quiet voice and I modeled my voice on hers. (Gertrude, March 16th 2009)

Gertrude also highlighted that as she grew older and had the opportunity to 'be social' and make new informal friendships her confidence increased. She says that she felt very passive at school but this changed when she went to university where she felt that she had more opportunities for social and informal talk.

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Meeting new friends at University really helped me. I felt passive at school. Sharing a room at university changed this ..... As I have grown older I have become so much more confident. The change was due to going to university, meeting new friends, making the decision to become a teacher. (Gertrude, March 16th 2009)

When she first became a beginning teacher the softness of her voice was once again an issue.

I was worried about the use of my voice. ..We discussed this at the first meeting on my teaching practice but I developed in this area'. (Gertrude, March 16th 2009)

### **6a 2.4 Talk in your life as a teacher**

Gertrude understood that talk was important. As an experienced Early Years teacher she had a very strong understanding of the role of talk in learning. She understood that talk is the means by which children learn about the world around them and become familiar with particular linguistic and cultural practices. She insists that through speech children build up new concepts and engage in literate thinking as Gordon Wells suggested (1987). She specified the ways in which talk was important in the Early Years classroom.

I suppose talk is very important. It's how you get your message across. It reflects on you....Talk is essential to an Early Years teacher. Children are learning about the world through talk, listening and exploring speech to build up new concepts. I can use questioning to introduce new ideas. Why do you think it does this? (Gertrude, March 16th 2009)

She also demonstrated how the Early Years teacher in this setting creates opportunities for talk and explained the crucial role of the adult, as the knowledgeable other, in planning for and scaffolding the language development of young children.



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There is the home corner where children can dress up in a free flow of child-initiated play. There are also adult led activities where the adult will plant the seeds, asking open ended questions to lend support and there are other opportunities where the children can learn from each other..[ the teacher]..using and adapting rhyming and action songs and get children to put the story in their own words ( Gertrude, March 16th 2009)

### **6a 2.5 Problems of talk, listening and group work**

Interestingly, Gertrude had very clear advice, with very clear cueing systems, on how to get the attention of the whole class. She stresses the need for having knowledge of the children in the class as well as adopting multi-sensory approaches, using a story, music or visual prompts to focus the pupils' attention:

Children are sitting on the carpet.. getting them to listen needs multi-sensory approaches, a toy, something that will stimulate their interest...then you can take it forward. Something visual for them to focus on that supports what you are saying. It's quite individual depending on the child, some may need to sit near you; some need something physical to hold onto; others need to sit in a particular place. ..you need to know how each child will respond and there is often an extra adult. Music is also useful and children need a little bit of time, a reminder (Gertrude, March 16<sup>th</sup> 2009)

She also suggests that classroom routines and rituals can bond the group together:

During transition periods we clap hands to refocus and create a sharper moment to draw them together. (Gertrude, March 16th 2009)

This is a very useful and succinct summary of how to keep children focused not only for teachers in the Early Years but also in many other phases of education.

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### **6a 2.6 Success with group work and talk**

Gertrude gave an example about playground design from a Year 2 class that she had taught. Here she draws on ideas of Dorothy Heathcote's (1996) because she is lending the children 'the mantle of the expert' as they work in groups to design a new playground for their area. She emphasis how the children 'loved it' because it was motivating them and that a lot of new learning was taking place.

We were looking at designing a playground. It was run down and we asked the children to work in small groups to tell us what they would like to improve it. They loved it...it was motivating and interesting...we built a model based on their best ideas...there was a lot of new learning going on, the stimulus and the small exploratory discussion brought out their thoughts and ideas for slides, roundabouts etc. ( Gertrude, March 16th 2009)

With this example Gertrude demonstrates the importance of the right stimulus and choosing topics and themes that engage the group here and she also discusses the importance of both open endedness and structure in tasks that involve exploratory talk and independent learning.

When discussing the problems of small group work a key area for Gertrude, perhaps thinking back to her own experiences, was the dominant and the shy child. She shows a sophisticated understanding of the process of differentiation in groups that work well together and also the role of the teacher in observing and intervening in the groups when appropriate.

We want all children to participate and we need to see if they can sort it out themselves. But that also needs some kind of structure and that's where holding an object or a time frame or a key worker can help. A lot of observation is needed and the adult is also a role model. There will be different inputs but if the children are interested in the task the input will be more even (Gertrude, March 16th 2009).

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Gertrude admits that girls may be shy in group work but her main focus is on children with special needs and the need for changing roles and perceptions of children.

Children with SEN can be babied by the group....Children with speech and language difficulties and special needs need to have enough time ...they can be left out...in the playground in turn taking games they can be the leader and also in describing and memory games..... children with SEN and EAL need to have more opportunities to take on different roles.... and that all this is influenced by the culture of the classroom. (Gertrude, March 16<sup>th</sup> 2009)

### **6a 2.7 How teachers could be helped to make classroom talk more effective**

Gertrude felt that modeling the use of talk was important in universities and giving school students the opportunity to reflect on the use of talk in classrooms was also important:

Universities and schools should model the practice of using talk and discuss this with students. The classroom bond of learning needed to be established and students needed to play different roles and then take these ideas back into their classrooms. The important thing was to give everyone an opportunity to become confident learners. (Gertrude, March 16<sup>th</sup> 2009)

Here again Gertrude reinforces her point that children with SEN and EAL should be given opportunities for different roles and language repertoires in classrooms.

### **6a 2.8 Gertrude's understanding of the challenges of talk?**

Gertrude's home life when she was young was very influential in forming her identity at school, where she felt quite reluctant to talk unless spoken to. She is, like Cathy, another 'late developer' when it comes to feeling confident about talking to learn and only in her university years, when she makes new friendships, does she feel able to become more

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articulate and self-confident. Her reasons for this late development are not explained by the formal structures of the school as they were in Cathy's case but by her family environment. As she said in the interview:

'I found it difficult to join in conversations because my tone of voice was too soft..... I was an only child in a small family and when my father and grandparents died I was on my own with my mum. My mum had a very quiet voice and I modeled my voice on hers' (Gertrude, 2009).

Like Cathy, Gertrude as a teacher is also very aware of the central role that talk plays in learning and the role the teacher needs to play in using the social situation effectively. She demonstrates this in the many detailed and precise comments she makes about using talk in the classroom. Her discussion of the use of stimuli and cueing systems; her perception that the group task, the group composition and roles need to be varied to avoid shy children or children with special needs being excluded or 'babied'; her understanding of open questioning and opportunities for structured and open ended activities and the development of a sharing ethos all demonstrate a very detailed understanding of how language works in the classroom. Her Early Years' background is an asset as spoken language has to play a very large role in learning in this setting. Her school classroom example shows that she believes that children will be motivated by meaningful tasks such as designing a new playground and that this will stimulate new thinking and new learning.

Gertrude also understands that schools and universities need to give new teachers opportunities to practice these techniques and reflect on them. She returns to some of the themes in her own life at the end of the interview suggesting that she wants all children, including shy children, to feel confident and comfortable in using talk in a variety of ways from an early age and the teacher plays a key role in observing and noticing how the groups are working. Once again her life experiences in education are helping to inform her identity and pedagogic choices as a teacher and her understanding of the challenges of talk.

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### **6a 3. Jean's story of talk: Secondary English and Media Studies NQT**

#### **6a 3.1 Interview**

This interview was conducted on May 15th 2010 at the school, a mixed comprehensive secondary school in London, where this teacher now worked as an NQT. Jean had been a part-time student on the Secondary English GTP programme at Kingston University and I had been her tutor for four terms, visiting her at this school.

#### **6a3.2 Talk in your life before you became a teacher**

Jean's earliest experiences of talk were very positive and her reflections challenge deficit notions of home literacy practices in single parent families. She also felt at home in her primary school and comments that she was always asking questions:

As a child I was learning to talk in the family, a single parent family, and there was lots of talking with my sister and younger brother. I was very confident in primary school, which was like a bigger version of home, and I was always asking questions... (Jean, May 15th 2010)

#### **6a 3.3 Schooling and talk**

But at the upper end of primary school she was bullied and felt less at home:

until Year 5 when I was bullied for being overenthusiastic and a 'boffin'. (Jean, May 15th 2010)

She moved to a bigger house and was sent to a new secondary school, a grant maintained comprehensive secondary school. And here she regained her earlier confidence and she had a more positive experience of talk, recognising that her English and Drama lessons helped

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to empower her in spoken language. But she still understands that she had most opportunities for talk informally in the playground:

Here I got my confidence back but I spoke mostly in the playground.... The English teachers were good with texts and with questioning and I also opted for Drama and the Performing Arts. I spoke less in Maths. (Jean May15th 2010)

### **6a 3.4 Talk as a teacher**

Jean was very aware of the importance of teacher talk in the classroom and how talk was part of her identity as a teacher, how pupils judge you by the way you talk and the way you read aloud.

It's at the heart of what you do. They want to know all about you. How old are you? Ethnicity? The pupils pick up a sense of who you are through what they detect in your voice. The intonation in your voice is very important when reading poems and books.... my orchestration of the reading and the relationships are formed through talking. (Jean May15th 2010)

### **6a 3.5 Problems of talk, listening and group work**

Jean had very clear ideas about pace and the need to break tasks down to keep the attention of the groups she taught. This concern is perhaps both a response to the needs of the pupils and the contemporary culture of the school where there may be an expectation of fast pace in lessons:

If I set a task that is 20-25mins long then I struggle to get the class to listen in the intervals. I need to set smaller tasks and give clearer instructions but sometimes they are still not really listening intently....Sometimes when I recap the task I also have a problem with listening. They look at me but they are not always really listening. (Jean May 15th 2010)

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Jean is aware that she is a new teacher who has to assert her authority and her first priority is to ensure that the children are safe and that the classroom is well managed. She realises that this means that the children's opportunities for self-expression may have been limited at first as she was learning to teach and becoming more familiar with the groups. She believes that things have got better and she has used more sustained talk-based tasks as she has become more established:

You have to use talk to communicate your authority, to keep children safe and you have to go in strong and take control. I did not initially use talk or allow children to be expressive. But as I have developed as a teacher I have begun to experiment with circles and pairs and then their talk goes beyond what they would say to me. When they give presentations and get feedback they like their power. They learn more and listen more and their ears are pricked. (Jean May 15th 2010)

She is therefore clear that the pupils listen better when they have a chance to contribute and present their own ideas and opinions.

Jean, of mixed Caribbean heritage herself, pointed to cultural diversity as a potentially positive feature of talk in her English GCSE classroom. She highlighted the oral self-confidence of the Caribbean pupils she taught referring to both boys and girls:

The Afro-Caribbean boys and girls are both very verbal, very confident at talking, giving opinions, unpicking texts. ..At KS4 the Afro-Caribbean girls are on a par with the boys... These pupils are very cultural and very opinionated and enjoy making moral judgements on texts and on lifestyles .The Asian students are more reserved, more guarded possibly because they are in a minority in this class. The larger ethnic group felt more empowered. Setting ground rules was important and teaching them to give their opinions in a particular way for example trying to understand the voice of the poet. I have to make them understand that talk is good but talk is free. The examiner who marks their work will expect the discourse of literary criticism. (Jean May 15th 2010)

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She was clearly concerned that the pupils adopted the kind of terminology that would prepare them for the exams. But Jean also stated, when asked to say more about gender, that it was still true overall that boys dominated talk in a whole class context:

Boys dominate talk and drama but their talk 'is constructive' and that some of the Polish girls she taught in the school for example were 'quite quiet'. At a Catholic School, where she had a short 6th form block experience, she felt that the girls were starting to come through and the girls answered teachers questions but that the boys asked questions, answered questions and answered back even after the teacher had spoken. The male students still dominated the dialogue here. (Jean May 15<sup>th</sup> 2010)

### 6a 3.6 Success with group work and talk

The lesson Jean chose was one with statement banks in relation to *Great Expectations*:

They had to choose whether the statements fitted with Chapter 1 or Chapter 39. They were able to choose a statement and move about to place them in the right section after making a decision together about where the statement fitted. The props, the movement, the space all helped the group work and they enjoyed the freedom they had to make a choice. (Jean May 15<sup>th</sup> 2010)

She also comments on what the pupils were learning in this exercise, where they had to discuss and compare two chapters of *Great Expectations*. She is suggesting that they learn that the answers do not always lie with the teachers and that pupils can also generate knowledge and that group conversations among pupils can confirm or deepen knowledge of the text.

The students realise that the teacher has not got all the answers and that a new idea can be generated by the students....This independent learning can inspire new thoughts. So they realise for themselves that Pip's earlier experiences were mirrored



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when Magwitch returns and that not all answers are set in stone. They can use the ideas of their peers to confirm their ideas or be persuaded otherwise. (Jean May 15th 2010)

### **6a 3.7 How teachers could be helped to make classroom talk more effective**

We talked about the skills of discourse and setting ground rules and the need for the teacher to choose the groups to challenge prejudices and mix up different types of pupils, the shy and confident and to ensure a gender mix. We also discuss problems of feedback when groups say the same as the last group and there is no elaboration or clear articulation of the thought processes and the role of the teacher here in probing the pupils. The need for a task to appeal to the pupils and different responses to longer and shorter talk tasks are also explored.

Jean suggests that she would like to talk less and even get the pupils involved in planning:

I'd love to talk less. I'd love to plan lessons that had less teacher talk....I'd like the pupils to have more input into planning the schemes of work. (Jean May 15th 2010)

Jean is aware that her ideas about planning for talk are not seen as important at the moment in her school. She argues that exam preparation dominates discussions in her department. She states that planning for talk is:

not a priority at the moment .....As an NQT we have discussions (in the department meetings) about schemes of work but we do not talk about talk and group work. We talk about what ability we are going to pitch the work at and the type of text we should use. At Key Stage 3 the schemes of work are in place and we have assessment for speaking and listening and writing. At Key Stage 4 we have the oral assessment through individual, group work and drama... but Key Stage 4 is changing. (Jean May 15th 2010)

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She is worried about the coursework disappearing and the changes that are coming that will make the English GCSE a more traditional exam. She is speaking before the 2013 English Programmes of Study have been published and does not know that speaking and listening will no longer count towards the final grade.

The coursework is going and we will have controlled assignments.... It's suicide..... It's really sad. Teaching at the 6th form in St B I found it even more exam focused. Point, evidence, explanation kept coming back. (This is a reference to teaching pupils how to quote from the text in literary criticism.).... The new language Study unit for the GCSE could be interesting. (Jean May 15th 2010)

Jean worked as a teaching assistant in several schools and has taught in two secondary schools as a GTP student and she suggests that there is a lack of education about the possibilities of learning through talk. She remarks that Ofsted only has a superficial approach to this and that there is little advice and training of staff in how to develop in this area of English teaching:

Heads of Department need more education about talk....some drama some think/pair share and Ofsted has a sheet to record children's talk and teacher talk but there is a lack of advice about how to do this. (Jean May 15<sup>th</sup> 2010)

Jean suggests that Local Authorities and universities could fill a gap here and lend school some talk consultants to work on a longer term basis to develop good practice in this area, rather as the NOP had done at the end of the 80s:

Schools of education, universities could lend schools some talk consultants...Local Authorities and Schools of Education could work together to model good practice through team teaching and practice...developing resources... and practical activities. (Jean May 15<sup>th</sup> 2010)

## Teachers' narratives of classroom talk: what are the challenges?

Jean also suggested that Case Studies of children 'doing interesting things with talk' (Jean, May 15<sup>th</sup>, 2010) would be useful particularly for Key Stage 3 and suggested that English teachers needed to be convinced that talk would lead to better exam results and better reading and writing.

### **6.3.8 Jean's understanding of the challenges of talk**

Jean has had a largely positive experience of talk in her family, a single parent family, and her early life, except for one short period in Year 5, at Primary School. She highlights her positive experience in English lessons and in Drama at her comprehensive school. She still understands the importance of informal talk suggesting that she still 'spoke most in the playground' (Jean, 2010). As a teacher she articulates a very sophisticated view of talk both as part of her identity in the classroom and as a mechanism for pupil expression and learning.

She outlines her journey as a new teacher explaining that at first she wanted to keep the pupils safe but now she allows for more self-expression. She is also aware that talk is 'not a priority at the moment' because English lessons are driven by the 'exam template' (Jean, 2010) and she wants more advice and modeling of talk and independent learning.

Her comments on the oral and vernacular skills of Caribbean pupils are interesting. She states that: 'The Afro-Caribbean boys and girls are both very verbal, very confident at talking, giving opinions, unpicking texts. At KS4 the Afro-Caribbean girls are on a par with the boys' (Jean, 2010) but she is also aware of the needs of other ethnic groups and that in general the boys still dominate in whole class discussions. She also points out that 'talk is good but talk is free' and suggests that her pupils will need to use the discourse of literary criticism in their exams.

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### **6a.4 Peter's story of talk: Deputy Head secondary school**

#### **6a.4.1 Interview**

Peter was a Deputy Head, aged 46, teaching in an Inner London Secondary comprehensive school serving a community with social disadvantages. The interview took place on 8<sup>th</sup> April 2008. At the time of the first interview he was teaching mixed ability Humanities groups at Key Stage 3 and small reading groups for pupils with SEN. His timetable included some very challenging groups. As a Deputy Head he was in charge of Inclusion and he line-managed several Heads of Department and the non-teaching staff. The school was in the midst of change as it was about to become an Academy and there were divisions in the school about this change. In phase two of the research, where we evaluated a critical moment in his teaching, Peter had become a SENCO in another London Comprehensive school, teaching lower school English sets and SEN groups.

I had worked with this teacher in another London Secondary School when he was younger. This interview was the first I conducted. I wrote down the answers as the interviewee was talking and then sent the interview back to the respondent for checking. It was a particularly powerful and poignant interview.

#### **6a.4.2 Talk in your life before you became a teacher**

Peter accepted that talk was an important part of the process of learning. For example he mentioned talk as important in his university life. He highlights discussions in tutorials and presentation of ideas in seminars as important cognitive challenges at university and highlights the importance of being able to ask questions to clarify points. He also suggested that informal talk was important in his social life.

Talk was important in my social life and in university in one to one tutorials and seminars (not in lectures) and in negotiating my living arrangements. When you were finding out more information about a topic or questioning the teacher you

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were also being assessed in your self-confidence and presentation of ideas. Talk was also important for clarification of the information we were using. (Peter, 8th April 2008)

Peter appears to see talk as important at university because 'you were being assessed in your self-confidence and presentation of ideas' and therefore it was part of being a successful student.

### **6a.4.3 Schooling and talk**

But comparing schools and universities he thought that although there were some similar purposes for talk it was not valued as much in his school, a grammar school that became a comprehensive:

In school talk had similar purposes although the emphasis on what you knew through talk was less valued and there were fewer opportunities for this. It was still important for clarification through questioning. (Peter, 8<sup>th</sup> April, 2008)

### **6a.4.4 Talk in your life as a teacher**

This interview focused very strongly on talk in the classroom and the teacher was clearly agitated and concerned about some of the factors that inhibited his ability to promote effective talk in the classroom. He clearly understood that talk was very important to teach well but he felt that behavioural issues and disruption marred his ability to use talk effectively. He describes his lower school, KS3 mixed ability classes as being particularly difficult and he compares these with a GCSE option group where he felt that talk was more effective. As a Deputy Head his timetable may have been allocated by filling up gaps on the timetable:

As a teacher talk is still very important. But there are few classes now where I can talk in a relaxed fashion to teach or ask questions. At the current moment there are no classes I teach where I can talk in an impromptu way and go with the feedback...

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Last year when I had a mixed ability ( GCSE RE option) group of 12-14 students there were 4 or 5 more motivated students and here talk was not such a forced process and I could go with the flow in a more relaxed way. (Peter, 8th April 2008)

This suggestion that the teacher needs to be able 'to go with the flow' and be able to teach 'in a more relaxed way' is a very important insight into how teachers feel about talk working well in the classroom.

### **6a.4.5 Problems of listening talk and group work**

The description of his problems was quite detailed and he told a vivid story about the restlessness of his classes and his difficulties. He shows in these comments how difficult it can be to get the attention of particular groups to even establish the IRF (Initiation, Response, Feedback) exchange that is the normal pattern of classroom discourse. And this is an experienced teacher and a senior manager talking:

The classes are very agitated. Their body language is very restless. In extreme circumstances they are shouting at each other they are so restless... So it's just very, very difficult to cut across that to get their attention, to get their interest, to channel their energy into something more formal directed by me. (Peter, 8th April 2008)

Peter talked of the strategies that he tried to use to overcome some of the restlessness. These involved calming activities, storytelling, visual cues and rewards, similar cueing strategies to those discussed by Gertrude the Early Years' teacher (Gertrude, 2009). But, importantly, he argues that sometimes even these strategies do not make any difference:

I have done some things that help but no one thing is guaranteed to get their attention. Sometimes these strategies can help a lot, a little or sometimes they do not make any difference. Using rewards to recognise pupils who follow instructions, giving a simple calming activity that requires their concentration but does not require them to listen to me e.g. a word search, drawing a picture, varying degrees -

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various forms of a seating plan but this is only of limited value if you are in different rooms each lesson ...or to try and say something attention grabbing which makes them sufficiently curious...an anecdote or a human interest story that will engage them, having a picture available on the IWB early on is also very useful it stimulates their visual awareness and can be more successful in focusing them.

(Peter, 8th April 2008)

This is an important statement because other secondary teachers also experience this adolescent resistance and find it difficult to quell (Richmond, 1982, Coultas, 2007b). In these conditions, Peter was quite sceptical of promoting small group learning. Classroom management issues are at the top of his agenda and he is only prepared to engage in small, shorter paired talk tasks and reluctant to try more extended group work:

I only dip in and out of this. One of the ways I would most often use small group learning is testing their knowledge through a true/false activity at the beginning of a topic. But I would only do it as pair work for a short period of time. Pupils seem reluctant to work with each other. They often work on their own. They seem to be unused to working in pairs or unwilling to do it. I am not sure that it has been done properly; they often do it quickly and superficially. (Peter, 8th April 2008)

### **6a.4.6 Success with group work and talk**

He did admit however that pair work was useful and that it encouraged pupils to have a go at thinking for themselves and this creates a better context for whole class discussion of the answers as the pupils' interest has been stimulated more.

