

AEFP Reading: Tuesday 6th March 2018

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

Over time, educators realized that students had to use the language if they were to become better educated. As a result, well-intentioned educators called on individual students to respond to questions. Teachers expected them to use academic language in their individual responses, and as students spoke, teachers would assess their knowledge.

Research on conversations in a class showed one student at a time talked while the others listen or ignore the class, the teacher used a lot of academic language, we know that teachers themselves have to use academic discourse if their students are ever going to have a chance to learn, and the balance of talk in the classroom tended to be heavily weighted towards the teacher. It showed that 94 percent of the words used in the classroom during a particular five-minute segment were spoken by the teacher. In addition, an analysis of the types of words used showed that half of the words spoken by the students were not academic in nature. That's not so great.

Students need more time to talk, and the structure of asking them to do so one at a time will not significantly change the balance of talk in the classroom. Consider whether you think that the students will ever become proficient in using the academic language. Our experience suggests that these students will fail to develop academic language and discourse simply because they aren