I think that the true/false activity meant that students passed information to each other from their general knowledge. Because they have had a go at thinking about it for themselves, they have more interest in the answer when it was given. (Peter, 8th April 2008)

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### **6a.4.7 How teachers could be helped to make classroom talk more effective?**

Peter was clear that there needed to be a lot of institutional change for him to be able to make classroom talk, in the form of teacher and pupil interactions and small group learning, more of an option for him. There was a very strong focus not only on the contextual features of his particular setting but also the practical problems he faced for example of moving from one room to another. He was categorical about this.

I do not think that small group learning is possible with the amount of friction, the different rooms, without teaching assistance or with the amount of time I have got to prepare. These are all breaks on my ability to use small group learning at the moment. So I cannot imagine that, in my current conditions, I would want to go beyond gentle pair work. I would be bolder if I felt relaxed and comfortable in my classrooms. (Peter, 8th April 2008)

He returns, once again, to the psychological theme of the need to feel relaxed and comfortable in the classroom to be bolder with talk and adopt a wider range of pedagogies.

Peter is angry at the system that exists in schools today. His tone of voice reflects his frustration and anger and there is a sense of alienation and disempowerment in what he says. This is a teacher who has taught for over 20 years in Secondary Schools and he knows that in the past teachers were able to discuss more openly how to deal with difficult classes and groups:

Schools have got to look at themselves honestly and gain comprehensive feedback before they begin to help teachers do things better. Too many schools nowadays do not want to hear about real difficulties in the classroom. They want to massage them away or blame staff for weaknesses if they admit to encountering difficulties (Peter, 8<sup>th</sup> April 2008).



## Teachers' narratives of classroom talk: what are the challenges?

Here we see that what Foucault (1979) might call 'truth regimes' are being challenged. Schools fear honest discussion among teachers because problems of challenging behaviour threaten the school's image in the new educational market that requires a good story to be told about all schools. There is pressure on teachers not to reveal or discuss their difficulties because all lessons need to be 'outstanding' to gain or maintain good results in inspections and staff fear being labeled as 'incompetent' if they admit to difficulties.

Despite his obvious difficulties Peter said that talk would work better for him if he had opportunities for team teaching or working with another adult in the classroom and if he had opportunities to teach higher ability classes:

I would be more inclined to try something braver if I had another adult working with me in the classroom. In my 20 years of teaching, I have been at my most daring with group work in higher ability classes because I have not been worried about their co-operation and their willingness to learn. (Peter, 8th April 2008)

He had not lost earlier idealism and child centredness however and was still able to see the situation from the children's point of view. He tried to use a wider range of teaching repertoires with his small reading groups:

Also when I run small reading groups (for pupils with SEN) I still keep quite a rigid routine but I might try something more ambitious there. I don't like to try small group learning where I feel I do not have proper control (Peter, 8th April 2008)

He was also aware that the curriculum needed to be adapted much more adventurously for children with different needs and he proposed a more multi-sensory approach to learning to address the needs of pupils with SEN:

The curriculum is not suited to children with SEN. They should not be sat behind their desks all day. Their body language tells us this all the time. They need more visual, hands on experience- a more multi-sensory approach. (Peter, 8<sup>th</sup> April 2008)

## Teachers' narratives of classroom talk: what are the challenges?

Finally, as this had been quite an emotive interview, I asked the respondent if the interview had been of any help to him. He suggested that he had become more aware of the institutional constraints on teachers:

Yes.... It made me look at my teaching situation from outside and made some themes clearer-my lack of power, the restrictions I face in the present situation.  
(Peter, 8<sup>th</sup> April 2008)

### **6a.4.8 Peter's understanding of the challenges of talk**

Peter saw the value of talk in school and particularly at university. He recognised that talk was important in the process of learning for him and he also understood the value of talk in the classroom for allowing the pupils to have a go at thinking for themselves.

He was obviously facing much sharper challenges with talk as a teacher in his interview than other respondents. The constraints of Peter's context in a North London Secondary School come across very strongly and his descriptions of his dilemmas with the pupils are very vivid. He describes the pupils as restless, disengaged, and unwilling to listen and cooperate in many instances.

He is angry that the League tables place subjects in high status and low status categories such as 'Core' and 'Foundation'. He feels that his Humanities lessons have low status in the school as they are Foundation subjects at KS3; mixed ability groupings where core subjects are set; larger groups with less learning support than subjects that have been placed in the spotlight such as English and Maths. His lessons take place in different rooms each time and it is difficult to establish continuity or use resource based learning.

In this context, where he finds it hard to even establish the IRF, he does not use group work very often, although he dips in and out of it on a small scale and realises that it allows for more independent learning. His difficulties had not wiped out his idealism or his child centred views because he was concerned that the school and the curriculum did not address

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the concerns of pupils with SEN who he teaches in small reading groups. He suggests these pupils need a more multi-sensory approach and the curriculum does not allow for this.

There is a sense of deterioration in his life as a teacher. He feels that the system is unwilling to talk of these realities of teaching today and that teacher' voices are suppressed, because truth regimes require schools to only tell a positive story internally and externally about their difficulties. Teachers can feel powerless and can fear negative labelling if they speak honestly.

However the most simple, seemingly obvious insight here is that a teacher will use talk more confidently, and have more agency, when they feel relaxed and comfortable when they can 'go with the flow' because the ethos is right and they feel empowered. Peter only felt able to go with the flow with his GCSE option group. This idea of needing to feel at ease with the group can be applied to many different teaching situations and still be a relevant point. We accept the social and emotional aspects of children's talk but today it could be argued, from Peter's case, that these issues are not always viewed as important from the teacher's perspective.

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### **6a.5 Study Stuart's Story: ex-London English teacher, Director of the Collaborative Learning Project**

#### **6a 5.1 Interview**

Stuart was 66 when the interview took place on September 26<sup>th</sup> 2008. He studied English Literature and Linguistics at University and started teaching linguistics in a Teacher Training College and then became an English Language teacher abroad. When he returned to England he began teaching pupils with EAL in Birmingham. He has worked in several London Schools and was an Acting Head of a Secondary School in Tower Hamlets. In 1983 he set up the Collaborative Learning Project supported by the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA). This project aims to assist teachers in creating resources that promote the collaborative use of language to explore literary texts and to promote talk in all curriculum subjects. As Director of the Collaborative Learning Project, Stuart is no longer an English teacher but continues to work as an English consultant in primary and secondary schools. I have worked with Stuart in the Project and run workshops with him for LATE and NATE. We have also worked together on the NATE Multicultural/Diversity Committee for several years and he has been a Visiting Lecturer at the School of Education at Kingston University.

This interview took place in his house which is also his office. The interview was quite long and was taped and the full transcript was published in *EnglishDramaMedia* Coultas, (2009d). He gave me written permission to publish the interview and use his name.

#### **6a.5.2/3 Talk in your life before you became a teacher and schooling and talk**

Stuart had a very positive experience of talk in his small village primary school. He describes an open environment where there were cross age classes, an informal environment where he had freedom to explore. He suggests that there were lots of opportunities for talk.

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I had quite a lot of opportunities for talk in my early education, partly because of going to a very small village school. It had one class for key stage one, one for key stage two and one for key stage three and I left it when I went off to the grammar school at the end of key stage two. It had a very informal atmosphere. (Stuart, September 26th 2008)

The opportunities for talk were linked to research and independent learning and discovering things for themselves. Importantly, he discusses the ethos in the school and how felt he was listened to and trusted and that what he had to offer was valued.

There were lots of opportunities for talk for example, in the equivalent of year 6, we were doing research in History and, something that would not happen nowadays; we wandered around the village knocking on doors, having tea with old ladies. This was unassisted and unaccompanied and involved interviewing and taking our own notes and finding out what their lives were like. So there was a lot of listening, reporting and feeding back. Lots of opportunities in my own childhood. And to feel that I had been listened to and that what I had to offer was valued. . (Stuart, September 26th 2008)

At Secondary school (an all-boys grammar school) he was not quite so positive about his experiences across all subjects in the curriculum in contrast to his primary school experience but there were some interesting opportunities in the Humanities that allowed for talk, particularly as he got older:

..in History and English there were lots of opportunities for talk, occasionally giving presentations, almost equivalent to hot-seating nowadays....It was like we were put on the spot and we had to talk about things.... Questions were put to individual pupils and they were very open-ended. . (Stuart, September 26th 2008)

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In common with my talk autobiography (Chapter 2) and Stephen's comments in the next case study, he recalls some of his secondary English teachers as being very bright, Leavisites who used to spend a lot of time discussing the text with the class.

Some of our English teachers in year 10 were very bright, straight out of university. ...They were so enthusiastic about their subject. There was a lot going on at that time in English teaching.....They were Leavisites and they had a great enthusiasm for literature. We used to spend a lot of time looking at texts and discussing their provenance. We had more time to go into depth because you only needed 2 A levels then..... (Stuart, September 26th 2008)

He comments on both the positive and negative features of the type of talk opportunities he had at secondary school:

One of the things that must have got embedded at that stage was the frustration in having to wait because there were too many people wanting to talk. (Stuart, September 26th 2008)

But Stuart also benefited from being identified as part of an elite group within the already selective school who were being 'groomed' for Oxbridge. Here in this small group he recalls he experienced close talk and discussions, a Socratic dialogue.

..they gave us tutorials with two or three people and this gave us the opportunity to engage in close talk, discussions, a 'Socratic dialogue' that would prepare us for tutorials. A lot of it took place after school and some of these sessions took place on Saturdays. (Stuart, September 26th 2008)

Stuart shows some awareness of this elitism when he adds:

You wonder if every child got this sort of attention (Stuart, September 26th 2008)

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Stuart appears to have had a largely positive experience of talk in his life in schools, a point I discuss in more detail in the summary and the next chapter.

### **6a.5.4 Talk in your life as a teacher**

Stuart became very adamant and more assertive as he talked about talk as a teacher. This has been a life-long interest for him and he explained how he became interested in the issue and why he was committed to passing on his knowledge to others. Silence, he insisted, was not golden.

Talk is 'very important. It's something I have been committed to enabling, networking and supporting ever since I started teaching. I think talk is the keystone of everything else. Silence is not golden. I studied literature at university and then got interested in language (Stuart, September 26th 2008)

He had a critical assessment of his own education and believed that all children had intellectual potential and oracy was a way of tapping into this. His first contact with school teaching was with students with EAL. He stated that his commitment to talk:

was partly political and it was to do with class. I believed that everyone could do the same as me with the right support. .... I enjoyed working with adults in Bucharest and Munich teaching English language and setting up language programmes...While I was doing a PG diploma in EFL...and...a teacher training programme...at that time in Huddersfield all the migrants were arriving and this was my first contact with EAL on that teaching practice. (Stuart, September 26th 2008)

### **6a.5.5 Problems of talk, listening and group work.**

Up to this point the interview had followed a facilitative semi-structured pattern where I had asked questions and followed them up with small prompts for clarification. When we

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began discussing the problems of talk and the difficulties in real classrooms my contributions became longer and more interrogative. This question, my key research question, of the challenges and difficulties of talk, how to set up and organise the learning for talk is the core issue in this study.

In what follows therefore I have included some of my extra questions in bold to show how the conversation developed and to highlight the nature of the discussion which became more of a professional conversation. There is a contrast to be noted here between the practicing teachers I interviewed and an ex-English teacher like Stuart who had moved into a more advisory role. The practising teachers seem to be more relaxed about discussing their problems and needed less probing because the practical challenges of talk were more immediate issues for them.

**VC: Can you describe any problems you have had getting the class to listen to you and how you attempt to overcome these problems?**

S. There's always a problem...in getting the class to listen to you. I don't think it's about getting the class to listen to you. The wording of the question is distracting me.

**VC. OK-well you have answered the question**

S. The issue is about engaging with them in learning. The teacher has to find something engaging for them to work on. I would rather get them to listen to each other. Most of the pupils I worked with were lively. It's not a matter of shutting them up but steering them in the right direction, creating the right atmosphere for learning. Does that make sense?

**VC: Yes it does. I hear what you are saying and I understand what you are saying and I agree with it but just to be devil's advocate**

S. Go on then

**VC. Lively adolescent and pre-adolescent classes can nevertheless be in a situation where they come in the room where they are NOT in a position to engage with you**

S. Yes that's true thinking about (a school) where we both worked

**VC. So while I agree with your overall approach there could be a moment, even before that, where the pupils have to be calm-**



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S. Yes which is about creating the right atmosphere but I think working in London that everyone has to work on that together.

**VC: You mean it's a whole school issue....but nevertheless, again to be devil's advocate because this is quite an important point .....there are teachers who are very easily able to, they are in a complete minority in fact, but there are teachers who are easily able to quell a turbulent group of children, possibly 5 or 3% who can click their fingers and the children listen, and there are the other 97% of teachers who struggle ....**

S. It's to do with personality partly and it's also to do with tuning in and beginning to work on.....the charismatic teacher is not always the most successful teacher. I can think of teachers who have the children in their hands but it does not necessarily mean the children are learning very much. Does that make sense?

**VC: Yes it does. I have seen teachers who are very charismatic but who cannot get the children to write**

S. When I was working with (name of a colleague taken out) at a school in London, we had some very hard times with very difficult classes and it was a matter of finding different ways of engaging with them, that's when we were doing the work on developing collaborative work in the 70s and 80s. ..You had to be tenacious. You have to find a way to get to know the children by talking to individuals. (Stuart, September 26th 2008)

Stuart's approach to classroom management issues and getting the attention of the pupils very much emphasises getting to know the children as individuals, building the informal relationships and using collaborative learning resources to engage the learners. This differs from a focus on whole class routines which I am emphasising and shows how different individuals approach whole class management issues.

In discussing the next issue of the problems of planning for group work the interviewee and interviewer, became more relaxed and there appeared to be more consensus on this issue. The interviewee talked about the problems of group work and getting the ethos right so that students knew what was expected of them. This concept of ethos, changing pupils' attitudes

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to how they learn and sometimes even challenging the dominant school ethos of didactic methods was an important point.

There are problems with different groups...partly the school ethos; lots of things can conspire against us. In the example of the Y9 class I have been working with recently, it took a term to settle the class and then the school re-organised them and half were taken away. But, what was a miracle, was that the half we had been working with trained the others ...to be co-operative and collaborative.... (Stuart, September 26th 2008)

Stuart believed that students needed to be educated to understand the value of group work and that if the whole school had a policy on group work this could be very helpful. He also advocates tricking the pupils into groups using talk strategies like the Jigsaw arrangement for group work.

There has to be a school policy because children will tell you why they do not want to work with other children. If you have friendship groups, all the race and gender tensions in the area will pop up in front of you....I am advocating the teacher tricking the children into always working together...like the jigsaw . (Stuart, September 26th 2008)

### **6a.5.6 Success with group work and talk**

Stuart gave a good example of a successful recent lesson, where he had been working as a consultant, using group work based on *Jason and the Golden Fleece* and his suggestion was that acting out parts of the story made it more 'real' for the students:

We divided the Year 7 class (studying the Greek Myths) into 6 groups of five and they each read different bits of Jason and the Golden Fleece. They then had to form a conscience alley and talk to Jason as he went through the alley... They had some

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props and made their own and they had to show their drama in order at the end.....  
(Stuart, September 26th 2008)

Like other interviewees, Stuart realises that learning can be deeper and more meaningful for the students if they choose their own routes through a story and suggests that listening to each other is as if not more important than listening to the teacher:

The pupils were learning that a story has chosen routes and that there were roads or paths that were not taken. It enables the pupils to look at a story that was old..... and look at ways the story could be altered... They were also learning that they did not have to listen to the teacher but each other... Acting it out makes it more 'real' learning and they gain more knowledge of the story. (Stuart, September 26th 2008)

### **6a.5.7 How teachers could be helped to make talk more effective**

Stuart was very annoyed about the present state of education. He believed that pupils with EAL for example were not being well supported. He suggests that there may be a backwards movement in educational developments for example for pupils with EAL:

The issue for me is that the times are as bad now as when I returned to England in 1974 and I was asked to teach children English in a broom cupboard until they could speak English...there is an increasing amount of withdrawal...teaching assistants are being given the EAL children the class teacher does not want. The Ethnic Minority Achievement Grant is diminishing. . (Stuart, September 26th 2008)

He felt that this situation was a product of the drive for standards which he saw as undermining teachers' professionalism. He suggested that some of the advice teachers are now being given about pedagogy is ill-informed for example in relation to language and learning. He thinks that talk is still neglected by many of those who influence the curriculum who have a narrow focus on literacy standards in reading and writing and therefore underestimate the intellectual value of talk for children's linguistic development.

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The reason for this is the drive for 'standards' and the outside pressures on the school... You have got people who are undermining the professionalism of teachers- the politicians and the government for example. The situation is dire and we are in a state of siege. We need the subject associations, networks, the internet as a way of undermining, authoritative, ill-informed advice. Talk is still the poor relation because it is time consuming, fiddly and difficult to assess. It is still neglected. (Stuart, September 26th 2008)

The interviewee maintained that the way learning was measured, prevented talk having a central place in learning in schools today. The big problem here was that teachers were not trusted with assessing pupils. And he also acknowledges that the complexities of talk require a lot of collaborative work amongst teachers.

Talk has to be made more central to learning. There has to be a change in the measurement of learning... If teacher's judgements were trusted about children's oral skills and other skills there would not be an issue... When I talk about assessment through talking I am suggesting some kind of talk portfolio, using moderated teacher judgement to profile pupils' talk repertoires... I am also in favour of collaborative teaching to promote collaborative learning amongst the pupils because it is hard to do it alone. (Stuart, September 26th 2008)

### **6a.5.8 Stuart's understanding of the challenges of talk**

As noted in the interview, Stuart's memories of his experiences of talk in primary school were very positive, very different to for example Cathy's recalled experiences. He talks of a small village school with cross age classes and an informal atmosphere, where he was given the freedom to explore ideas and learn independently, where there was a lot of listening, reporting and feeding back and where 'he felt that he was listened to and what he said was valued' (Stuart, 2008). There is a suggestion here that his identity was secure and his self-esteem high and this developed his intellectual self-confidence.

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Again in contrast to other teachers, some of his secondary school experiences were positive for talk based learning for example in History and English lessons and in tutorials in the sixth form. He highlights open questioning and a kind of hot seating as promoting talk but he also was aware that individual presentations did not give scope for all and he often remembered waiting for his chance to talk. The role and enthusiasm of the teachers in Primary School and particular subjects in secondary school is emphasised here.

Another interesting aspect of this interview was a similarity between my quite positive experience of 6th Form English Literature discussions led by Leavisite trained English teachers and Stuart's experience. The literature review earlier also highlighted this feature of English teaching in the 60s from the perspective of one such teacher working in such schools at the time, Barnes (2000). A difference with my experience is that Stuart is aware that he was part of an elite group in his sixth form being groomed for Oxbridge and therefore he was encouraged to further develop his intellectual self-confidence by taking part in 'Socratic dialogue' in a small group.

As a teacher Stuart is both committed to talk for learning and very knowledgeable on this topic. He has a very sophisticated understanding of the practical and planning issues involved in small group learning, such as issues of gender and race and he is aware of the importance of the school ethos in supporting group based learning.

The style of the interview differs from the classroom teachers interviewed because, at one point, there is a tension between the interviewer and interviewee over a key challenge, how to get the class to listen at the beginning of a lesson. Stuart says that 'the wording on the question is distracting me'. But after some reassurance he continues and articulates his view that he prefers to use a more persuasive approach thinking about 'engaging pupils with their learning' and later, 'tricking them into the groups'. I continue to probe or interrogate this issue because I want to highlight the unpredictability of pupil reactions even when the planning is very good and we do end up with a kind of agreement that you both need to engage the pupils and have some classroom routines that teach pupils how to listen.

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This was a very interesting exploration of different approaches to the classroom management of talk and touches on the complexities of teachers' different personalities and the way they approach teaching and the process of setting up talk differently; one emphasising bringing the whole group together and establishing routines for listening; the other teacher suggesting that you can entice pupils into learning through the resources you provide. Although these approaches are not necessarily in conflict, the different perspectives of the support teacher and the whole class teacher might be behind this discussion or perhaps this is an example where taking those with expertise out of their comfort zone gets a more reflective response. Or perhaps, in some circumstances, just starting a collaborative activity with interesting resources will work if the task is accessible and has meaning for the pupils.

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### **6a.6 Stephen's story of talk: ex-London English teacher, Head of Drama, Vauxhall Manor School**

#### **6a 6.1. Interview**

This interview took place on July 10<sup>th</sup> 2012. Stephen had worked in three London Secondary Schools as an English and Drama Teacher and a Head of Drama before becoming an ILEA English adviser. When he ceased teaching English in schools and advisory work, he began working in Higher Education. I worked with Stephen to establish the subject knowledge for teaching training sessions for English, Drama and Media students in the West London Partnership Graduate Teacher Programme (GTP) at Kingston University. He has written about his pioneering work around language and learning in the Talk Workshop with others at a South London School, Vauxhall Manor in the 1970s (Eyers and Richmond, 1982) and he talks about this in the interview.

#### **6a 6.2 Talk in your life before you became a teacher**

It was fascinating to learn about Stephen's family background and his immersion in the cultural practices of the free church from a very early age. He talks of how the oral literacy practices of his family were closely linked to non-conformist religious beliefs:

The most important thing to say is that my father was a preacher and it was generally regarded in my family that the highest form of life was to become a preacher and that you would expound the scriptures to the believers as though inspired by the holy spirit—in fact that's what they believed ..they were inspired by the holy spirit ... so to speak up almost entirely without notes was seen as the highest form of language activity. (Stephen, July 10th 2012)

It is interesting that he highlights 'speaking up without notes' or improvised prayer as the highest form of language activity and that prepared speech was of lesser value. This

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challenges conventional values that suggest presentational talk or writing are of higher value than spontaneous speech:

.....so everything was in fact oral. There were other forms like... um... being able to pray... again as though the holy spirit was moving you. And again. except for the Lord's prayer... to pray in any way that was prepared or read, as in the Church of England, was seen as like... oh dear that's a bit dodgy.. (Stephen, July 10th 2012)

Stephen, when prompted, links his early life experiences to his approach to teaching and suggests that this training in divergent thinking and finding things out for yourself was very powerful:

Very much... because I have great respect for divergence in thinking because ... yeah....I'm a divergent thinker...perhaps...even going back to the world of my father perhaps to suspect things that are provided rather than made from yourself-is that a bit too much? (Stephen, July 10th 2012)

### 6a 6.3 Schooling and talk

Stephen contrasts his positive experiences of talk in primary schools with a negative experience at his secondary school, a grammar school. He feels that he could speak and be heard and that he was valued in his primary school although he realises that his treatment, as an 'autonomous learner' may have been different than other children.

I suppose I had... a quite liberal primary education. It was just a back street school in a south coast town and all the children around me were from families that were just as humble and penniless as my own...but... I think that we were lucky that we were valued....those of us who were autonomous learners were valued and you could speak and be heard and be reflected back and be valued for what you thought and what you'd learnt. I suspect by modern standards it would not be that



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progressive but it made me confident and I enjoyed my learning. (Stephen, July 10<sup>th</sup> 2012)

In contrast he felt that silence and obedience was highly valued in his grammar school. He was shocked by the class discrimination and elitist attitudes of the school. The chosen few were prepared for Oxbridge entry while clever boys from the council estates were mocked for their accents. He says that he felt depressed and spoke little:

And then...I think I've said this in one of the sessions where we've worked together.... When I went to the highly selective school – it was a school in which silence was valued... instant obedience, it was a conveyor belt for Oxbridge entry and for those of us who didn't get Oxbridge entry we were like you just sit there and be quiet and get on with it... (laughter)...it was shocking, boys from the council estates in Bournemouth, their accents were mocked by the teachers..... they were the cleverest boys in the town. It was a shocking place and I felt terribly depressed there. I don't suppose I said very much in all those 7 years... (Stephen, July 10<sup>th</sup> 2012)

We discuss the sixth form and consider whether there was more opportunity for talk and Stephen agrees that there was but that there were clear parameters for the discussion and that texts were studied in detail but that the social and cultural context was often absent.

Yes there was some discussion. But you always had to toe the party line... and the parameters in which the text was studied...for instance I was talking to someone within the last year... we went to see Sean O' Casey and we did Sean O' Casey in the 6<sup>th</sup> form. In the 50's this was quite an adventurous text- think of all the things that have happened since then... and no-one but no-one ever talked about 1916 or the Irish Civil War or what happened in 1922 or the fact that we just shot people who disagreed with us in Ireland... no one ever talked about that. So how did we do Sean O'Casey without ...? (laughter) (Stephen, July 10<sup>th</sup> 2012)

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I complete the sentence adding 'the social and cultural context'. And Stephen goes onto discuss the Leavisite approach to literature and its weaknesses and some of its strengths. He suggests that the weakness of this approach was that you had to trust the text not the teller (or reader).

But there was an answer to that which is I think... and that was the teachers must have come from the Leavisite School and Leavis says that it's all in the text, trust the text and not the teller and in that sense again we were done unto. You just have to look at the text... don't argue with me it's all in the text. (Stephen, July 10th 2012)

But Stephen also suggests that strength of Leavis was that he argued there is a high moral purpose to literature and Stephen agrees with this, although he also strongly believes that literature comes from life experiences.

I suppose that I'm certainly a Leavisite in the sense that I believe that there's a high moral purpose to literature..... but I'm also way, way divergent enough to understand that all literature comes out of experience. (Stephen, July 10th 2012)

### **6a 6.4 Talk as a teacher**

Stephen talked about his ideas about talk in the classroom, something that he had given a lot of attention to as an English and Drama teacher in the 70's and 80's in London. He has written about these ideas (Eyers and Richmond, 1982) and in this interview he links his interest in talk to his early life experiences in the home and in school. He thinks that talk is very important in classrooms and says:

One of the things I thought it might be valuable to say in this interview is that because of some of the things that we have already touched on, that everyone has very divergent experiences that everyone has a bit of experience they are coming from into the arena for discussion... I, in the end, kind of lost sight of having a set syllabus or a set curriculum. (Stephen, July 10th 2012)

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He goes on to articulate the principles that he was using in developing talk for learning in his classrooms in South London schools at that time before the Education Reform Act (ERA) and the National Curriculum.

And there were some supporting features to that.. I don't know whether you have ever come across the Humanities Curriculum project done by Lawrence Stenhouse?.....

So Stenhouse's view was that you cannot have free and confident discussion without removing the teacher and the teacher's ideas from the discussion...and I was very influenced by this and I still am and this is absolute anathema to today's situation where you are meant to transmit, transmit, transmit! (Stephen, July 10th 2012)

He compares the Stenhouse project with the Nuffield Language Project and suggests that they are a bit like 'show and tell' on a larger scale. I am reminded of the first English GCSE oral exams that I assessed where the pupils had to bring in an object or topic for a group talk which gives some evidence of overlaps between the pre and post ERA era in relation to talk for learning:

But that project was a great influence on me and the other thing that was a great influence on me was the Nuffield project.. it was called the Nuffield Language Project and it said...it was a bit like show and tell.. that children should bring objects or fascinating ideas to the class and talk about it to the class...and again the teacher would not be the primary generating force of knowledge... but of course they're the kind of back stop, the kind of force that says if we can focus and get to something that's worthwhile...but the whole idea is that there could be some lessons where you did not necessarily get anywhere... and that was absolutely drink to me!' (Stephen, July 10th 2012)

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Having taught alongside Stephen and understanding some of his philosophical ideas about English teaching; I suggest that he is articulating his view of the primacy of personal experience and how this has to be brought into the English classroom to make learning meaningful for pupils. I am very interested in how far he was able to go in using children's own experiences as the basis for language and learning; even further than I was able to do becoming a Head of English in the post ERA era. But I suggest that talk is a very important mechanism for bringing personal experience into the classroom. He agrees saying:

Yes absolutely...that's right... and as a footnote there and I think you heard me say this a few days ago, how much I respect people like especially Harold Rosen for opening the door to non-standard children ( to all accents and dialects). When I used to say to the pupils there's a poetry reading tonight or a theatre trip .. and they say but it's not for the likes of us.... And that's one of the most awful things that has been said to me as a teacher.. that it's not for the likes of us...What the Rosen's did, and Harold especially, but both or all three of them, was open the door to *all* children's language (Stephen, July10th 2012).

This approach is very refreshing to listen to as it ignites all the memories of the innovative work many London English teachers were attempting to do with talk and language in the 70's and 80's (See Chapter 2). And Stephen explains how he sees talk as a very central part of your identity and how voice and accent can become a feature of class discrimination.

Harold fought several union cases for people [teachers] who had lost their jobs because of their accents... and he fought them through using work on language and linguistics. So that's an important footnote that your language not only reflects your identity but it is central to it. (Stephen, July 10th 2012)

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### **6a6.5 Problems of talk, listening and group work?**

Stephen extends his very child centred philosophical approach to how to deal with disruptive students and promote good listening routines. He argues that pupils need to learn to listen and value each other but he is open minded about continuing to learn from other teachers in this area.

I began to answer this earlier and it's not only to listen to me but to listen to each other. Listening is as important as talking and I don't think any of us have really cracked how to talk to children about the skill of listening because we are also so obsessed with producing stuff...perhaps there are teachers who can tell us about listening? (Stephen, July 10th 2012)

He had some useful practical examples of how he had tried to get the pupils listening and working well as a group. These included having everyone in a ring and removing the 'slightly adversarial presence of the desk' using 'Mr Eyer's keys as a conch' (Stephen, July 10th 2012) to allow the pupils to speak in turn and also going into role.

I had to learn to raise my voice, whisper sometimes. I don't think I am a particularly good actor but I quite enjoyed putting on an act sometimes going into role. When my hair was very long I used to be the Pardoner..when you're in role the kids think..what 's he going to do now?... I could use funny voices..funny looks...One minute you are the listener, the next the performer. (Stephen, July10th 2012)

Stephen again surprises and goes against contemporary views when he highlights his success with mixed ability classes, suggesting that he was able to use the different strengths of the pupils in this situation.

The best group work happened for me in the unstreamed classes where you could use the different strengths (not necessarily that you could use the academic to lead

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the less academic) but that there would be children with stronger personalities who would be good at holding the groups together. (Stephen, July 10th 2012)

Some of his classes became so used to group work that they would even organise themselves into the groups. I suspect that he is talking about an all girls' school here and check this with him later.

It did happen, on several occasions, that the children would organise themselves into groups. It does sound like heaven I know...in both cases they were Year 10's..they came in and said, 'Mr Eysers. We've done it..we've sorted the groups'. And they had! (Stephen, July 10th 2012)

Stephen also highlights and celebrates the rich oral skills of the Caribbean pupils he taught:

I can see that certain cultural groups for example second and third generation Caribbean children were way, way better orally and that sometimes that could lead to greater success on paper. But some of those black kids were sensationally good orally and left other children behind. The verbal interplay was fascinating. (Stephen, July 10<sup>th</sup> 2012)

His own religious and spiritual background and some of his divergent attitudes perhaps resonate with aspects of Caribbean culture:

I still very much admire the spiritual in black culture. You can hear it in Bob Marley, Linton Kwesi Johnson. But also the facility of interplay and calling the shots with each other. (Stephen, July 10<sup>th</sup> 2012)

But it is also interesting to contrast his celebratory stance with Jean's concerns that her pupils use the language of literary criticism and not simply 'free talk' for success in exams and I discuss this contrast in more detail in Chapter 6.

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### 6a 6.6 Success with group work and talk

Stephen introduces his answer to this by referring me to his writing and then illustrates the answer with reference to Integrated Studies lessons and a Year 9 pupil engaged in independent study and talk.

I could direct you best here to a Chapter in *Becoming our own Experts* (1982) to a Year 9 class in History, RE and English [Integrated Studies] where I create a vignette of my classroom.....One Year 9 pupil, who came from Northern Ireland picked up a copy of *Woodbrook* by D. Thompson about a young man going to Northern Ireland and falling in love; a book full of anguish and poignancy. The pupil read this book all 380 pages and then she wrote about Northern Ireland; she wrote as the woman and she wrote as the man. She did her own research on her family who came from Ireland. This is an example of going with the learner but the teacher also needs to pull her back into the group and she then talked to the class about what she was doing. (Stephen, July 10th 2012)

### 6a 6.7 How teachers could be helped to make classroom talk more effective

Stephen had very clear ideas about this. He thought that 'young people should have more scope to organize their own learning-it's just as simple as that.' (Stephen, 2012). He wanted teachers to use recording, as I was doing, and the talking pen and new technologies to celebrate children's talk and he was particularly insistent that:

teachers should work together horizontally rather than vertically so that not only in English departments ..(and I do see some evidence of English departments allowing trainees to feed in new schemes of work or resources)... but I wonder whether it goes on across the curriculum? I've yet to see any evidence of this recently? (Stephen, July 10th 2012)

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He concludes by insisting that the path breaking work at Vauxhall Manor School was partly the result of the professional freedom that teachers enjoyed at the time and that teachers were left alone to 'burrow around' and work together:

..one of the reasons for the looking at language work was that we were confident with each other and we worked together well. ....It was very intense but that's how it was. There was no need to worry. You weren't thinking Oh God the Deputy Head's coming this morning. The deputy Head had no idea what we were doing... we just burrowed around together and produced something quite coherent. .  
(Stephen, July 10th 2012)

### **6a 6.8 Stephen's understanding of the challenges of talk**

Stephen's early life experiences are rooted in free church religious traditions and his approach to teaching and even his manner and his choice of language in the classroom are both influenced by this.... 'so to speak up almost entirely without notes was seen as the highest form of language activity.' (Stephen, 2012). His comments on the oral strengths and spirituality of black culture can also be seen as a link with his early induction into alternative or dissenting community literacy practices. This discussion of the informal cultural influences of childhood reaffirms earlier work by writers like Brice Heath (1983) around the mainly oral features of many community literacy practices in contrast to 'schooled literacy' that focuses primarily on reading and writing.

Stephen has a formed philosophy about English teaching. He is very child centred in his approach to English teaching and draws on the work of Stenhouse and the Humanities Curriculum Project to say that he believes pupils should have much more control over their learning and the freedom to make mistakes and learn from them. He believes in the primacy of personal experience and the imaginative exploration of literature in the English classroom. He also seems to share some of the ideas of writers like Holbrook in that he sees language as the expression of "whole experience" ... because 'English is a discipline



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that attends to the imaginative exploration of human experience' (Holbrook, cited by Barlow, 2011:3).

His philosophy also seems to have been formed against the dominant, elitist cultural practices of his secondary education; in an all boys' grammar school. There is still anger in his voice about this. His reflections on the elitism and discriminatory practices of grammar schools mirror some of my statements in my talk autobiography. But he also expresses a strong belief in the moral power of literature that he has gained from his education and his own reading.

His attitude to learning from the students and the children is consistent and he clearly seems to have attempted to practice the talk for learning approach he preaches as a school teacher as the example of a lesson, his work in the Talk workshop and his writing about his own teaching show (Eyers and Richmond, 1982).

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## Chapter 6b: The case studies: critical moments

‘teacher knowledge is embedded in concrete practices...understanding comes through the analysis of evidence drawn from practice...’ (Elliot, 1994:105)

In this chapter I discuss the challenges of talk in practice, discussing the teachers' insights on talk as they evaluate their critical moments. In doing this, I am building on the discussion I began in Chapter 3 where I began to suggest that teachers look at talk from a very practical angle, evaluating talk from the point of view of whether it makes them more effective as a teacher. My main research question was: ‘what do teachers find challenging about classroom talk?’ so I look at each critical moment with that question in mind.

As stated earlier, I asked the teachers to video a lesson where they planned to use talk and identify a critical moment, a moment where they wanted to look more closely at how they had used talk in the classroom. The act of identifying this moment meant that the teachers were already evaluating their practice; some choosing a good moment; some choosing a moment that they found interesting or where they felt that the student reaction had not been as they expected. Their discussions with me allowed them to articulate and enrich their understandings of how talk worked and its challenges. This builds on Elliot's (1977) approach that greater understanding often comes from teachers becoming aware of what they are doing rather than from others trying to control what teachers are doing.

This idea of a critical moment for talk therefore operated on two levels. It was chosen to raise awareness of how talk works in the classroom in order to enrich teacher knowledge and identify further issues to explore. But it was also a way of trying to make public some of the insights and intuitions that teachers have about classroom interactions that are not always present in writing and debates on classroom talk: an attempt, as Saunders (2012) stated, ‘of turning teachers' expert knowledge of classroom interactions inside out’.

The video recordings and short transcripts allowed for more concrete representations of classroom practice to become part of the study. As discussed in Chapter 4, the familiar

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setting became a little more unfamiliar as teachers watched themselves and observed their teaching from a different vantage point than is normal. The discussion was structured by asking the teachers to look at the positive, negative and interesting features of the moment and the lesson (See Appendix 5). This came from a thinking prompt originally devised by De Bono (1987). The aim was to probe the teachers to assist them to 'stand outside' and think about their practice and the challenges of talk in a more open ended way.

Each case study and critical moment, as I demonstrate below, highlights the teachers' perceptions of the challenges that arise out of their unique situations. But the teachers evaluate their practice and make suggestions for what they want to do more of with talk. Each moment also makes some clear links between each teacher's life experiences and views on talk and what they actually did with talk in the classroom

### **6b.1 Cathy's critical moment for talk: the Jubilee jigsaw, the plenary and a talk for writing challenge**

'I felt in control all the time—there was not a moment where I felt that it was not going as planned. Apart from their responses to the final question in the plenary' (Cathy, June 3<sup>rd</sup> 2012).

In Cathy's recorded lesson we see that she has applied her ideas about enjoying 'talking classrooms' to her practice. She has set up an effective jigsaw activity where the children in her Year 4 class choose a topic and then work in groups to read and make notes from different newspaper reports of this specific event during the Queen's Jubilee. They have to read a report individually on their topic; for example, the events surrounding the flotilla on the Thames and then report back to their home group to make notes on that event together.

Cathy's video shows that she is able to use the social situation in the classroom effectively to construct her Jubilee jigsaw. The video demonstrates that the children in a top set are very engaged with this exercise. First they move around the room to read the newspapers

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and then they are sitting on the floor in their groups, scattered around the room and they have an aide memoire to assist them. The lesson has been carefully planned beforehand.

As I suggest in Cathy's case study (Chapter 6a) she is committed to talk in classrooms as a result of a critical evaluation of her own educational experiences in school. Because Cathy feels confident about using talk in her classroom she bravely identifies a critical moment in the plenary where the talk and the pupils' reactions surprised her. Below I select this moment from my field notes:

**Teacher:** Just have a quick look at the information on your sheet..... Hands up if you think that the info you have researched yourselves and the info you have gathered from your notes...who thinks they could now write an article..Or do you think that you need a few more minutes to research? .....Hands up if you've got enough info?

**(4 pupils raise their hands- mainly boys)**

**Teacher:** More time... **(5 or 6 hands go up)**

**Cathy is beginning to realise that the pupils may need more time to write the article and probes them further.**

**Teacher:** Jack, you didn't put your hand up?

**Jack:** Yes, I needed more time.

(Field notes, 2012)

Cathy thought that the research and note taking in the Jigsaw would have prepared the pupils for writing. But when she asks the pupils if they are ready, only 4 hands go up. Cathy has expected more pupils to be ready but the majority are not yet ready to write.

### **6b .1.2 What Cathy said about the challenges of talk from evaluating her critical moment**

Although Cathy is surprised by the small number of children raising their hands to say that they feel ready to write, she uses the plenary to probe the pupils further asking them what

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else they need to know to feel more confident about starting to write. She is assessing their learning in the discussion but she has perhaps initially underestimated the cognitive challenges of moving from talk and note taking to actually writing a news report for a Year 4 class.

In discussion it seems that as well as the cognitive challenge there may have been some lack of clarity over the question. Cathy will go on to address these issues and scaffold newspaper report writing in the next lesson. She states that she would have preferred to go straight onto this task but the constraints of the new sets for literacy interfere as part of the group have to return to their normal class. This last statement is interesting because, at the interview stage of this research project, there was no direct evidence of the constraints of performativity on Cathy's teaching. But here we see that the setting for literacy is a new adjustment the school has made in order to raise standards in literacy. Cathy (2012) is slightly ambivalent about this and comments that 'I'm not an entire fan of the sets but I have seen some benefits'.

To sum up we see an effective use of the jigsaw to promote independent reading and collaborative note taking but questioning at the end reveals that the pupils will need more support to complete their own newspaper article. Constraints imposed by the new setting for literacy mean that the writing task will have to wait until the next lesson.

Cathy suggests that she likes to interact with a group as they are doing the task and that if you stay with a group the children will begin to really talk with you in a more open way. This would have allowed her to ask one group the question she asked the whole group at the end and she would then perhaps have been able to anticipate the difficulties they might have had in writing the article. She has to give her attention to the videoing of the lesson, where Cathy had to assist the teaching assistant, and this may have interfered a little with Cathy's normal practice. But understanding the difficulties of moving from talk and note taking to writing is a key dilemma for English teachers and one that Cathy certainly encountered in this critical moment in her lesson.

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### **6b 2 Gertrude's critical moment for talk: dialogic discussion on teambuilding and group work, but presentational talk still a challenge**

'there were good relationships within the group .. they respected each other's opinions and were able therefore to feed off each other' but Gertrude 'still found it quite challenging to speak in front of a group of adults and particularly so in front of a camera..'

(Field notes, May 5th 2013)

Gertrude has chosen a very appropriate topic of interprofessional practice for her critical moment and she involves her CPD audience well in reflecting on the different dynamic of working in groups. The nursery workers and teaching assistants have to work together to present a role play of a multi-agency conversation in an Early Years setting later in the sessions. In Gertrude's critical moment, recorded on the video, she leads an open ended discussion where the group reflects on the processes they have been through so far in forming the groups and having to work with someone new as they would have to do in a professional context.

The group begins to formulate some of the ideas of Tuckman (1965) about group processes; forming, storming, norming, performing, after drawing on their own experiences. This frames and acts as a pre-reading exercise to introduce the article. There is a tone of amusement and light heartedness in the discussion when the students see Gertrude holding the article. This suggests a degree of trust between teacher and taught. The students are trying to explain what they have learnt from working in groups. Below I present an extract from the transcript in the field notes.

**Teacher: (nodding in support)** I think that's a really good point, learning how.. the approaches people use and the way they study...and

**Student 1: (Completing the teacher's sentence)** Yes – the fresh approaches that you might use...

**Student 2:** Also taking responsibility for your own role...like physiotherapists...I don't really know much...

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It made me find out more..it made me get involved..start asking questions...yeah

**Teacher:** Yes.....you are learning more information as you go along (**Softer voice here**)

(Field notes, 2013)

The discussion is quite dialogic in the sense that the students are addressing and acknowledging each other and building on points and also completing the teacher's sentences. The teacher refers back to the students' experience to illustrate and build on each point made. Several different students have contributed in the discussion, sometimes in an extended way, posing questions and not just answering questions put by the teacher. Gertrude evaluates the session saying that 'she thought there were good relationships within the group, that they respected each other's opinions and were able therefore to feed off each other'.(Gertrude, 2013)

### **6b 2.1 What Gertrude said about the challenges of talk from evaluating her critical moment**

So we can see that Gertrude has been able to demonstrate that some of what she says about promoting talk in the classroom is reflected in her practice. She also practically demonstrates her suggestion that schools and universities need to give school teachers and teaching assistants' opportunities to practice these techniques of working in groups and reflect on them. Gertrude had wanted the session to have a practical and reflective theme and she felt that she has achieved her aim because the students articulated the processes that they had gone through. She leads a sophisticated discussion in a skilful way.

However, Gertrude said that she 'still found it quite challenging to speak in front of a group of adults and particularly so in front of a camera' (Gertrude, 2013) which made the presentational talk more difficult for her. Perhaps even more strongly than others, Gertrude said that she was very self-conscious looking at herself and that she was surprised how much she smiled and gesticulated. Perhaps this linked back to her reflections on her early shyness, her family literacy practices and life experiences in education. I suggested that her

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open questions and her pauses, that allowed students to come in, were a good way of facilitating discussion and natural interactions. She said that 'as she was not so comfortable speaking, so she always tried to encourage others to join in' (Gertrude, 2013).

When prompted to reflect on the context she also said that it was true that when teaching in a Special school there was a difference with mainstream schools, you had to pause and wait for the children to speak and give them more time. It was also important in a Special school to go with the child's needs. And she also commented that in adult settings, such as CPD, you also had more time and an easier setting for talk than in mainstream classrooms.

### **6b 3 Jean's critical moment for talk: 6th Form GCSE Exam retake and collaborative writing. The exam pressure and the independent learning challenge.**

'Does exam pressure mean that I sound patronising, talking lower and slower and that I do not encourage enough independent learning?... there's a notion of a 1920s teacher there. I was not learning from them in the way that I might do in the top sets?' Jean (Field notes, June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2012)

In Jean's critical moment we see two pupils in a 6<sup>th</sup> form English GCSE retake group using exploratory talk to write a letter to the Head Teacher about school uniform. But in her reflections Jean is concerned about how she addresses the whole group and the exam pressures on her and the pupils. So I talk first about the chosen critical moment and then I discuss her reflections.

The task set, is writing a persuasive letter to prepare the students for the GCSE English exam the next day. The video of the critical moment provides evidence of the two pupils being involved in the task and contributing to the writing through exploratory talk. Below I present a first extract from the field notes.



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**(Both pupils are engaged with the task. L is making suggestions and so is K and they are refining and clarifying their ideas...)**

**Pupil K:** It makes you look more presentable....school

**Pupil L:** No---it makes your school look better

**Pupil K:** Yeah....

**Pupil L:** Argue...well we're in the sixth form. We shouldn't really need school uniform.

**Pupil K:** So you're saying sixth form is separate to the main school....

(Field notes, 2012)

We see the pupils working together, completing each other's sentences and rehearsing ideas for the letter. One pupil does more writing than the other. One of the pupils then initiates an exchange with the teacher and tries out a sentence he wants to use in his letter suggesting he might ask the head teacher to 'scrap' the uniform. Below I present a second extract from the transcript in the field notes.

**Pupil L:** So can I put 'I am writing to inform you that I don't like the school uniform ...can you please scrap them?

**Teacher:** What do you think of that K? (**K shakes his head giggling**)

**Teacher:** Sounds a bit rough (**lowered voice-touch of humour in response not a reprimand-teacher seems to be implying that a game is being played here and that they know that this is not right. Both boys are smiling**)

You actually want her to change the uniform don't you? (**A reminder of purpose and audience here**)

**Pupil K:** Yeah..

**Teacher:** What sort of tone do you need to have?

**Pupil K:** Um.....sophisticated... **Pupil K:** Um.....sophisticated...

**Teacher:** Sophisticated—what else?

**L:** Informal

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**K:** No—formal, form

(Field notes, 2012)

There is a sense of playfulness and banter in the conversation and Jean uses a colloquial phrase in response 'sounds a bit rough'. The teacher is participating in the playful and colloquial aspect of exploratory talk but also clarifying the audience the pupils should be addressing in the writing task and the register that they should use. The boys are smiling and the teacher has lowered her voice perhaps all participants enjoy the irony here? The tone of the exchange, even more than the precise words used, emphasises the positive relationship between the pupils and the teacher. They can ask and they can play and they can learn and incorporate the teacher's language when they use the word 'formal' later in the conversation because there is an ethos of trust and respect.

This critical moment is a short but quite powerful example of why exploratory and collaborative talk in small groups allows for more pupil input as it gives pupils opportunities to play with and interrogate language and clarify thinking. The more confident writer Pupil L; is writing, but the other pupil helps shape the writing through talk. Because the pupils are working in small groups and trying out ideas they can then initiate a conversation with the teacher on their terms. They have some control over the agenda in a manner that is more like normal conversation outside the classroom.

Jean has had quite a positive experience of talk in her own family and community and was able to develop her self-confidence with talk, to some extent, in the early stages of her primary school and in her secondary school. This influences her desire to allow for pupil self-expression. She is able to show evidence of allowing the pupils to be more expressive as she has become more established as a teacher in this school. She is using small group exploratory talk successfully in a 6<sup>th</sup> form retake group.

### **6b.3.2 What Jean said about the challenges of talk from evaluating her critical moment**

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But Jean's challenge with this group, which has many pupils with EAL, despite the example of effective paired talk, is that she is very aware of the pressures on the pupils from their families to make the grade and get the C. She knows that some of them, who are quite new to English, are going to find this very difficult, especially as English coursework has now been abolished.

She feels that this puts pressure on her to just 'get the job done' and is anxious that 'I am taking them all with me' in whole class discussions and this means she feels that she has to abandon some of the spontaneity she feels she uses with the higher sets. When looking at an earlier part of the video she says 'I sound patronising, talking lower and slower and that I do not encourage independent learning in the way that I might do in the top sets' (Jean, 2012).

Jean's challenge is to feel that although she has worked well with a small group she may still be patronising the lower sets in whole class discussions because of the pressure to 'get the job done' and get them through the exam. She wants to be more mobile and more open to learning from them. She, like Cathy, sees that by interacting more with one group and being more mobile she may be able to do this. But she also wants to 'show that she is there for all' (Jean, 2012).

### **6 b.4 Peter's critical moment for talk: the puppet reads the love letter aloud. The challenge of trying to hold onto something relevant to the pupils**

'It was a moment when I could do something entertaining and relevant'. Peter, (Field Notes, October 10<sup>th</sup>, 2011)

Peter is teaching a lower set Year 8 class of pupils with SEN and EAL. He divides his lesson on synthesis and letter reading into two parts, the formal part where he has to teach the word synthesis and the informal part where he uses the puppet to read the letter aloud. He chooses the beginning of the informal part of this lesson where the puppet reads the letter aloud, for his critical moment after watching the video,

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‘because when I bring the puppet out I could see the look of relief on my face as I slipped my hand in the glove puppet.....It was a moment where I could do something that was more entertaining and relevant’ Peter, (2011).

This reading aloud exercise helps to introduce the letter and helps to scaffold the pupils' later attempts to complete the sequencing exercise as they try and re-read and reconstruct the letter.

And here this teacher shows that, despite all the difficulties he highlights with classroom talk in inner city schools and his somewhat sceptical attitude; by using a puppet as a prop he can successfully play with the pupils and orchestrate the reading and maintain the group's attention while reading a non-fiction text. The text is a love letter in the story which has been written by the teacher himself. The students have very low reading ages.

Peter was confident about using talk at university and in his social life and in this example he shows that he can adopt different voices in the classroom while he reads aloud and uses teacher in role. He is attempting to make learning vivid and real for these students as the topic chosen of a love letter from a boy to a girl will have an appeal for this age group, 12-13 year olds.

This is a kind of interactive or dialogic practice in a whole class setting because the teacher is in role as puppet and puppet master orchestrating the reading. Below I present an extract from the transcript in the field notes:

**Teacher:** Now I think it's time for old Macca to have an appearance today.....Will you be able to do it? (**The teacher is still talking directly to the puppet-puppet nods at the teacher**) You're too nervous are you?

**Pupil:** Sir, can I hold him?

**Teacher:** Well we are all going to prompt him when he gets stuck.

What sort of things do we say to him when Macca gets stuck on his reading?

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**Pupil A:** Take your time

**Pupil B:** Say the first letter

**Teacher:** Say the first letter

**Pupil A:** Sound out- sound out

**Pupil B:** Calm down

**Teacher:** Calm down-don't rush

**(The pupils seem more engaged now-particularly the boys)**

(Field notes, 2011)

The pupils start to interact with the puppet because they are familiar with this prop as they say: 'say the first letter'; 'sound it out, Macca'; 'take your time, Macca'. The puppet's reading difficulties mirror their reading difficulties and yet they are able to help the puppet, beginning to give advice as if they were the teacher, the expert on reading. This helps most of the pupils to engage, at some level, with the text and want to read it themselves.

This modeling of the reading prepares the sequencing exercise where the pupils will have to re-read the love letter broken up into chunks and put them back into the right order. In response to the suggestion that some might see this lesson as having 'low expectations' of a Year 8 class in a secondary school; Peter says this suggestion does 'not really understand the problems these pupils have with reading, comprehension and formal language'. Peter, (2011)

### **6b.4.1 What Peter said about the challenges of talk from evaluating his critical moment**

He goes on to suggest that abstract ideas, such as teaching synthesis are imposed on teachers from above but that teachers 'try to hang onto something that [they] feel is relevant to the children' Peter, (2011). He sees his informal or unofficial approach as a kind of subversion of the formal agenda.

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He admits to being cynical about the present climate teachers find themselves in where prescription and performativity dominate. He finds it hard to take interventions seriously. He suggests that these are always done in 'a clumsy, insincere way that does not inspire you. It's tokenistic. The only thing that is followed through is pushing up the grades...by whatever means' Peter, (2011).

So his critical moment shows that, despite his admitted cynicism about the dominant climate and about talk, to some extent he can interact with the pupils by choosing texts, a love letter and teaching methods that are relevant for a teenage group with low reading ages. He relaxes when he is doing something that he has chosen to do which involves a kind of playfulness. But his central difficulty is that he sees this approach as subverting the official, prescriptive agenda of the school and the government. He sees current interventions in schools failing to listen, engage or inspire teachers to really develop interesting approaches to teaching.

### **6b.5 Stuart's critical moment for talk: poetry genre sorting exercise. To re-arrange or not to re-arrange the groups?**

'they were a bit like Year 11's, less mature than I expected...and too self-conscious to move into new groups' (Stuart, Field Notes, March 29<sup>th</sup>, 2010)

Stuart's critical moment comes at the beginning of his part of the session when he suggests that the groups move into new groups and he realises there is resistance to this idea. Stuart, an ex-English teacher working part-time with me at KUSE, is teaching an all-female English subject specialist group of 25 in a session on 'Teaching Poetry'. This is a very different setting to a school as all the students are quite highly motivated and it is an undergraduate group, all of whom have studied English at Post 16 level.

He felt that the session achieved its aims of getting the students to read the poetry anthologies independently and find new poems to fill in the grids. He was emphasising the need for English teachers to read poetry and be familiar with a range of poems in order to

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teach poetry well. Stuart notes that some students' literary reading is good as they were able to fill up the charts with a range of poems from their own memory as a group without referencing the anthologies.

Stuart chose his opening moment as his critical moment because he engaged in sustained teacher talk to set up the activity and there were some sound problems with other parts of the video. He felt that it was a fairly easy going introduction. There is evidence on the video of the students then working in a sustained way on the group activity that he has established; using exploratory talk remember or find poems that can fill the grid with the different genres of poetry. Stuart is very committed to talk; which he feels is still neglected in the English curriculum and across schools. His commitment is a result of his own educational and teaching experiences and wider values of seeking to give all students equal opportunities to use talk to think and learn.

Stuart's dilemma came when he had finished his introduction and he wanted the students to move into new groups. Below I present an extract from the transcript in the field notes.

**Teacher: (Stuart is handing out orange sheets and he is smiling)** OK---

You can chop it up....so what you'll find on line are activities that encourage children to talk to each other around different topics...not just poetry.

But I've got one little collaborative poem for you to make....

I'd like you to work in fours, or threes but not twos or ones... or sixes

**(some mumbling)** – OK two, threes – so basically you are not going to move are you?

(Field notes, 2012)

Stuart resolved his dilemma by not insisting that the students move. He said afterwards 'they were a bit like Year 11s, less mature than I expected...and too self-conscious to move into new groups' (Stuart, 2012). He thought that perhaps they felt exposed and he said that he decided to be gentle with them.

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### **6b.5.1 What Stuart said about the challenges of talk from evaluating his critical moment**

I had been teaching this group in the first part of the session and I have transcribed the beginning part of this session as a critical moment for talk (Appendix 4). This collaborative teaching allowed for a discussion that reflects both lecturers knowledge of teaching this particular group at this moment in time. Stuart suggests that he felt that some students were more engaged or responsive than others in the group. We both notice; after watching the video; that the two groups at either side of the room were more enthusiastic and responsive than the group in the middle and that meant that both the lecturers were more at ease with these two groups than the middle group.

This led to a discussion of the challenges of the mood and ethos of different groups and how it is sometimes difficult to change the mood of a group. Sometimes there is a hidden tension within the group between the students and when it is an all-girls group these underlying tensions are very hard to penetrate as girls and female students are often expected to be harmonious as discussed in Chapter 2.

So Stuart's key dilemma in his critical moment was whether to re-arrange the groups and responding to the slight tension caused by this proposal he decided not to re-arrange. This was probably a wise decision in this instance as he felt that the group may not have responded positively. A teacher/lecturer planning for group work will always need to weigh up the pros and cons of changing or re-arranging groupings.

### **6b.6 Stephen's critical moment for talk: dialogic conversation after reading *Mouta Massey*. But changing the role of the teacher challenges traditional expectations**

'If you remove 101% authority of the teacher and just act as a facilitator it can be perceived as someone who isn't doing their job.....

(Stephen, Field notes, 2012)



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Stephen, another ex-English teacher, working at KUSE, chooses a moment where he is engaging with the group of 10 postgraduate Secondary English and Media GTP students on a day long English subject knowledge for teaching introductory training session entitled 'Narrative and Creative Writing'. Although the moment chosen shows a very dialogic discussion, his reflections on this moment highlight some interesting insights on the challenges of talk for classroom teachers.

Stephen circulates a piece of writing from one of his Y10 students at Vauxhall Manor School, when he was working as a teacher, called '*Mouta Massy*'. In a dialogic conversation after a dramatic reading of this short story; the students articulate their thoughts on this amusing piece of writing that has used Creole dialect very cleverly.

Stephen starts the discussion by asking two open questions: 'Why do you think that's worth putting in front of you?' 'What qualities can you see in that narrative?' And this elicits a round table dialogic discussion of this piece of writing. For example; K puts a question to Stephen, 'Would you say it was set in Jamaica?' Below I have selected an extract from the transcript in the field notes.

**K:** I like all the things that they say and the sense of 'Britishness'.

**Teacher:** Do you mean imposed Britishness?

**K:** About people's identities....so that Miss Maty is her true self and the other person is not showing her true self.

**Teacher:** That is so complicated and you are so right, but quite whose identity is whose is difficult. Because, after all, if you want to take it back, some of the features – the word 'kata', on the board,.....to take.....people carrying the water....there's a roll of cloth'(gesticulates to top of head). And 'labrish' these words are; or derive from West African words.

**K:** So they haven't completely.....

**Teacher:** So they actually moved completely out of their, what you might say, their heritage language.....I mean these issues are so complicated. But I think you are spot on there!

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**V:** I really got into it...that's why I kept missing my cues.....

**Teacher:** You were reading ahead weren't you?

**V:** It's really interesting to see this extract in language too because of the context of the language....we know what Miss Maty means despite her use of patois.....also the English....it's nice to see the contrast.

(Field notes, 2012)

So Stephen's question leads into a discussion of identity. The video and transcript show evidence of students talking to Stephen and each other and there are a range of contributions. Some shorter and some longer statements. Whilst Stephen's contributions are more sustained there is clear involvement and engagement of the group with 5 out of 10 of the students contributing to this discussion, several of them more than once. Stephen has done what Chambers (1985) advocates in using fewer but better questions to start this discussion.

Stephen said that he chose the moment because he felt the group was bonding and gelling together at this moment and it:

'reminded me that I can get the class to work itself. Get the energy of the group going. Although it's still my responsibility' (Stephen, 2012).

The lecturer articulates his view of this particular dialogue very clearly when evaluating that moment:

'I don't know what the answers are going to be... and how important it is that there will be answers I have not foreseen and [as a teacher/lecturer] you have to be quick enough and perceptive enough to acknowledge what the students are bringing and you also have to be humble enough [to understand] that fresh readers see things that you have not seen' Stephen (2012).

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The critical moment chosen highlights the potential of talk in enriching understanding and engagement with texts but, in the discussion around this moment, the contrasts between schools then and now come to the fore and the different constraints school teachers face in contrast to teacher educators are also explored.

### **6b.6.1 What Stephen said about the challenges of talk from evaluating his critical moment**

Despite this example of dialogic learning, Stephen admits in the discussion that he was not always able to do this as a school teacher and recalls one example where he messed up badly with one particular class in an 'Our Cultures' scheme. This topic had worked well with other groups but in this case it did not partly because there was one member of the group who was antagonistic to him. This is yet another testimony to the unpredictability of talk.

He realises that working in the kind of way he wants to 'using negotiation and discussion uses a lot of time'. And that we often run over with this session but it doesn't matter because we have flexibility, all day in the university and can re-adjust but that this is not the case in schools. Stephen's remarks link to what other teachers and researchers say about the need for time and flexibility to be able to use talk in the classroom and to plan for effective talk. In Chapter 3, I referred to Peon and Rojas-Drummond (2004) who found out that 'many teachers find it difficult to provide effective scaffolding' [because] 'it takes considerable time' (p 554).

We discuss the greater flexibility that used to exist in the English curriculum in the 80's, before the advent of the National Curriculum, where we were able to do more project work and work with other subjects to develop 'Language Across the Curriculum' for example with projects such as Integrated Studies and the Nuffield Humanities Project. And that there were opportunities for longer lessons and more time with kids and that this allowed for 'a kind of spontaneity that is often lacking in education now' (Stephen, 2012). Stephen's ideas about child centred education are a result of his early home literacy practices; based on very

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non-conformist religious practices where the spontaneous spoken word had a very high value and his philosophical views about English teaching where he argues that pupils should have much more control over their learning.

Stephen suggests that his central dilemma in promoting talk in schools was the way in which he challenged the traditional notion of the teacher as an authority figure. He is self-aware and open minded and realises that being a facilitator can clash with dominant expectations of the teacher as authority figure, 'that language does not occupy an ideological vacuum' (Richmond, 1982) and that the teacher who encourages learning talk can be seen as 'someone who isn't doing their job' or too 'laissez faire' (Barnes, 2000). He quotes a year 8 pupil:

"The funny thing about Mr Eyers is that he seems to be the one who wants to learn!"

Isn't that a paradox? I took it as a compliment and she saw it as an insult.'

(Field notes, 2012).

This problem or challenge of changing the teacher's role will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. But here a pupil sees Stephen's 'talk for learning' model as eccentric because she expects a more traditional approach. Once again the insights of the European researchers discussed in Chapter 3 are interesting here. For however democratic and child centred you feel your approach may be, the student may have a different response to the one you expect.

Stephen however felt that his problem was one of isolation in this particular school and that he needed wider support for his approach to counter these rigid views of the teacher's role. He found that support in the Talk Workshop at Vauxhall Manor school. In the university setting, Stephen is also aware that he can be easily diverted and we discuss how much we enjoyed getting our teachers to digress as pupils. But he points out that we have more time to digress and then readjust in universities.

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### 6b 7 Summary

I hoped the critical moments would stimulate more detailed reflections from the teachers about how they saw talk working in the classrooms and its challenges. The reflections show that teacher knowledge of the challenges of talk is embedded in concrete practices. From the video evidence all the teachers have promoted some form of pupil to pupil interactions or dialogue in their chosen lesson so we can see some clear links between the teachers' theory of talk and their practice. But the challenges highlighted in these moments can be grouped into several areas to enrich our knowledge of how talk works; for example; the challenges of independent learning; expectations of the teacher's role and problems of isolation.

The specific challenges the teachers' highlight in relation to independent learning were how to encourage independent learning in groups who struggle to gain a grade C in the GCSE retake exam group. This was an issue for Jean who was worried about patronizing the lowers sets because she felt that the exam template did not give teachers enough space to try out independent learning approaches. Peter was also worried about how to 'try to hang onto something that is relevant to the pupils' (Peter, 2011) when working with SEN and EAL who have difficulties with reading and writing, in a very prescriptive era. Peter saw his informal or unofficial approach as a kind of subversion of the formal agenda. How to use talk for writing to prepare younger pupils for writing a newspaper article was an issue for Cathy who realised she needed to allow for more time and teacher input to fully prepare her Year 4 group for an independent writing task.

Another group of challenges came from the wider expectations of the students, the school and the parents about the teacher's role. For example Stephen's concern, in a particular school, that even when the teacher is able to become more of a facilitator of learning, how this can provoke mixed reactions amongst pupils. Stuart's dilemma about whether or not to re-arrange the groups in the face of polite resistance from students is also perhaps a reaction to contemporary student expectations of more passive styles of learning. Also Gertrude

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clearly still feels rather uneasy with presentational talk as a teacher, although she can lead a sophisticated discussion.

There was also a feeling that with talk you were sometimes working alone on this. The newer English teachers, Jean and Cathy, showed a willingness to use talk but clearly felt that they were rather isolated in doing so and wanted more support. The older English teachers had learnt how to use talk in their formative years in London schools in a previous era. They knew that it was hard to do it alone even then and realised that talk was possibly harder to promote now, but that it worked best when teachers collaborated on this.

The detailed evaluations allow teachers to highlight what they are doing well. But they were not complacent and through the prompts in the discussion began to think about how to use talk more effectively such as interacting more with the small groups or the larger group, feeling that they need to be more free to use their own knowledge of what works with the students, needing wider support and understanding of language and learning in the department or school for the 'talk for learning' model to work more effectively.

But the teacher's view of talk is also informed by a number of other factors for example their values, their understandings of language and learning and their own life experiences in education and the era in which they are working as teachers. Their views on talk and their desire to persist in experimenting with talk, are often linked to a critical evaluation of the cultural elitism of traditional didactic modes. This comes out very clearly in the evaluations of the critical moments.

In this sense the teachers demonstrated reflective thinking about talk and its challenges in the classroom as Dewey, 1933 (cited by Griffin, 2003:207) suggests manifesting whole heartedness, open-mindedness and responsibility. The teachers were mostly whole hearted in their commitment to classroom talk and improving classroom interactions although some were more 'crusaders for talk' (Richmond, 1982) than others. Where they were not so wholehearted; it was the result of a very challenging context; Peter, or being new to their careers; Jean, or due to factors that they had less control over. They were open-minded and

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child centred in the sense that they discussed talk from the children's point of view and wanted to learn more from the children; they aimed to talk less and wanted the children to learn more independently and talk more. They discussed ways that this could be achieved. They took responsibility for what they did in the classroom and could articulate what they felt that had achieved with talk in that particular lesson. But they were not afraid to subject themselves to critique in the context of the evaluation of the critical moments-some teachers choosing points in the lesson where they saw problems or telling stories of problems in other lessons even when much of the lesson on the video had demonstrated effective talk.

In the next chapter I will try and capture a wider picture of these teachers' awareness of how talk works in the classroom and the challenges it poses for them, by discussing the signals coming from outside the classroom; commenting in more detail on the way in which the teachers saw this influencing their practice with talk.

## Teachers' narratives of classroom talk: what are the challenges?

### **Chapter 7: What the teachers said about the nature of the signals coming from the outside that influenced their challenges with classroom talk**

‘Perhaps there had been too much focus on the cognitive dimension of language in the classroom and not enough attention had been paid to “the need to manage a class and all the other social pressures that one’s coping with” (p4)’ .... he would now want to ‘give more space to the nature of the signals coming [to teachers] from outside’ (p5).

Barnes, interviewed by Hardcastle and Simons (1988)

The overall aim of this study was to bring to the surface teachers’ awareness of how talk works in the classroom and the challenges it presents for those wishing to promote effective talk. This was an area in the literature on talk that I argued was underexplored (See Chapter 3). Teacher’s use of talk and interactions in the classroom have often been observed and judged by senior teachers, head teachers, advisors, inspectors and researchers. This study attempted something different: I asked a group of English teachers to identify their challenges with talk and evaluate their practice, but also to make observations about the climate they worked within and implicitly those who normally support and judge them, by also asking them to consider the constraints on their use of talk in classrooms. This allowed the teachers to consider not only their own individual practice but the wider nature of the signals coming from outside the classroom that influence their challenges with talk. As stated at the beginning of the study, the life narrative case studies were a means of inviting interviewees to speak about their lives and educational histories and place their understandings of talk in a wider context . This led to some very interesting reflections and insights.

So while the discussion in the last chapter primarily focused on the teacher’s individual thoughts and evaluations of their practice, the reflections of the teachers in this chapter focus on the wider sociocultural context and summarise what the teachers said about talk and the era, setting and contexts in which they worked.



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The case studies also reveal a lot of insights about the challenges of dialogue and traditional patterns of classroom discourse and the power conflicts among the pupils that are always in the classroom; conflicts which can become more transparent when teachers promote talk for learning. Additionally, I refer back to the teachers' own life experiences in education to further develop understanding of how talk works. For these life experiences not only influence the teachers' present pedagogic choices, as suggested earlier, but they can also shed light on the ongoing challenges of talk in classrooms. I have also included comments from the teachers participating in the group discussion (Appendix 6) in this chapter.

### **7.1 The challenges of era and context**

Perhaps one of the most interesting new features that this study underlines is the way in which the era strongly influenced teacher's attitudes to and choices over pedagogy. The oldest teachers (both in their late 60s when interviewed) had the most child centred, discovery learning views of teaching.

Stuart, an ex-English teacher very committed to exploratory talk; approached this through a resource based learning approach producing materials through the Collaborative Learning Project (2011). Stuart over several decades has worked with teachers to produce resources such as information gap that require exploratory talk.

The child centred view, where the teacher acts as a facilitator of learning, is also very clearly represented in Stephen's statements, another ex-English teacher, in focusing on discussions around literature and highlighting the importance of personal experience:

'We have to make mistakes and overcome our confusions and then learning has taken place. Kids who think like the teachers are more likely to learn quickly but others need a longer scheme of work. The view of the teacher as an instructor limits the complexity of what you can teach. ...Even in a top stream not everyone has learnt, they can just be going through the motions' (Stephen, 2013).

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This idea of taking time to learn and discover what pupils already know and compare it with new knowledge; that learning new ideas takes time and that children need to learn at their own pace is strongly rooted in Stephen's philosophy and practice. Stephen thought that today time was a real issue here:

‘Plenty of 45 minute lessons in schools now..... once I had a whole morning with Year 9 where a lot of the work was a project with tape recorders ....a kind of spontaneity that is often lacking now in education’ (Stephen, 2013).

The view that it takes time to learn is at odds with the pacy, bite sized and target oriented learning of the performativity cultures and Stephen is aware of this. In his interview he refers to the ideas that influenced his school teaching in the 70's and 80's:

‘So Stenhouse's view was that you cannot have free and confident discussion without removing the teacher and the teacher's ideas from the discussion...and I was very influenced by this and I still am and this is an absolute anathema to today's situation where you are meant to transmit, transmit, transmit!’ (Stephen, 2012)

Stephen is able to compare his own experiences as a teacher with the experiences of the young teachers he has been supporting on the Graduate Teacher Programme. Richmond, who worked at the same South London School as Stephen, also (1982) highlights the stark differences between the pre National Curriculum era and the post National Curriculum era when he states: ‘...one of the luxuries, or the terrors, of English teaching is the openness of its agenda’ (Richmond, 1982:189), testifying to the flexibility of the English curriculum in the 1970's and early 80's. Baron et al (1981) distinguish between ‘liberal and radical teachers’ (p 189) at this time. They suggest that the liberal teachers believed they were relatively autonomous from social and political structures ‘attempting to realize universal values such as relevance or interest, or cultural comprehensiveness’ (p189).

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Stephen comments directly on the experimental work of the Talk Workshop (Eyers and Richmond, 1982) at this school, suggesting that there was far less surveillance of teachers taking place and they had much more freedom to work together independently and experiment:

‘...there was no need to worry. You weren't thinking Oh God the Deputy Head's coming this morning. The Deputy Head had no idea what we were doing... we just burrowed around together and produced something quite coherent' (Stephen, 2012).

I also comment in my autobiography that even in the late 80's and 90's there was a strong sense of collective identity among teachers:

‘There was a strong collective ethos of teachers working together to transform teaching and develop new ideas in the classroom' (Chapter 2)

Those newer to teaching in this study are more subject to the disciplines of a highly prescriptive curriculum and the performativity cultures and the necessity to prepare students for exams and retakes. This study suggests that they have less time and flexibility to plan and evaluate talk. The teachers also comment on their isolation and their lack of support and a lack of real understanding of the value of learning talk. They have more reason to worry and, as Ellis (2007) suggests, this incessant individualistic improvement discourse can sap teachers' creativity, isolating teachers from one another and their shared knowledge.

But the younger teachers were not unaware of the wider constraints of the 'Standards Agenda' and had their own ideas about what good teaching should look like. For example, Cathy sums up some of these aspects in the group discussion (Appendix 6) saying that if you had a positive view of talk as a teacher:

‘it kind of came naturally but, in the test culture, if you did not have this view there was no encouragement to use talk for learning anymore (Cathy, 2013).

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Cathy in the group discussion (Appendix, 6) talked of how teachers in her Primary schools were now labeled, ranked and graded today, something she has not mentioned in her earlier interview. And how in her school; teachers not only avoided speaking about difficult classes but that the teachers also kept quiet about their grading after observations using euphemisms; saying that things had 'gone ok' or 'better than expected' rather than speak openly about this.

Talking of performativity; she said that learning walks, monitoring walks and drop-ins had started happening in her Primary school and although they were framed as 'supportive' they put more stress on teachers. She also said that because writing was a focus the SMT often wanted to see children writing rather than talking. As a literacy coordinator she understood that talk supports writing but some of those observing did not always understand this.

Stuart (2008) maintains that there is an underestimation of the value of talk in children's learning and intellectual and linguistic development. Jean (2009), when an NQT and a new Secondary teacher; places this statement in a contemporary context saying that she feels there is a lack of advice about how to use talk effectively:

'As an NQT we have discussions (in the department meetings) about schemes of work but not about talk and group work. We talk about what ability we are going to pitch the work at and the type of text we should use....heads of department need more education about talk....some drama some think/pair share and Ofsted has a sheet to record children's talk and teacher talk but there is a lack of advice about how to do this ' (Jean, 2009).

Stephen comments that there was not so much paper work and targeting going on when he was teaching:

'We weren't overwrought with unnecessary paperwork and intensification. Have you come across Giroux? Giroux has this theory of intensification. If you don't

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make people work harder and harder, then they'll run around doing interesting things and where will we be then?' (Stephen, 2012)

What Stephen is referring to here is called teacher busy-ness which allows teachers little time to reflect and initiate new ideas of their own. The wave of imperatives coming down from above leaves little time for thought and teacher initiative (Ellis, 2007).

Peter, at forty six with twenty years of teaching behind him, is also acutely aware of the changes that have taken place in his career and bears witness to the what Stevens (2012) and European writers such as Canadell (2013) denote as the increasingly authoritarian management of schools. Peter describes the deterioration of his life as a teacher. He portrays a brave new Orwellian world in which new truth regimes dominate and where London Secondary school teachers are no longer allowed to talk honestly of the realities of classroom life or to be in a position to even discuss their real challenges and dilemmas. He highlights his practical difficulties, his restless classes who arrive in friction, his lack of time to prepare teaching materials, having different rooms for each lesson and a lack of in class support for pupils with SEN:

'Schools have got to look at themselves honestly and gain comprehensive feedback before they begin to help teachers do things better. Too many schools nowadays do not want to hear about real difficulties in the classroom. They want to massage them away or blame staff for weaknesses if they admit to encountering difficulties.'

(Peter, 2008)

Here the suggestion is that the rise of an educational 'market' and competition between schools and the need for a 'good public image' to attract the 'best' students can restrict an honest discussion about what is really happening in the school and particularly what is happening in the classroom; so that teachers remain unaware that others are having similar difficulties to you. In the group discussion, Stephen (2013) pointed out that working vertically means being judged and working horizontally means working together and this is

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what works for promoting talk. Carol adds that vertical systems do predominate in schools today and she also felt that there was an element of fear in the performativity culture. Peter and Cathy's reflections on the cultural transformation in schools as the social control of pupils and teachers has increased is developed by Woodfield (2008), who cites Giddens (1991) suggesting that; as teachers' previous child centred moral codes have been challenged and they are unhappy with the new moral imperatives of performativity; they therefore experience 'anomie'. The suggestion is that teachers have lost a sense of identity and direction as new moral imperatives have been imposed on them with which they are uncomfortable.

It is thus important to emphasise again that the era and the context are extremely important influences on the pedagogical choices open to teachers (Coultras, 2012). Although some aspects of teaching have not changed and as Coffey (2001) explains; teaching will always be about classroom interactions and teachers will still, inevitably, mediate the curriculum (Kress et al, 2005); the cultural shifts are important and there clearly are changing 'signals coming from the outside' (Barnes, 1988). However we must also note that teachers search out good practice and that they are influenced by the work of teachers in previous eras. There is evidence of an overlap in my teaching career in my Autobiography (Chapter 2) that shows that; even as the National Curriculum was introduced, the ideas and influences of the NOP and the whole language tradition still influenced my thinking and planning throughout the 90's as a Head of English (Coultras, 2006b).

But these case studies clearly suggest that there were different challenges with talk faced by the teachers in the pre Education Reform Act, or more particularly pre SATs era before 1995, where teachers still had some professional autonomy in contrast to those teachers entering teaching in the late 90's and 2000's where they clearly have less professional autonomy and choices over how they teach (Coultras 2007b, 2009c, 2012b, 2013b). The way in which neo-liberal ideas have undermined the idea of collective provision for a welfare state (Harvey, 2005) and generalized the principles of competition and accountability in the education sector; introduces a new rationality into schools (Dreux, 2013, Whitty, 1997) that demands a certain kind of thinking, conduct and a certain kind of

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teaching. As Jones (2011) suggests discussions on language and learning have been blocked or stifled and replaced by the new imperatives of performativity and the constant measurement of learning outcomes. Both beginning and more experienced teachers in this study clearly felt that teachers' pedagogic choices, and therefore the possibilities of planning for learning talk, were more inhibited today than in previous eras. In one case study, the alienation and lack of power expressed by one teacher, Peter, was also a protest against this new dominant rationality.

A key finding of this study therefore is that the challenges of talk cannot be understood fully, unless we take account of the bigger picture and consider the era and sociocultural contexts teachers are working within and the signals coming from the outside. Barnes (2000) shows understanding of this and its impact on learning talk when he says:

‘The contexts in which teachers work, both outside and inside the school, are crucial in enabling him or her to perceive alternatives, and in supporting the process of change. So are the relationships between teachers in the same school..... having a source of values outside the school (in LATE and later NATE), as well as inside it, was important.....I found that I was more willing to take the risk of making changes when my morale was high, which makes me think that the destructive criticism of schools that has been characteristic of the last two decades is not likely to have helped teachers improve’. (p123)

Again in this section I must emphasise that we are now witnessing a return to a very traditional curriculum with an emphasis on adult led knowledge; alongside the imposition of standard English in the English curriculum (Coulthas, 2013). Gove (2013), assuming a much wider currency for talk and group work in classrooms than research evidence suggests, has made his own view on traditional teaching styles and small group work unambiguous:

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‘All too often, we’ve seen an over-emphasis on group work - in practice, children chatting to each other - in the belief that is a more productive way to acquire knowledge than attending to an expert.’

In a recent UKLA/BERA conference (2014) English teachers reported that they were being forced, in a particular Academy chain, to make the pupils sit in rows. It needs to be recognised that Gove’s traditional views are therefore likely to make the challenges even greater for those who wish to promote talk, small group learning and pupil self-expression.

### **7.1.1 The challenges of context and setting: problems of disruption and disdain with classroom talk**

There were four different educational settings for this study- the Primary school, the Secondary school, the Special school and for the ex-English teachers, their reflections on Secondary school teaching and the Teacher Education setting.

There was a clear difference in the experiences of Secondary and Primary school teachers in this study. The Primary teachers interviewed did not have such a battle to maintain order in the classroom. Gertrude (2013), in teaching in a Special school and training teaching assistants and nursery teachers in a small group, also produced a very dialogic example of talk. But she highlighted the special circumstances of having a small, motivated group of adult learners and how even Special school teachers were not so constrained by time as mainstream teachers were.

Cathy suggests that her Year 4 class was livelier after the school trip but she does not encounter any big difficulty in getting the children to listen to her. Gertrude gives good advice from her early years’ background on how to get the attention of the group but she does not describe this process as a battle or a struggle or use the language some of the secondary teachers used. When it came to the question about having any difficulties in getting the attention of the class this was a really big challenge for the secondary teachers



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working in urban schools in this study, particularly at Key Stage 3 but also sometimes at Key Stage 4.

Peter, for example the secondary Deputy Head, points out that many of the lower school humanities groups are restless and he is most adamant about the difficulties:

‘The classes are very agitated. Their body language is very restless. In extreme circumstances they are shouting at each other they are so restless.....the pupils seem reluctant to work with each other. They often work on their own. They seem to be unused to working in pairs or unwilling to do it’ (Peter, 2008).

This statement is a very honest description of the key challenges many urban secondary school teachers can face at the beginning and sometimes throughout their lessons (Coultas, 2007b) and this study reaffirms this. Jean, Peter, myself and the two ex-London teachers also discuss the problem of keeping the groups engaged with learning. Stuart and I have a very close discussion of this topic as we clearly approach the issue of gaining the attention of the class in different ways.

But as I suggested in Chapter 4; although behaviour management literature explores these issues, it is a challenge that remains undiscussed in much of the literature on talk. The teacher is saying how can I get them to work with each other if they cannot even listen to me?

But the nature of the group was also a factor influencing the teachers' attitudes to talk in secondary schools. The teachers felt less comfortable with the way they used talk in lower sets than in higher set:

‘It's easier with the top set but with this group my main focus has had to be to get the job done with the retake’ (Jean, 2012).

Peter also felt more relaxed with a GCSE option group where:

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‘There were four or five more motivated students and here talk was not such a forced process and I could go with the flow’ (Peter, 2008).

The key challenge the teachers are dealing with here is the problem of adolescent subversion of classroom and school routines. All adolescent pupils can manifest aspects of rebellion and resistance both in and outside the classroom and you only have to read *Tom Brown's School days*, Hughes (1857), to understand that this is something that is a potential problem in any school. But it is also manifests itself in a particular way with classroom interactions and talk. Here the problem is that speech has gone, as Richmond (1982), suggests:

‘from being a central act of knowing in the infant, to being ....a tool or rebellion and resistance in the teenager’ (p181).

And that pattern of resistance can become an established feature of pupil behaviour in many comprehensive Secondary schools; particularly in the lower sets and sometimes in lower school mixed ability groups where an anti-school culture (Ball, 1981) can become dominant.

However, Stephen highlights the point made both by Cook et al (1989) and me in my commentary on the autobiography (Chapter 2) that while talk can be unpredictable it is vitally important for the intellectual and emotional engagement of all pupils and can help to overcome patterns of resistance and alienation in turbulent classrooms. Stephen reflects on how he was able to engage the intellectual energies of the pupils in mixed ability classes:

‘The best group work happened for me in the unstreamed classes where you could use the different strengths’ [where he urged the pupils] ‘not only to listen to me but to listen to each other’ (Stephen, 2012).

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In the group discussion, Stephen also wanted to emphasise that encouraging cooperation within groups was part of:

‘the higher moral purpose of teaching and how by allowing children to discover things for themselves and make their own mistakes this avoids scorn and can divert children from disruptive behaviour as they learn to cooperate.’ (Appendix 6, 2013)

The School of Education setting at Kingston University, with Stuart, Stephen and I, did not have any problems of open resistance but there was some disdain among some of the students discussed in the poetry session (Stuart, 2012, Chapter 6b). Here we see the way in which even high achieving students are also influenced by the use of talk as a tool of resistance. This mirrored remarks of teachers in high achieving sixth forms at NATE workshops I have run recently that aspirant students sometimes just want to be told how to do well and get the highest grades and are therefore also resistant to group work. In Stuart's context an all girls group was also slightly resistant to fully engage with a group activity and we discussed how beginning teachers might undermine university lecturers in more subtle and varied ways. Once again I suggest that resistance to fully incorporating the teacher's view of the world (Smolka, 1995) does not end at 16 or at 18 because of the intersubjectivity of human interactions.

### **7.2 The challenges of dialogue and traditional expectations of classroom discourse: facilitator or didact?**

A key aspect of the debate that this study has highlighted in discussing the challenges of talk for the teacher is that although talk is ‘at the heart of what you do’ as a teacher (Jean, 2012: 2) and ‘how you get your message across’ (Gertrude, 2009), it is often difficult for teachers to change their role and act as a facilitator of learning: for this challenges the traditional role of the teacher as the source of knowledge and wisdom and as the agent of authority and social control in the classroom. As Richmond (1982: 159) maintains ‘language does not exist in an ideological vacuum’.

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The teacher therefore has to mediate between the role of facilitator of learning and agent of social control. On the one hand this involves facilitating exploratory talk but it also involves keeping order and evaluating the pupils (Grainger, 2000). What this study has shown is that this change in role can create new challenges for the teacher as it can be at odds with the school and the community and even sometimes clash with children's expectations.

This contradiction between child centred and adult centred approaches to learning is also a central theme of the debates on talk; debates on pedagogy and English teaching. These tensions have always been there as Stephen suggests when working as a teacher in South London in the 1970's and referring to parents and children thinking that he was not doing his job properly. But the pendulum is now shifting sharply back towards the adult centred view of teaching today.

What the teachers' statements suggest is that an awareness of these contradictions, thinking about where the pupils are coming from and being more aware of the different roles a teacher can choose to adopt in the classroom, sometimes as didact, sometimes facilitator, sometimes storyteller, performer or advisor can perhaps allow teachers to promote talk more effectively and respond better to students' disruptive or disdainful responses towards classroom talk.

### **7.2.1 The challenges of dialogue and the Initiation Response Feedback (IRF) exchange; an area requiring further study because of 'disruption' and 'disdain'.**

This brings me to a key issue that this study has had to grapple with but has been unable to solve: the continued domination of the Initiation Response Feedback (IRF) exchange as the main pattern of classroom interactions; despite a host of advice suggesting that the pattern should be changed during at least some part of the lesson (Chapter 3 and 4). But I believe that I have more insight into this problem, more understanding of the reasons for conflict between the teacher and the taught, and that this is not an easy problem for the teacher to

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resolve and that it needs continued discussion and research from the view of the pupil and the teacher.

Every teacher in the study had strong views on this topic. A question was asked that promoted discussion of the IRF from the teacher's perspective; 'can you describe the problems you have in getting the class to listen to you and how you attempt to overcome these problems?' Gertrude gives good advice about establishing good listening routines that this has a use value for all teachers.

But Peter's problem was actually establishing this IRF exchange in some classes (Coultras, 2007b). The restlessness of his classes meant that he could not relax and even properly establish the IRF exchange, something that Rampton and Harris (2008) record in their study giving this rebellion the somewhat euphemistic term of 'non-deferential' learning (Chapter 4). Jean also realises that she has classes that require a lot of teacher input and traditional exchange patterns to follow the narrative and that, at first, as an NQT she felt that her priority had to be to keep the children safe:

'I wanted to keep children safe...I did not initially allow children to be expressive. ....As I have developed as a teacher I have experimented more...when they talk in pairs or in a circle...make presentations... their ears are pricked when they listen to each other..... it goes beyond what they can do with me' (Jean, 2010).

So Jean realized that she had to establish herself before she should allow for self-expression by the pupils but she did feel that she had moved forward.

Stephen is aware that if you attempt to become a facilitator some of the children can think you are soft or eccentric. His discussion of the parents' reaction to his approach was also a key challenge for him in one particular school. Here, there were clear expectations in the school where he taught, that had until recently been a grammar school, that he should adopt a more traditional role and become more of a didact. He realized that unless the whole school or at least the whole department had a commitment to the talk for learning approach;

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individual teachers could find themselves isolated and more child centred teaching approaches could be misunderstood.

Peon and Rojas-Drummond (2004) also recognise the problem of ingrained teaching practices and that 'scaffolding is an easy strategy to understand but difficult to apply adequately' (p 554) because it clashes with established modes of teaching. Alexander (2008) also talks of the need for a transformation of the culture in English classrooms if dialogue is to be promoted effectively.

And Stuart and I discuss different approaches to establishing good listening routines in the face of disruption. In Stuart's critical moment; the disdainful view towards group work '....of the often highly motivated school and university student who can become disdainful of softer teaching modes' (Field notes, 2010); who continually press for just wanting to be told how to get the highest grades, is considered. These students can seem to suggest that they would rather not play games with group work.

All the teachers therefore had some insights that gave a better understanding of this phenomenon and the ways in which teachers needed to vary their use of the IRF depending on their particular situation, being new to the class, being a new teacher, having to take account of some the expectations of the pupils and the school or the inspectors and explain the case for talk more explicitly. Or having to deal with classes that did not even conform to 'normal IRF patterns of discourse' and needing to establish this pattern before or while moving to more independent learning based on group talk.

Richmond's (1982) discussion of adolescent rebellion and deliberate subversion of adult agendas seems to come the closest to describing why adolescent pupils find different strategies to resist attempts at whole class dialogue (Galton, 2002) and 'learning talk' and can be used to help us understand disdainful attitudes as well as disruptive behaviour. He is also aware that making space for talk also requires a discussion of some of the difficulties:

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‘Making space for talk is a venture accompanied by frequent dangers and difficulties. [We] must...attempt to understand why those dangers and difficulties exist’ Richmond’ (1982, p181).

Leftstein (2008) also illuminates the rhetorical character of classroom discourse; as the teacher is performing in front of thirty children and the children are performing in front of the teacher and they feel the need to play to the gallery in order to express their adolescent identity. This is yet another way of explaining the pressures on the pupils and on the teacher that makes it difficult to use talk effectively.

Two teachers, Cathy (2012) and Jean (2012) suggested that when teachers sit down and actually join the conversation in the small group we often, quite naturally, get a more equal discourse pattern. Peter also shows insight when he says that the teacher has to feel relaxed: ‘to be able to go with the flow’ (Peter, 2009) to facilitate dialogue and respond well to pupils and probe them more effectively. Peter (2009) also makes us aware that even honest discussion about how to use talk effectively; in the face of restless classes, can be problematic in an increasing culture of surveillance and greater competition between schools. A recent television programme *Tough, Young Teachers* yet again highlights this problem of schools not wanting the reality of classroom life to become public. When TV cameras are allowed into his school, one of the head teachers involved, Davies, (2014), is dismayed because he is worried about negative publicity. Stephen, perhaps drawing on his drama teaching background, makes suggestions for getting pupils to sit in a circle and pass the keys around to decide who speaks; as the conch was passed round in *Lord of the Flies*.

As I suggest in Chapter 3 and Chapter 6, European researchers argue for more study of this area of conflict and intersubjectivity in conversation as ‘the human subject is rarely constituted through consensus and convergence’ (Thompson, 2009:36). Richmond (1982) also suggests that we should be careful about expecting norms of discourse from pupils in schools that adults do not follow when they become involved in arguments and discussions. Clearly more study of the IRF and classroom conversations with pupils and teachers together looking at these issues of conflict would provide further insights.

### **7.3 The challenges of dealing with the power relationships between the pupils becoming more transparent with talk**

Issues of power relations have therefore come to the forefront in the study in several different ways. Above I have considered the powerful forces outside the classroom influencing teachers practice and the way in which the power of the teacher and the relations between the pupils and the teacher influences classroom discourse. But in setting up the teaching and establishing the groups the pupils' power relationships among each other also come to the fore. For, as Stuart (2008) suggested, if you always let the pupils choose the groups, all the gender and racial tensions in the area will emerge.

As suggested in Chapter 4, all the psychological tensions that adults have in developing teams are manifest in the classroom with pupils. In the group discussion the teachers suggested allowing pupils to work in friendship groups on some occasions but that the teacher should choose the groups on other occasions. The dominant and the shy child can also lose out in different ways if the groups remain unmonitored and as Gertrude suggested; you need to plan tasks that really engage the whole group and encourage children to vary their roles. It should be remembered however that re-arranging groups is not always an easy task and during a discussion of Stuart's critical moment for talk he decided not to re-arrange the groups as he was unfamiliar with the students and in the particular context, this was a justifiable decision.

The power relationships that emerge between boys and girls in group work and whole class discussions were also explored by several of the teachers. Cathy (2009) suggests that boys and girls try to work in separate groups and that bright girls can dumb down when working with boys and that boys can dominate in whole class discussions. Stuart (2008) suggests that girls enjoy the autonomy of group work and are often more mature than boys. Jean (2009) comments that Caribbean girls and boys at GCSE were very verbal, very opinionated. Stephen (2012) agrees remarking on the sensationally good oral skills of many Caribbean pupils he taught. Whilst Stephen is more celebratory of these pupils' oral skills, Jean (2009) is more concerned to get her pupil to use the discourse of literary criticism. But



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they would probably both agree with Barnes (1976) who suggested that talk can lead pupils over time into a discussion of more abstract ideas:

‘Our pupils will learn most by reading, writing and talking about the experiences they meet and through this in time will come to terms with subject disciplines’  
(p126).

Jean (2009) also notes that boys still dominate classroom talk overall for example in a 6<sup>th</sup> form setting she noted that they ask questions; give answers and answer back when the teacher has spoken.

Teachers in the study suggested that interrogating the task, thinking carefully about group composition and establishing ground rules and clear routines are all mechanisms that are useful in promoting effective group work and good listening. Induction into group work and ground rules (Mercer, 2008) can allow the teacher to establish the case for collaboration. But in addition the teacher needs to be alert and watch what is happening even sometimes directly joining in; as Jean (2012) and Cathy (2012) suggest; participating in the discussion and ensuring that the groups work well and that the teacher can learn how the pupils are tackling the task. Reflection at the end of group work is also a mechanism for allowing pupils and students to learn to analyse their own talk and how to work more effectively the next time. (Coultas, 2007b, Cook et al 1989).

But as Adam Lefstein (2008) and feminist sub-cultural researchers, such as Coates (2011), have made clear, even with careful planning and active supervision the problems of status, power and talk and different social practices can never completely be neutralised. Gender, class and racial divisions have gone through some important changes over the last few decades but these divisions have not disappeared.

Again the era will also influence how schools consider and discuss gender, race and class and equal opportunity issues that impact on talk in classrooms. Indeed, although while some suggest that class divisions may be deepening in society but in new ways (Ainley and

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Allen, 2007, 2013), schools now often assume a rhetoric that is class blind (Wrigley, 2002). Yet teachers have to operate in a world where there are different forms of power operating in the classroom and in a climate where the ranking, ordering and labelling of children and teachers has become a prevailing theme. Therefore this study suggests that the different power relations in the classroom has to be a consideration for teachers at all times; including in the planning for small group learning and classroom talk (Coultas, 2007b).

### **7.4 The challenges of talk revealed in the teachers' own educational life experiences**

The teachers' reflections on their own life experiences in education reveal important insights both about the importance of talk and its challenges. Looking at teachers' accounts of their life experiences we can also see that the presence or absence of opportunities for learning talk and the era and school culture, have a very important influence on the identity of school children and our sense of ourselves as learners (Bruner, 1996).

#### **7.4.1 Gender and informal learning**

Gendered experiences of talk were prominent in the teachers' reflections on their own lives. Three of the women in the study suggested that as pupils and students they found informal talk outside the classroom often more supportive to their intellectual development than the more formal talk in the classroom and the lecture room. Cathy (2009) suggests that the teaching was very didactic in her schooling and in my grammar school; I (Chapter 2) suggest that the spoken word was very much confined to extra-curricular activities. Jean's (2009) experiences of talk in her comprehensive Secondary school were more positive and she emphasized that discussions in English lessons were good and she gained confidence through using talk in Drama and the Performing Arts lessons, options that were not available to pupils attending most Grammar schools in the past. Jean was still aware that she talked most in the playground; however.

Presentational talk being dominated by boys and men in schools and other institutions was another challenge that the teachers highlighted in their own life experiences. Several of the

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teachers, Gertrude, Cathy, Jean, myself suggest that, in most cases, boys still dominate the dialogue in classrooms. This reflects previous research discussed in Chapter 3 and my own writing (2007b). For example, I note in my autobiography that despite wanting to participate in student debates, I faced obstacles.

‘I was so frightened of standing up and speaking on my own that I went to the bar and drank 3 brandies immediately one after the other’ (Chapter 2).

Here we see that even women who want to participate in presentational talk have to put in an extra effort to be prepared to participate in the adversarial world of political discussion. Yet Stuart notes that he had the experience of Socratic debate in small groups in the preparation for Oxbridge in his Grammar school 6<sup>th</sup> Form and felt encouraged to develop self-confidence in talking. So, promoting exploratory talk, ensuring that girls have a variety of roles and are well prepared for equal participation in dialogue is still a central challenge for teachers who aim to promote talk effectively in classrooms.

### 7.4.2 Family background and self-confidence

Family background can also play an important role in forming identity and promoting confidence in using talk. Gertrude for example was an only child in a small family. She was very shy and wouldn't speak up in class and her tone of voice was too soft. Jean, on the other hand, highlighted a very positive experience of talk in her family:

‘As a child I was learning to talk in the family; a single parent family and there was lots of talking with my sister and younger brother’ (Jean, 2010).

Both the poignant and positive messages about the role and challenges of talk can help give teachers a richer understanding of how and why talk works in the classroom. Maybin's (2006) suggestion, discussed in Chapter 3, that talk is referential, interpersonal and particularly emotive, expressing inner states, is very insightful for this study as it helps to

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explain how being able to talk and express ideas reflects and builds self-confidence in the learner at any stage of life.

### **7.4.3 Religion and community literacy practices**

There was quite an extended discussion between Stephen and myself about the routines and rituals, choric reading, singing and free speech of the non-conformist Church and the influence of this on our attitudes to talk. Stephen highlighted the reverence that his family had for the spoken word:

‘...in my family... the highest form of life was to become a preacher and that you would expound the scriptures to the believers as though inspired by the Holy Spirit....so to speak up almost entirely without notes was seen as the highest form of language activity’(Stephen, 2012).

I also note in my talk autobiography that one of my first public speaking opportunities came with the recitation of a poem in a church hall and we discuss how these early literacy practices may have influenced our own attitudes to talk. Jean and Stephen’s reflections on the oral language skills of the Caribbean pupils in her English GCSE were also a very interesting reflection on the power of oral language in particular communities.

These references to the informal cultural influences of the teachers’ childhoods, reaffirm earlier work by writers like Brice Heath (1983) around the mainly oral features of many community literacy practices in contrast to ‘school literacy’ that focuses primarily on reading and writing.

### **7.4.5 Critical evaluations of these experiences and reflections on the challenges of talk**

In the case of Cathy and me; the commitment to talk also came from a feeling of being silenced or excluded at school. Cathy (2009) remembered a very formal, didactic mode of teaching in her primary and secondary schools and Cathy felt silenced in her schooling. In

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my talk autobiography (Chapter 2), I state that I felt that my voice had often been ignored or dismissed and my intellectual development impeded by the formality and abstractions (and sexist assumptions) of the school and the classroom. In Stuart's (2008) case; he remembered waiting to speak and being annoyed by that and he therefore wanted to give others more opportunities for learning through dialogue in small groups. In Stephen's (2012) case; he was appalled by the language discrimination in his Grammar school and became very committed to celebrating language diversity. Stephen talks of the terrible elitism of his boys Grammar school that mocked the voices of pupils from working class homes. For example he says of his Grammar school:

‘It was shocking; boys from the council estates in Bournemouth, their accents were mocked by the teachers..... they were the cleverest boys in the town’ (Stephen, 2012).

This is an example of what Williams describes as the ‘vulgar insolence’ of telling someone that they do not how to speak their own language (Williams, 1965 cited by Yandell, 2013).

Stephen stated in the group discussion (Appendix 6) that, in complete opposition to these views; as a teacher, he wanted pupils ‘to feel as he did in his primary school; equally valued’ (Stephen, 2013).

So, in these cases, there was not an imitative relationship but a critical assessment of the teachers' own educational experiences and a conscious commitment to a more democratic approach to using oral language pedagogy as teachers.

### **7.5 Summary**

The approach that I adopted in this study drew on the ideas of Saunders (2012) and Elliot (1994) about researching teacher knowledge. I used reflection and a critical moment to probe the teachers' knowledge of their educational experiences of talk in order to discuss and become more aware of how talk works and its challenges in the classroom. This is a

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collective, developmental model that seeks to enrich teacher and researcher knowledge of talk; building on a child-centred more empowering tradition in education, drawing on the ideas of Dewey (Novak, 2014). This contrasts with the individualistic, overly judgemental and deficit model of teachers expounded in the top down school improvement discourse (Wrigley, 2002).

In Chapter 2, I used my own experiences to situate the study and explain why talk had played such an important role in my learning and in my teaching to demonstrate its empowering qualities. In Chapter 3, I argued that the 'talk for learning' model was an intellectual conquest of the 70's and 80's, which was influenced by a range of disciplines and teachers' adaptation to the needs of children, and this model should be defended if moves towards democratic pedagogies were to continue. That the elocution model of talk, where pupils' natural speech is undervalued and corrected, was ever present and loomed large in the thinking behind the new very traditional English curriculum (DfE, 2013). In Chapter 4, I suggested that it was necessary to listen more closely to teachers' voices to understand the complexities of setting up learning talk successfully in the classroom: that the practical problems teachers raise should be of greater interest to educational researchers and to schools.

In this chapter; these case studies underline the ways in which not only the teacher's personal attitudes to talk but also, moving wider, the setting and era influenced and sometimes restricted their pedagogic choices. Moving from didactic modes of teaching to more facilitative modes is identified as quite a difficult project even when the language debate was quite rich; for example, in London schools in the 70's and 80's. But it is very clear from this study that teachers in schools today face greater difficulties in promoting 'learning talk' in classrooms, not just because of the imposition of a more traditional curriculum, but because the culture in these schools appears not to value or fully understand this notion of learning talk or have a developmental view of teacher growth. The teachers see themselves as isolated in wanting to develop learning talk and have less time and encouragement for this type of planning and pedagogic experimentation.

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From the teacher's point of view, the particularly sharp challenges of whole class interactions and the IRF come to the fore in a new way as this study suggests that a change in role towards becoming more of a facilitator can sometimes create new problems for the teacher. The study also highlights the need for the teacher to feel intellectually engaged and relaxed to do talk well and adopt a variety of roles to promote dialogue. The need for a supportive ethos or culture or sub-culture in the school or the teaching community to plan for talk and promote it effectively is therefore a particularly important insight of the teachers.

My analysis of the case studies showed that the teachers were using talk and small group learning in their teaching but their interviews and evaluations showed that they were, quite acutely, aware of the power relations in the classroom that pose problems for group work both between the pupils and between the teacher and the pupils. They were also aware of the challenges of talk in their own educational experiences and how talk had worked to empower or disempower them as learners and this strongly influenced their understanding of the challenges and their thinking about talk in the classroom.

I will now try and conclude this study, on a more positive note, by considering what the teachers in this study revealed about where talk works well and what the teachers identified as ways in which they might be helped in this area.

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## **Chapter 8: The implications of this study**

‘For, whatever a government document may say, talk will always be ‘at the heart of what we [as teachers] do’ (Jean, 2010).

My aim is to document teachers’ awareness of the challenges of talk in classrooms, an area that has not been fully explored in previous research on talk. In this final chapter I consider the implications of the teachers’ insights for promoting classroom talk more effectively. For, despite the focus on and discussion of the challenges of classroom talk; paradoxically, we can learn something from this study about where teachers feel more confident in using talk in the classroom. I also discuss what the teachers felt might assist them in this endeavour, the last question asked in the interviews and a strong theme of the group discussion (Appendix 6).

I then attempt to step back from the study and discuss its strengths and limitations and conclude by reaffirming what this study has tried to achieve in documenting teachers’ insights on talk, reasserting the timeless relevance of talk in classrooms but also its renewed topicality in current curriculum debates.

### **8.1 Where teachers in this study suggest that talk works well**

#### **8.1.1 Learning together through authentic conversations both in and outside the classroom**

Firstly, a close look at the reflections on successful lessons in the autobiography; the interviews and the successes of talk in the critical moments, allows us to see where teachers felt more confident in using talk. It was when they felt they were learning with and from the students, where teachers and pupils were learning together and all participants were intellectually engaged by the topic and the authenticity of the talk. Under these conditions it can be seen that talk and dialogue works well. Stephen articulates this idea very clearly when he says that you need to be ‘both quick enough and perceptive enough.....and humble



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enough to see that others read the text differently than you' (Stephen, 2012) and Peter also recognises that talk works best when 'is not such a forced process' (Peter, 2008). Jean also talks of encouraging independent learning and 'wanting to learn more from the pupils' (Jean, 2010) in a GCSE retake group in the 6<sup>th</sup> form.

I would highlight the point that *both* teachers and pupils need to be engaged by the learning for example when Peter is in role as puppeteer and he is playing with the pupils and both teacher and pupils are engaged by this interaction. Also, when Jean is talking to the two 6<sup>th</sup> Form pupils, who are writing a letter together, they can put questions to her and play with language. She uses irony when she rejects their first suggestion for the letter, saying it is 'a bit rough'; using informal language and the pupils later mimic her choice of words when they excitedly incorporate the teacher's language and use the words 'sophisticated' and 'formal' in the conversation. We can therefore see examples of this kind of authentic engagement both from what the teachers do well in the critical moment and from what they want to do more of.

The positive features of informal literacy practices that the talk autobiography and interviewees refer to when they were school and university students; also remind us of the power of authentic talk in the classroom, the school, the university and the wider community. And also how the study of informal literacy practices and the celebration of the diversity of spoken language, can sharpen and enrich our approach as teachers in the classroom. For when we understand how pupils use language in the home, the community and the playground (Brice Heath, 1983, Tizard and Hughes, 1984, Maybin 2006), teachers can become more knowledgeable about the different ways in which we can lend children support in developing spoken language repertoires in the classroom (Chapter 3).

### **8.1.2 The importance of the teacher feeling relaxed to handle whole class dialogue well**

Secondly; building on the above, watching the video gave the teachers the opportunity to comment on the multimodal aspects of teaching. Looking at semiotic features such as the tone of voice, eye contact, the posture and body language of the teacher made it possible to

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consider the teachers state of mind, highlighting the psychological and affective aspects of teaching. It became clear that when the teacher was not relaxed this showed in their body language and tone of voice, for example in some parts of my pilot of the critical moment (Appendix 4). In contrast; when the teachers and the pupils feel relaxed and there is an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect; this is where talk works well. In these conditions, the good relationships where pupils learn, 'not only to listen to me but to listen to each other', (Stephen, 2013) come to the fore and there is a sense of bonding, that allows the teacher to, in Stephen's words, 'work the group' (Stephen, 2013) or as Peter suggested 'go with the flow' (Peter, 2008). This involves choosing the right topic and asking open questions that allow for intellectual challenge and higher order responses, as Gertrude suggests, 'adult led activities where the adult will plant the seeds, asking open ended questions to lend support' (Gertrude, 2009) but it is also about the teacher feeling able to nurture that ethos of trust and mutual respect.

Additionally, when a teacher feels relaxed and confident the study suggests they are more able to express doubt and clarify misconceptions. As Peter (2008) suggests they also feel confident enough to respond and adapt to the pupils and to vary their roles and interactions. This can involve making emphatic statements, playing devil's advocate for example, even going into role when leading a group or a whole class discussion. Stephen makes the point that the lay out of the chairs in the room can influence how pupils contribute and that by putting 'everyone in a ring so that you haven't got the slightly adversarial presence of the desk' (Stephen, 2012); as Drama teachers often do, a more equal and reflective communication can be fostered.

The positive messages the teachers as pupils themselves conveyed, about wanting their talk to be valued by their teachers; actually run in parallel with what they are saying as teachers about when they feel confident about using talk effectively in the classroom. These affective and emotional aspects of talk (Coulthas, 2007b), where it just has to feel natural and right for both teacher and taught, are highlighted in my talk autobiography, in the interviews and in the work of researchers like Wilkinson (1965, 1990) and Maybin (2006).

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Goldstein's (2008) also highlights the need for teachers to 'experiment, *develop a comfort zone* and adjust to the learning needs and styles of the students' (p2 my italics).

Also; as discussed in Chapter 3, Alexander (2008), after working with several Local Authorities on dialogue, moves towards this view suggesting that it might be a first step to concentrate on getting the 'ethos, dynamics and the affective climate right; that is by making talk collective, reciprocal and supportive' (p110) when he admits that achieving a dialogic classroom is no easy task as it 'is in effect a transformation of the culture of talk' (p110) in British classrooms. Mercer (2008) also argues that the right ethos is a factor in dialogic talk, for example the establishment of 'a suitable context of shared understanding for the development of extended responses and tentative contributions' (p 64) in a report back or whole class discussion. This is not to deny the importance of allowing for and understanding that conflicts will arise in real discussion and classroom interactions and that this is also part of the subjectivity of talk (Smolka, 1995, Leftstein, 2010) as discussed in Chapter 3 and Chapter 6.

As suggested earlier; those writers and researchers who recognise these tensions and contradictions caused by role change are more arresting because they reveal a more untidy, yet realistic, approach to patterns of classroom discourse. This unpredictability of talk is also something that must be taken into account if the teacher is to stay relaxed, accepting that there can be valid reasons for this pupil resistance however skilful the teaching may be.

### **8.1.3 Small group discussions and whether and how teachers might intervene**

Thirdly and linked to the point about feeling relaxed, confident and looking at the learning from the pupils point of view; it appears that talk often works better when the teacher feels able to interact with a small group, to learn more about what they are thinking and how they are approaching the task. This illustrates how exploratory talk allows teachers as well as pupils to share knowledge, be more tentative and to use more informal registers. This can be done in different modes as the NOP model in Appendix 2 suggests. In my case studies we see the teachers interact with small groups in the following ways: through the teacher

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deciding to interact with one group for a period of time ; as suggested by Cathy after confronting some issues with moving from talk to writing in the plenary session (2012) in her critical moment; while responding to the pupils' request for more information, after an exploratory discussion, as Jean (2012) does in her critical moment; by closely observing what the pupils or students are achieving in their groups as Stuart (2010) does during the poetry genre sorting exercise in his critical moment.

But these two latter examples also remind us that the most successful oral work may also take place when the task is a good one and 'when the teacher is most recessive' (Doncaster, Undated). Stephen (2013) and Cook et al (1989) also reaffirm this point when they suggest that disruptive pupils might be allowed to work together in a group to produce a positive outcome as a way of showing them that cooperation really does work.

### **8.1.4 The teachers suggest that 'play' and going into role can promote effective talk**

Fourthly, when the teacher goes into role, as Peter (2011) does as story reader or puppeteer in his critical moment, it shows a willingness to play and make an appeal to the pupils' imagination as they begin to interact with the teacher in a more spontaneous way. Stephen, in the group discussion (Appendix 6), also wants to emphasise the importance of the 'p' word, play and the importance of giving children something that they would enjoy like storytelling. He explained how English teachers in the 70's started using professional storytellers discovered on the streets in Brixton for example. As mentioned in the group discussion (Appendix 6) and Stephen's interview (2012) teacher in role can be a springboard for more ambitious simulations where the teacher and the pupils are both in role.

In the autobiography and some of the case studies; several of the English teachers highlight their use of drama to promote talk effectively in the classroom. As argued in Chapter 2, drama can create particularly powerful contexts for language use. By adopting the 'mantle of the expert' approach, an approach popularised by Drama teachers (Heathcote and Bolton, 1996), opportunities can be generated for a wider range of talk repertoires because

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of the necessity of communication (Wilkinson, 1965) and extended utterance (Grainger, 2000). But ambitious and sustained talk tasks like this need time to plan, to practice and rehearse, to evaluate and persist (Coultras, 2006, 2007b, Coultras interview with Scott, 2009d). As Neelands (2000:89) suggests 'a new alliance between English and drama' could be fruitful.

### **8.1.5 Careful planning as a pre-condition**

Fifthly, one of the points that emerge from the teachers' narratives is the importance of planning for talk. This is clear for example when the teacher plans carefully to ensure good listening; which Peter (2008) and Gertrude (2009) talk convincingly about in discussing visual prompts, stories, music and classroom routines in two very different phases of education. Or planning for open ended tasks that allow for extended talk in small groups, for example, the use of sustained talk projects over several lessons (Coultras, 2006b, Stephen 2012) to allow pupils to discover knowledge for themselves. While Jean realises that shorter tasks can be necessary in certain situations, she also talks of using more extended tasks and allowing for pupil self-expression as she becomes more secure as a teacher. Cathy's jigsaw note taking exercises on the Queen's Jubilee (June 2012), Stuart's Poetry Genre Chart (2010), Stephen's discussion on *Mouta Massey* for example, show evidence of careful planning for open ended tasks requiring sustained talk in small groups.

Another interviewee also highlights the need to plan and teach the talk conventions. For example, Jean (2010) reminds us of the need to discuss the rules of the 'discourse of literary criticism' when building on pupils' responses to poetry. Mercer (2008) also highlights the need to clarify the implicit conventions of exploratory talk through the discussion of ground rules as discussed in Chapter 4.

The aim of small group learning is to 'give pupils more ownership of their learning' Stephen (2012) and planning needs to take place before the lesson to prepare for this asking questions like 'is it real group work?' (Coultras, 2007b) Will the topic and task really

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engage the pupils, students and provide for cognitive challenge at the right level?

(Sutherland, 2006) Am I asking fewer but better questions? (Chambers, 1985)

Gertrude (2010) also perceptively notes that in group work there can 'be different inputs but if the children are interested in the task, the input will be more even' (Gertrude, 2010). She was also aware of the need to vary roles for children e.g. shy children and children with SEN and she highlighted the need 'to look very closely at the task...to see how it works and the need for a mix between open endedness and structure in the task' (Gertrude, 2010). But again, while planning for talk is crucial; we should also remember that, as Stephen suggested in the group discussion (Appendix 6); teachers also need to 'have stuff up your sleeve' and a few stories that could be told were one example of that.

### **8.1.6 Teachers working 'horizontally rather than vertically'.**

Finally, when teachers and adults work well together, as Stephen phrases it 'horizontally rather than vertically'; there is more scope and self-confidence for teachers to promote talk. In the group discussion Stephen explains that working vertically means being judged and working horizontally means working together. This idea that teachers can evaluate their own practice both individually and collectively without prompting from above is also made by Cliff-Hodges (2005).

Stuart makes it clear that it is hard to develop collaborative teaching and learning approaches alone. Many of the teachers in the critical moments are working with other adults, the ex-teachers/teacher educators are teaching together and Cathy is working with a teaching assistant (TA), Peter also has a TA in the room. But Jean (2012) suggests that 'English lessons are driven by the exam template' (Jean, 2012) and that departments and teams need to have more freedom and time for really focusing and working together on talk and pedagogy. She suggests that; in her experience, 'Heads of English need more training in this area' (Jean, 2012)

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The challenges of talk makes collaborative planning and evaluation particularly important because, as I have shown, this type of learning often goes against dominant expectations of classroom practice, particularly as the pendulum is swinging strongly back towards more adult-centred learning goals where traditional forms of didactic practice are likely to be reinforced. The challenges of talk make time for collective planning and rehearsal and the collaborative teaching of this type of pedagogy particularly important. As Richmond (1982) explains:

‘The only way through is via a spirit of trust and openness not easily achieved within the hierarchies and suspicions of schools’ (p223).

A central point to make here is that these collaborative but evaluative processes are particularly vital because this area of pedagogy has proved so resistant to change over a long period. An important conclusion of the group discussion therefore was that, as Cathy suggests, even among those committed to these approaches:

‘A sharing ethos and the sharing of difficulties or challenges with talk, as has been attempted in this study, is very empowering for teacher development’ (Group discussion, Appendix 6).

### **8.2 What the teachers thought might be done?**

#### **8.2.1 The curriculum and assessment should value talk more**

Stuart thought that:

‘Talk is still the poor relation because it is time consuming, fiddly and difficult to assess. It is still neglected... we should continue to argue the case for talk and that the curriculum and assessment should value talk more’ (Stuart, 2008).

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Jean also suggested that 'talk was not a priority at the moment in schools' (Jean, 2010) and she clearly thought it should be. Cathy; in the group discussion, felt that 'if you had a positive view of talk as a teacher it kind of came naturally but; in the test culture, if you did not have this view you were not encouraged to use talk for learning anymore'. (Cathy, 2013)

The new English language GCSE (DfE 2013b) specifies that: 'Spoken language will be reported on as part of the qualification, but it will not form part of the final mark and grade' (p6) and the emphasis throughout the new curriculum is on the use of formal language, presentational talk and the use of spoken standard English. There has been a lot of criticism of this approach for example, 'speaking and listening, drama and modern media have almost disappeared from English' (Bassey et al, 2013). This new 'cultural restorationist' (Jones, 1989) coalition Curriculum represents a decisive break from what I have referred to as the 'talk for learning' model with regard to speaking and listening (Coultras, 2012).

It was clear in the group discussion that the teachers felt that the dual nature of classroom talk was not fully understood and in the case of coalition Education policy; the talk for learning model was under direct attack. Stephen (2013) thought that even the word 'oracy' was vanishing from the vocabulary of teachers. Stuart, in his interview, thought that:

'There has to be a change in the measurement of learning...if teachers' judgments were trusted about children's oral skills and other skills there would not be an issue. ...When I talk about assessment through talking I am suggesting some kind of talk portfolio, using moderated teacher judgment to profile pupils' talk repertoires'.  
(Stuart, 2008)

And these suggestions for a change in assessment would indeed give talk, in all its forms, a more prominent place in the curriculum as I have argued elsewhere (Coultras, 2006a, 2009a). Indeed, if schools and head teachers were to adopt a Talking Schools approach (Howe, 2013) and value formative assessment through talk across every subject; this would



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allow for 'learning talk' to be defended despite the return to a more traditional curriculum. Presentations, panels, group discussion, group performance, media simulations and individual talks encourage independent learning and develop intellectual self-confidence among all children. This can help to secure their knowledge in all subjects and rehearse ideas before writing and formal exams (Coultas, 2009a).

### **8.2.2 Teachers should build independent and unofficial networks**

Peter (2011) sees his approach of hanging onto something relevant to the students as a subversion of the prescriptive agenda in schools today. Stuart (2008), realising that talk was often neglected, also wanted teachers:

‘to resist ill-informed advice... and create their own networks through the internet and the subject associations to spread the word about talk.’

And English subject associations, for example the National Association of the Teachers of English (NATE) and the United Kingdom Literacy Association (UKLA); have been able to retain a bank of knowledge and research on talk that continues to act as a source of enlightenment for new generations of teachers.

### **8.2.3 Language across the curriculum: still the way forward**

Stephen (2012) was particularly concerned that we should 'give children more control over their learning'. Stephen and Stuart both suggest that talk works best when the whole school uses a language across the curriculum approach. The Talking School project (Howe, 2013) clearly building on the ideas of language across the curriculum and the promotion of dialogue in classrooms and Talk Partners (Alexander, 2008) are both interesting developments here. This is not to deny that talk and oracy should not retain its special place in the English curriculum, (Ofsted, 2011, Coultas 2012a, 2013a, Doncaster LEA, undated).

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### **8.2.4 More training and more modelling of how talk works in the classroom**

Jean (2010) wanted more talk consultants and more case studies of talk working in classrooms. She also wanted more training in this area. Cathy (2009) agreed that there was a need for more case studies of good practice in classrooms and thought the university had done a good job of modelling talk but wanted more examples of teachers doing this with beginning teachers in schools so that new teachers saw how it would work in practice. Geraldine (2009) concurred with these suggestions asking for universities and schools to work together on modelling good practice in this area. She also wanted teachers to intervene to ensure that all children could enjoy a variety of roles when working in groups.

### **8.2.5 Use the new technologies to record, celebrate and evaluate talk**

Stephen (2012) made a comment that it seemed to him that children's talk was no longer being recorded:

‘I see it even less than I saw it when I was a classroom person...that's extraordinary’.

This was a paradox because the technology for recording was so much better. He suggested that perhaps we should be using it much more widely than we are to demonstrate the power of children's talk.

This study has used recordings of conversations and lessons to make teachers' expertise more visible and share evaluations of talk in classrooms. This technology potentially gives teachers more power to take control of their own development because; as Elliot (1977) suggested; improvements in practice can often come from teachers becoming more aware of what they are doing. My talk autobiography demonstrates that in the NOP era this sharing and evaluating of practice was how teachers were being encouraged to change their practice and I attempted to build on this work in this study. But we also have to remember

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that technology, like talk, does not operate in an ideological vacuum and can be used in ways that impose new hierarchies among teachers.

### 8.2.6 How to overcome constraints?

But a vital feature of this enquiry was allowing teachers to comment on the bigger picture when it comes to promoting effective talk as discussed in Chapter 7. The picture would not be complete in this critical enquiry if it was not emphasised that while spreading the word, better training, more modelling and research to develop new case studies are all good suggestions, talk will not flourish while top down curriculum and a view of teaching is fostered that ignores 'the needs of the learner' (Bassey et al, 2013). Jean and Peter are both worried by their ability to use talk and independent learning effectively in lower sets because of the instrumental pressures of performativity.

So as emphasised in Chapter 7, the 'signals coming from the outside', (Barnes in interview with Hardcastle and Simons, 1988), should not be underestimated in these discussions on talk and their effect on those on the inside of schools. This study suggests that the tyranny of the bite sized measurement of learning and of the performativity cultures must be challenged if we wish to avoid the new instrumentalism which threatens to transform schools into 'best test and evaluation factories' (Schou, 2008:53), where teachers and pupils are denied access to critical thought. Rather we need to continue to 'create opportunities for unguarded questioning in principled contexts' (Schou, 2008; 53) encouraging children 'to [talk and] explore feelings and emotions within [a] text' Winston and Tandy (2009: 80).

It has been suggested that English teachers have a 'strong sense of duty towards the inevitable creativeness of ordinary lives' (Stevens, 2012:123) and a desire to be responsive to the cultural traditions of the pupils in urban schools (Jones, 1989) and talk, is one way of unlocking that cultural creativity in all children. It is this expressive mode of learning that is more often cumulative; richer (Winston, 2004) but less easily quantifiable that is often set aside because of the focus on measurable outcomes. It must be reasserted that values and attitudes, not just skills, influence learning and that it takes time to learn and that talk

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should be embedded in a longer scheme of work (Coultas, 2006b, Barnes, 2008) if it is to be meaningful for the students.

Teachers therefore have to be trusted and must be able to trust each other and work together if talk is to become more central once again, as it was becoming in the 1970s and 1980s. This is not to valorise a golden age, as there were still problems of inequality in society and traditional practices in schools, but to register that some rich debates on language and learning were taking place in the 70s and 80s, for example in London as this study has demonstrated, that have now been blocked or at least marginalised as part of the mainstream discussion in schools (Coultas, 2013b).

The teachers in this study were not complacent and they were keen to develop their work in this area but they were aware of the constraints operating upon them and did not always feel that there was time or space to discuss classroom talk.

As I argued in Chapter 3, building on Andrew Wilkinson (1990), oracy and democracy are therefore very closely related both for pupils and for teachers. Teachers will need to create independent networks and forums, Coultas interview with Scott (2009d), to spread the unofficial story of talk, in schools and outside; that will enable them to speak more freely and honestly Peter (2008), as they have begun to do in this study; to engage the intellectual energy of other teachers about what makes for good practice in this area of the curriculum. But this will inevitably pose a challenge both to the dominant new instrumentalism and to the new 'curriculum of tradition' (Jones 1989, Ball 1990, Allen and Ainley 2012) that will attempt to impose the elitist elocution model of talk (Howe, 1992). The elocution model places standard English on a pedestal as the language of knowledge and, obscuring its class basis (Jones, 1987, 69), represents an attempt to set aside the 'talk for learning' model (Coultas, 2012a).

Teachers will need to use the power they have in the classroom to continue to identify new collective ways forward that challenge retrograde approaches and go 'beyond the false certainties of performativity' (Clandinen, 2012).

### 8.3 Strengths and limitations of this study

This study has only recorded the voice of seven teachers. It might be argued that the pupils' voices should also have been included but pupils' views on talk have been extensively recorded in the NOP (Norman, 1992) and many other studies (See Chapter 3 and 4). The focus for data collection remained on the teacher's view of classroom talk as this was a neglected area and I felt that teacher's expertise should be made available. This was particularly the case as we are living in an era where the voices of teachers and even teacher educators have been marginalised in debates on pedagogy. And that therefore just listening to teachers on this topic of classroom talk was a particularly valid exercise at this time (Coultas, 2012b).

I chose to explore and document the teachers' 'tacit knowledge' (Holbrook, cited by Barlow, 2011:2) and expertise surrounding talk in their lives in and out of teaching and through their reflections to explore the role talk played in a critical moment in their lessons. I was interested in prompting teachers to reflect and then trying to record their meanings and get closer to what they really thought about this topic of the challenges of talk. In doing so I hoped to prompt them both to evaluate their own practice in more depth and 'to make their insider knowledge more public' (Saunders, 2012). The expertise of the teachers revealed by focusing on the challenges they faced in using talk for learning was very interesting. There were clearly some areas that require more study; for example, the problems of the domination of the IRF exchange, and the issue of conflict in classrooms and within groups. The idea that discord and different views among human beings can sometimes stimulate thinking and creativity (See Chapter 4) is a very arresting idea. Studying what both pupils and teachers think good whole class dialogue and discussion looks like, would provide further insights.

Another critique could be that this is a very small scale piece of research and that it is therefore difficult to generalise or draw conclusions too widely from it. But the case studies have been compiled from a rich data set, collected with the teachers in different forms over

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a period of time and the study only claims to draw conclusions from the subjects of the study

While the study is my view of the topic; I took steps to ensure that I was validating my findings with the participants throughout. The interview transcripts and the field notes of the critical moments were checked with the participants. The group discussion (Appendix 6), gave two of the teachers the opportunity to review their own case studies in detail and to compare them and to comment on the findings at that point. The field notes of that discussion were also checked with the participants. The discussion was quite open ended but it kept on track by concentrating on how teachers perceived the challenges of talk. The discussion was dialogic and stimulating and ideas bounced freely off each other as there was a common reference point of interest in talk and English teaching.

The case studies have been shared with beginning and practicing teachers and university lecturers. And these individual cases have had some resonance with teachers and lecturers who see some plausibility and authenticity in the representations of classroom life and classroom talk.

### **8.4 Dissemination**

Finally; as with any piece of research, a crucial question could be: of what use has this study been to teachers and the wider educational research community? And here the answers are very clear: individual interviewees commented on the usefulness of the interviews to them. Peter, (2007) for example said that the interview 'made me look at my situation anew and see how disempowered I feel'. The group discussion (Appendix 6) also strongly endorsed the value of sharing examples of the practical difficulties and challenges of talk. Alongside this, I have published articles based on chapters of the thesis as they have been written (Coultas, 2009 a, 2012a and 2012b) and began to disseminate my findings in a range of educational research forums, such as NATE, UKLA, BESDA and BERA.

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As a piece of practitioner research; this study has also influenced my undergraduate and postgraduate teaching in teacher education. The study has encouraged me to plan more lectures on exploratory talk and dialogue and to also use the idea of a critical moment to give more structure to student evaluations of oral work. It has also informed a new MA module I have written, entitled Oracy and English Language Teaching Pedagogy.

### **8.5 To conclude**

These case studies; by documenting teacher knowledge, have shed some new light on the potential of talk but also some of the real contradictions and tensions even committed teachers face when facilitating classroom talk. Responses to this study in the several research presentations I have given and the articles I have written show that English teachers; teacher educators and the wider educational community are very interested in the role of the teacher in promoting talk and classroom dialogue.

When I began this study; the talk for learning model was being questioned but now that model has come directly under fire in the new coalition English Curriculum, (DfE, 2013 a, b). This study is therefore valid on two levels: both because of the intrinsic importance of exploring the challenges of talk for teachers who want to involve pupils in the construction of knowledge but also because of the renewed topicality of talk and 'spoken language' in current curriculum debates. Perhaps the attempt to very directly reverse the gains of the language and learning era and what I call the 'talk for learning' model may create opportunities for more discussion around the displaced speaking and listening or 'Cinderella Strand'? (Coultas, 2013a)

By documenting what teachers say about classroom talk, rather than studying classroom interactions, I have begun to make a new contribution to an ongoing debate. For, whatever a government document may say, as Britton (1970: 29) states 'all that children write.....takes place upon a sea of talk' and classroom interactions and talk will always be 'at the heart of what we [as teachers] do' (Jean, 2010). This study demonstrates that the

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English teacher not only has a very special responsibility for classroom talk but also requires a lot of skill and understanding and a supportive context to nurture it effectively.



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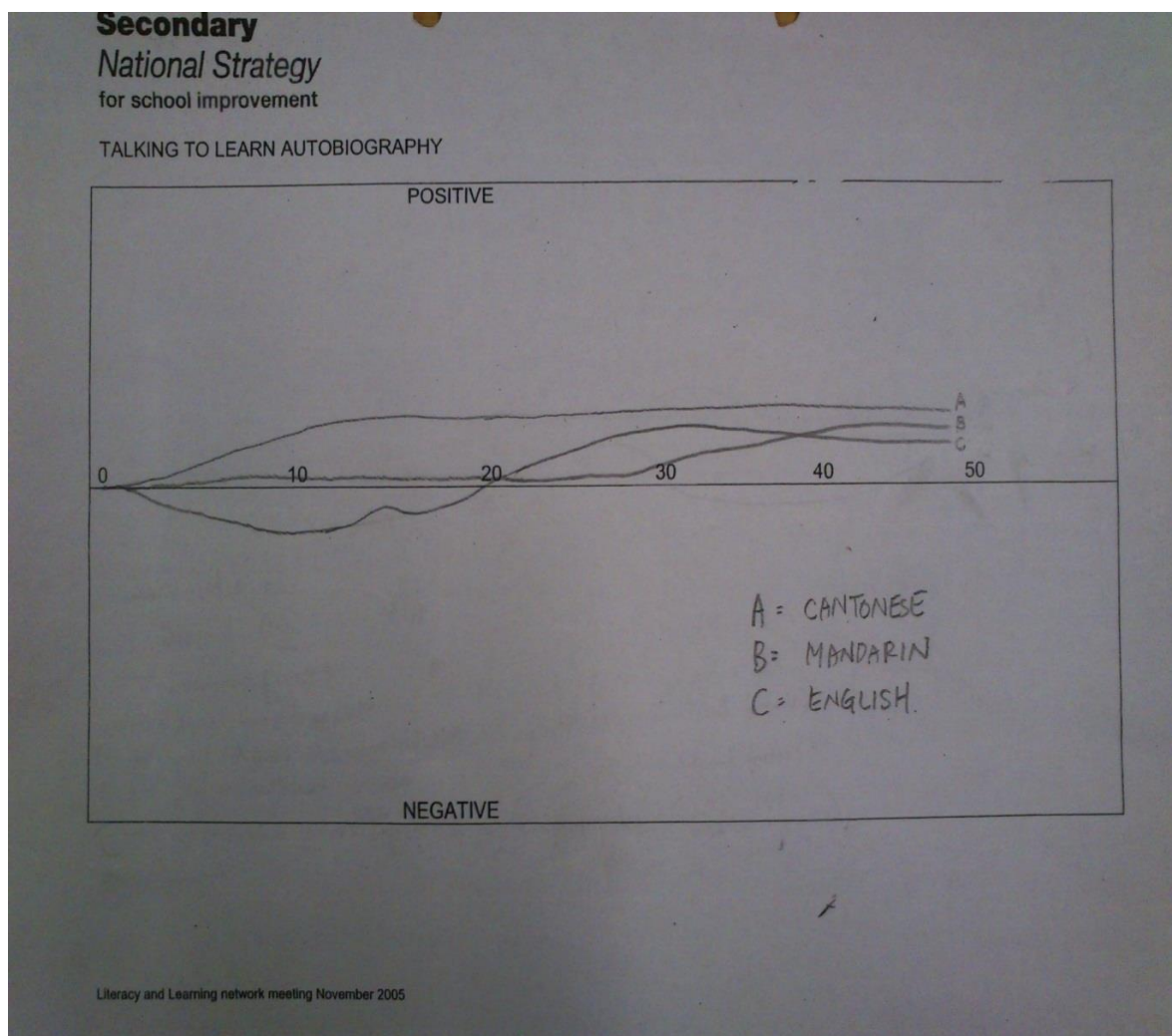
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# Teachers' narratives of classroom talk: what are the challenges?

## Appendices

### Appendix One: Talking to learn autobiography graph



## Teachers' narratives of classroom talk: what are the challenges?

### Appendix two: National Oracy Project model for small group learning

#### Engagement



Engagement: teacher provides input to whole class.

2

#### Exploration



Exploration: small group exploratory talk.

3



## Teachers' narratives of classroom talk: what are the challenges?

### **Transformation**



Transformation: students engage in an activity to reshape information.

4

### **Presentation**



Presentation: pairs combine to share results of activities.

5

## Teachers' narratives of classroom talk: what are the challenges?

### Review A

- the group of four is the ideal vehicle for reflection on the learning process.



### Review B



Note:

- Whole Class discussion without the teacher requires careful planning
- it's what has happened beforehand that makes this work, and breeds this level of engagement



## Teachers' narratives of classroom talk: what are the challenges?

### **Appendix three: Letter to interviewees**

Dear Colleague,

I am interviewing a number of teachers about their attitudes to talk and small group learning and I wish you to be an interviewee. This is part of a wider study for a PhD at the Institute of Education (see attached sheet).

Your answers will be returned to you after the interview for checking. Some of the answers you give may be used or quoted in the study but you will not be named and therefore any issues you have raised with me will remain confidential. As a follow up to this interview I may ask you to keep an oral diary of a particular lesson and/or visit your lesson to observe you teaching or teach alongside you.

You have the right to withdraw from this study at any time. All information you give will be retained in a strictly confidential manner. I will be the only person who has access to the information. After the project any data that could identify any individuals will be destroyed. In the final report of the project, no information will be released which will enable a reader to identify who the respondent was.

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed. Please contact me by phone if you wish to raise any questions. Please sign the permission slip below and return it to me.

Yours sincerely,

Valerie Coultas

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I give permission to be interviewed by Valerie Coultas for a study on teacher attitudes to talk.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Post \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Teachers' narratives of classroom talk: what are the challenges?

### **Appendix Four: Field notes of pilot of critical moment for talk**

**Valerie Coultas Teaching poetry transcription Part 1**

**December 2010**

The activity involved reading a range of poems in different forms such as sonnet, parody, limerick and identifying their form to share knowledge of poetry and poetic forms and to warm the students up for the session tapping into their prior knowledge. One of the poems was a rap and the students would be using this form later to write their own fairy tale rap. There were some puzzles in the task such as two forms of concrete poetry that were harder to identify.

Transcript and notes from a critical moment for talk identified by the lecturer herself after watching the video: Starting a session and setting up the first talk task on a snowy day in December.

**(I am introducing the aims of a one-off poetry session at the end of a module)**

**VC:** Um- we are reflecting on the teaching of poetry- and I will begin to investigate a range of strategies for teaching poetry and , hopefully, in the second (part of the) session, we will get you to write your own fairy tale rap...because I asked you to bring in your own fairy tale from last week's session.

**(My shoulders are slightly hunched and I am sitting down in the lecturer's chair looking at the whiteboard while I explain the aims of the session. As I turn to the group to talk more about the session you can see that my hands are clenched together and that I am not completely at ease)**

**VC:** Ok –so- This is a session, just a session on poetry and it is not assessed. It is just something we like to do in the subject specialism...to do more poetry. ...And we go a little more deeply into poetry in this session than we do in the core English sessions....so we are going to think about it a little bit more here

## Teachers' narratives of classroom talk: what are the challenges?

**VC: Thank you (the teacher gets up to take a cup of coffee from a student-it has been a morning of snow and students were late arriving and there was quite an informal start to the session)**

**VC: So-** what we are going to start with is an exercise on what is a Poem? Which is on your sheet here...And what I am going to do is to read part of the poem..the poem in the box aloud and then I am going to ask you to do a little exercise to show what you know about Poetry...

Now...I know you know quite a lot about poetry. You have all done post 16 English so you'll be quite knowledgeable about this but let's just share our knowledge..

**(I now stand up and I am rubbing the back of my neck with one hand and holding the sheet in front of me with the other hand. I read the poem... 'A poem's a poem man. It doesn't have to rhyme...' I do not look directly at the audience as I read on)**

**(There is coughing in the room...Then I ask the students to work together in pairs to read the different poems and identify which type of poem is a limerick, a sonnet, a parody etc. The students start to talk with one another and I begin to circulate around the room)**

Reason for choosing this as a critical moment

I chose this moment because I felt tense at the beginning of the session and I wanted to analyse why I had those feelings. This reflected my feelings about the group in general where I did not feel as relaxed as I had with other English subject specialist groups on the undergraduate programme. The snow had delayed everyone so it was a slightly difficult start. But the group of students opposite me were quite disdainful towards me, towards other students, even a little towards the visiting lecturer. When this group of students got their essays back, a number of them had attained very high marks their attitudes changed towards me and in Year 3 they became very positive. I am still unsure why they were slightly difficult during Year 2...but I think factors outside the seminar room may have influenced them.

## **Teachers' narratives of classroom talk: what are the challenges?**

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### **Initial Comments/thoughts**

Superficially this looks as if this is a relatively purposeful beginning to a session and the talk task has been quite well set up. But the fact that the session started late and arrivals were difficult and that I had got up late and arrived in haste and difficulty gives a different context. My speech was clear and quite authoritative, although more tentative in some places than others but my body language was stiff and I was not really at ease as the session began.

As the students talked together I looked more relieved. By the time the students were feeding back I was more relaxed, smiling and responding, prompting with more ease. But there was still a certain lack of genuine responsiveness from some of the students sitting straight in front of me. Why was this?

### **Collaborative evaluation with visiting lecturer: field notes from the discussion March 29<sup>th</sup> 2011**

#### **What were the positives? Where did you feel in control/have agency?**

Formally a well planned introduction giving a clear rationale for the session explaining the reason for an additional session in the English subject specialist course. I was able to overcome some of my rather anxious movements and behaviour at the very beginning as the students engaged with the task and fed back. I was then more relaxed, smiling and engaging more openly with the group as we began to share our knowledge. The voice is clear and the enunciation good if rather formal. The task did engage the group and allowed them to discuss and share some of what they already knew about poetic forms.

#### **Constraints**

There were pragmatic constraints in this session as several students arrived late due to the snow and the visiting lecturer was delayed and this meant that I was anxious about how the

## Teachers' narratives of classroom talk: what are the challenges?

session would actually fit together. Although the session had been planned in a broad brush stroke by both teachers prior to the session this was the first time for a jointly taught poetry session.

But there are also some emotional and psychological constraints to do with relationships in the group, where one group of quite highly motivated students can be a little disdainful towards other students in the group and towards the lecturer.

This explains my slightly diffident and reserved manner, the rather nervous hand movements ( pressing hand on hair at back of neck, stroking the mouth) and the use of slightly tentative, self-effacing language ' and hopefully.... we will get to'.... 'just a session on poetry'.... 'we go a little more deeply into poetry'...' we are going to think about it a little bit more here'... 'to do a little exercise'. The fact that I do not look at the audience when I read the poem aloud is also a sign that I am not wholly at ease with the group or, at least, some sections of the group

### **Interesting**

Isn't it a shock to see yourself teach on a video? I had filmed myself in school and in another session but this was the most prolonged filming. Both lecturers discussed this and, although both were shocked by their appearance, both felt that it was very useful to see yourself through the camera's eye- although this should be used very carefully for specific purposes, such as collaborative evaluation, as it could become a big brother tool in the wrong hands. The multimodal aspects of teaching were also highlighted in this evaluation as not only the words spoken but gesture, gaze, use of voice, movement were all highly significant in assessing the state of mind of the teacher.

Discussed the problem of the often highly motivated school and university student who can become disdainful of softer teaching modes and might just want to be told how to do well and the way in which cultures of performativity can create a culture of over dependence on the teacher. How this desire to get the best grades is an imposition and a change in culture

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that affects both students and teachers and can make students less interested in learning for its own sake and in the process of learning. What can be done about this?

Pragmatic adaptation-perhaps there could have been a writing activity immediately after this that used one of the poetic forms to get the students to write poems themselves to illustrate the application of their knowledge more directly to teaching and particular approaches to poetry teaching. So they could then see that they were learning not just to rehearse their knowledge but apply it in a new context. (This was outlined in the aims and accomplished later in the session but perhaps the link needed to be made more explicit?)

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### **Appendix five: Cathy's critical moment for talk, June 3<sup>rd</sup> 2012 field Notes**

(These are the original field notes that I made in June 2012 as I met with Cathy and recorded her reflections after watching the video. She discusses the lesson and the critical moment with me. I transcribed quite a large part of the critical moment with her which I then reduced for the summary in Chapter 6b.

At the end I try and summarise her reflections using the notion of a reflective practitioner (Dewey, 1933), giving evidence from the video of how she has used talk in her teaching and her English subject knowledge then discussing what she understands about the challenges of talk. In Chapter 6b I focus the summary on the challenges of talk, my leading research question.

This iterative process was followed in using the data with all the interviewees.)

### **The Jubilee jigsaw, the plenary and a talk for writing challenge**

The pupils have had to choose an event from the Queen's Jubilee and read different newspaper reports about their chosen event for example the flotilla, the service at St Paul's, the concert. They have to go to the newspapers to find their information individually and then report back on that newspaper report version of the event to their home group. The purpose of the exercise is to prepare to write a newspaper article.

On the video we see that the children are very engaged with the topic chosen and the group work in this greater London primary school. They are sitting on the floor in their groups for the discussions and they have an aide memoire to help them structure their notes. This is a top set in literacy in Year 4 where there are four sets. The names of pupils have been changed in the transcript.

Cathy's reason for choosing this as a critical moment

Cathy chose this moment because, after the lesson and viewing the video, it was the point where she realised that the pupils had not got quite as far with the exercise as she had expected. Most of the pupils had collected their notes on a writing frame but did not yet feel ready to turn those notes into a newspaper article. Cathy also realised, from looking at

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the video, that she was asking a lot of questions in one go in the plenary and that the question she was asking may not have been so clear.

### **Critical moment: the feedback plenary**

Cathy calls the group to come and sit on the carpet at the front of the room. She wants to know how far they have got with the note taking and whether they are ready to write their newspaper article.

**Teacher:** Thank you Terry

**Teacher:** 4, 3, 2, 1, 0...well done...

**Teacher:** Just have a quick look at the information on your sheet. Hands up if you think that the info you have researched yourselves and the info you have gathered from your notes...who thinks they could now write an article. Or do you think that you need a few more minutes to research? Hands up if you've got enough info?

**(4 pupils raise their hands- 4 hands go up mainly boys)**

**Teacher:** More time... **(5 or 6 hands go up)**

Cathy is beginning to realise that the pupils may need more time to write the article and probes them further..

**Teacher:** Jack, you didn't put your hand up?

**Jack:** Yes, I needed more time.

**Teacher:** Which area is missing? **(The teacher is now referring to the sections in the aide memoire)**

Hilary what is missing?

**Hilary:** Um....a purpose?



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**Cathy is now fully aware that she needs to give the pupils more time and guidance before they write and probes them even further focusing on a response to Hilary's answer.**

**Teacher:** What event were you celebrating?

**Hilary:** We were doing the church service at St Paul's

**Teacher:** Do you want to know why that church service took place?

But the questioning was assessing the learning and Cathy was identifying that the pupils needed more support to actually write the newspaper article in the next lesson. She also understood that if she had sat and worked with a group she would have been more aware of how the pupils were tackling this jigsaw activity on the events of the Queen's Jubilee. The camera in the room was new and this slightly altered her normal practice of making time to engage with a group as she suggests in the commentary.

### **Cathy's evaluation of the critical moment June 3<sup>rd</sup> 2012**

#### **Positives**

Cathy thought that the lesson was very positive because the children all knew exactly what they were doing in the groups. 'They chose who to work with. They chose which event to research and they chose where to go in the classroom (to work in their groups). I think the writing frame/aide memoire, which included sections for the event, the weather, who attended and what the purpose of the event was, helped them because it structured what they were looking for.

I felt in control all the time—there was not a moment where I felt that it was not going as planned. Apart from their responses to the final question in the plenary that we have transcribed. When I looked round the room at the groups they were all engaged—I felt good they're going to do the next stage. They had chosen who to work with and there was a lot of ownership and the topic was very recent and resonant.'

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### **Constraints**

According to Cathy, the lack of time was a constraint. She suggested that, 'It would have been nice if they could have used the information immediately. Because we set for literacy it was not entirely one class so I had to send them back. If it had been just my own class I could have decided to substitute writing the article for guided reading.

I'm not an entire fan of the sets but I have certainly seen some benefits. But you do feel restricted in relation to time. The Big Write has been useful but we have adapted it through discussion in the year 4 group of teachers, although it's my responsibility to plan for it as I co-lead Literacy.

I don't normally have a TA with a camera in the room so it made me like a pin ball. Normally it is more static and I would go and work with a particular group. So perhaps if I did the activity again I would focus in more on one particular group.'

### **Interesting**

Cathy noticed the amount of time she talked and the amount of times she asked questions! She commented on 'The language I use for Year 4s..sometimes I use words that year4s might not understand. The general amount of my talking surprised me. I always think that I need not to speak so much. But, in my mind, I want to make this clear, have good introductions. I would like to give them an activity to start off my talk perhaps.

What I feel is that floating around is not as effective as having amore sustained interaction with I group. I think that's because initially they freeze. Then a couple tell me what I want to know...if I stay a bit longer other children say what they think and you have a much better interaction. When I flick in and out..there is tension at first and then they relax. If they are more used to me 'joining' the group for longer they will be less tense.

There are times on the carpet where you get the sense that someone's feeding back but when you sit with them it's more secure and lots of children contribute....it's a more natural form of 'real' talk.'?'

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### **What does this case reveal about Cathy's experiences and challenges with classroom talk?**

'If you stay with a group the children will begin to really talk with you in a more open way.' (Cathy, 2012)

### **General approach, attitudes and values towards talk and English teaching, whole heartedness/open-mindedness/responsibility ( Dewey, 1933 cited by Griffin, 2003:207).**

Cathy felt disempowered at school and found that talk in her Post 16 vocational training helped to boost her self- confidence as a learner. She went into university and into primary teaching on a mission to create 'talking classrooms' where pupils were encouraged to think aloud and get more out of lessons that she felt she had as a child. This reaffirms the view that our life experiences in education help form our identity as teachers.

The interview gives us a picture of Cathy as a self-confident teacher, who is very interested in oracy, working well with her classes and feeling confident about using a range of talk repertoires with the children. She is relaxed with her classes and identifies subtle nuances about girls dumbing down for boys for example and she realises that informal or exploratory talk is often the most effective form of dialogue in classrooms. Her reflections on gender and talk in the classroom are also interesting and unexpected although these are issues that were sometimes discussed in sessions on oracy in the university. She is open minded and willing to look critically at her own practice.

### **Evidence of using talk in her teaching and English subject knowledge**

In Cathy's critical moment we see that she has applied her ideas about enjoying 'talking classrooms' to her practice. She has set up an effective jigsaw activity where the children in her Year 4 class choose a topic and then work in groups to read and make notes from several newspaper reports of the Queen's Jubilee. They have to read a report individually on their topic for example the events surrounding the flotilla on the Thames and then report back to their home group.

In her critical moment she is pleased that the groups have worked well and the pupils were able to read the newspaper articles independently and extract information from them.

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Cathy's video shows that she is able to use the social situation in the classroom effectively to construct her Jubilee jigsaw. The video demonstrates that the children in a top set are very engaged with this exercise. First they move around the room to read the newspapers and then they are sitting on the floor in their groups, scattered around the room and they have an aide memoire to assist them. The lesson has been carefully planned beforehand. The lesson has been carefully planned beforehand. In her critical moment Cathy is pleased that the jigsaw groupings have worked well and the pupils were able to read the newspaper articles independently and extract information from them.

### **Understanding of the challenges of talk in the classroom**

But during the plenary she realises that there is going to be more support and scaffolding needed to move from note taking to writing a news article. She has perhaps underestimated the intellectual challenge of writing a news report for Year 4 children. But her questioning reveals this and she also realises that if she had been working alongside one of the groups she would have been more prepared for this problem. The need to work with the pupils while they complete a group task is therefore emphasised here; if the teacher is going to learn about the challenges the task poses for the children.

Liveliness and off task talk is a continuum for teachers. It is always there to some extent but for Cathy this is not a major problem. Her good classroom control enables her to identify, in quite a detailed way, the subtle nuances of power relationships in classrooms. She suggests that 'boys and girls in year 4 often want to go into separate groups'. She was slightly worried that on some occasions 'very able girls in literacy groups dumb down their contributions not to alienate the boys'. She is also aware of the need to get the boys quiet to listen to the girls. But again she highlights her power in using 'the sharing ethos in the class' to help 'to produce an even spread'. This 'even spread' is an interesting aim that could be the subject of further research perhaps.

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### **Appendix Six: Field notes of discussion group with Stephen, Cathy and Valerie, June 7<sup>th</sup> 2013**

Stephen, Cathy and I met for a whole day to read some of the data and some of the findings and discuss the study. In the morning Cathy and Stephen read the abstract, the autobiography, their two case studies and then read and annotated Chapter 7 and Chapter 8. In the afternoon the discussion took place and my field notes below record that discussion.

#### **Discussion on the abstract**

Cathy wanted to discuss the definition of talk and we talked about the dual nature of talk how it is both a medium for learning and a skill that can be developed. Cathy suggested that for younger children, in key stage one, when it came to developing skills in spoken language you were often assessing the ability to participate in a discussion, taking part, taking turns, listening. At secondary and tertiary levels you were looking at the quality of spoken language in terms of being able to justify opinions for example.

Stephen focused on the oral skills of beginning teachers he had interviewed in subjects other than English and how they were sometimes monosyllabic in their answers. He emphasised that the school's view of oracy was important as it was a cross curricular issue. He also commented that he thought the word 'oracy' was vanishing from the vocabulary of teachers.

We agreed that the definition of talk could be made a little clearer in the abstract.

#### **Discussion on the individual case studies**

We discussed why Stephen and Stuart had used their real names and there were pseudonyms for the other school teachers. It was explained that this was an ethical issue and that this attempt at anonymity was to protect the teachers and the schools they were working in and that it was a normal research convention. Stephen and Stuart were ex-school teachers and had published writing on this topic so I had asked permission to use

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their real names. However this 'status' issue of different interviewees is interesting and I referred to this in Chapter 5. The status issue is, to some extent, contradictory in this study because the school teachers are in fact closest to the real challenges of talk in schools.

Cathy explained that her Head had now decided not to set for literacy in Year 4 from next September as the research suggested that children could make better progress in some subjects in mixed ability groups. Maths however would remain in sets. This led to an animated discussion on the pros and cons of setting and mixed ability teaching, which is not the subject of this study, so I did not record it.

We discussed whether the first prompt that asked the teacher to say what was positive about their lesson or their critical moment was useful. We agreed it was and Stephen said that the comment that he looked 'preacher like' was also useful because he had not realised that before. We discussed the notion of different personas in the classroom, how we came across differently in front of a large group and how we often became more natural and relaxed when we worked with smaller groups. A difference perhaps between presentational and exploratory talk for teachers. Stephen emphasised the importance of talk for establishing social and cultural context when discussing literature to empower students, referring to the Sean O'Casey example in his case study. Carol gave an amusing example of a child who was told by the teacher to prepare a scone with cream on the bottom and jam on the top. The child arrived with a plate with cream on the plate, then jam and then the scone. This emphasised the cultural assumptions that teachers can unwittingly make.

Stephen also wanted to emphasise the higher moral purpose of teaching and how by allowing children to discover things for themselves and make their own mistakes this avoids scorn and can divert children from disruptive behaviour as they learn to cooperate. I suggested that sometimes you can work through the chaos in a classroom by tapping into something that really interests the pupils. I gave the example of a showing a TV adaptation of *Othello* with the first black chief of the Metropolitan Police in an all boys' secondary school with a large number of black pupils.

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We also discuss questioning and the idea of fewer but better questions and how one can also demonstrate a fine command of language by knowing when to say nothing. We also discussed how pupils will talk well on a topic where they have expertise.

Stephen also wanted to emphasise the social discrimination based on working class accents and the way you dressed in his grammar school and the way pupils were ranked and how when he became a teacher he wanted the pupils to feel as he did in his primary school, equally valued. Stephen said he thought the principle that the teacher cannot expect the children to respect his culture until he respects the culture of the child was a good one. He reminded us of Peter Abbs' view in the 70s that there should be no assessment and no criticism of the children's work! Later Stephen spoke of the need for more affective learning and how he stopped a training session when a student was in tears to ask another student to assist the distressed student.

Cathy talked of how teachers are labeled, ranked and graded today. She said how useful it had been to read the other teachers' case studies. And how teachers today not only avoided speaking about difficult classes, as Peter suggested in his case study, but that they also kept quiet about their grading using euphemisms, saying that things had 'gone Ok' or 'better than expected' rather than speak openly about this.

### **Discussion on Chapter 7**

Cathy felt that the point about teachers and educators being excluded from debates on education was 'very pertinent' today. Cathy agreed that you knew that you were learning when your talk was valued by the teacher and she would want underline this point. Cathy felt that if you had a positive view of talk as a teacher it kind of came naturally but, in the test culture, if you did not have this view there was no encouragement to use talk for learning anymore. Talking of performativity; she said that learning walks, monitoring walks and drop-ins had started happening in her Primary school and although they were framed as 'supportive' they put more stress on teachers. She also said that because writing was a focus the SMT often wanted to see children writing rather than talking. As a literacy

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coordinator she understood that talk supports writing but some of those observing did not always understand this.

We then talked about how the culture of the school does have an impact on the children. Stephen contrasted a formal 6th form where he caused some anxiety among the pupils when they were asked to answer an open ended question about Blake's poetry for homework because they were used to being told the meaning of the literary text. The other 6<sup>th</sup> form, in a comprehensive school, where the more naïve students had been taught to engage in exploration suddenly discovered that the archaic literature they were studying was written by authors whose names were on the streets of Brixton: on Chaucer Avenue; Milton Road in Poet's Corner. This latter group, he said, gave him much more joy.

### **Discussion on Chapter 8**

Stephen said he just wanted to emphasise the use of the p word, play and the importance of giving children something that they would enjoy like storytelling and how English teachers in the 70's started using professional storytellers discovered on the streets in Brixton for example. He also said that it was important to plan for talk but that it was also important to 'have stuff up your sleeve' and a few stories that could be told were one example of that.

We return to the possibilities of talk for learning being more widely promoted and Stephen suggests that the study seems to suggest that this is quite a difficult project today. He says that working vertically means being judged and working horizontally means working together and this is what works for promoting talk. Carol adds that vertical systems do predominate in schools today and that there is an element of fear in the performativity culture and that explains the coded messages that teachers give to each other when they say that they were 'quite delighted' with a particular observation but that they are often dismayed when they do not get such a 'delightful' message in the next observation.

We talk about how to overcome these constraints and the work of younger teachers in the subject associations like LATE who are setting up Teachers as Writers groups to support



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teachers as creative writers and practitioners but also to subvert the drive to focus on developing writing skills in schools in simplistic ways. We discuss the league tables and the surveillance culture and how this inhibits pedagogic experimentation and how talk can be risky because it can look disorganised and it can also go wrong. But we conclude by agreeing that a sharing ethos and the sharing of difficulties or challenges with talk, as has been attempted in this study, is very empowering for practitioner research and teacher development.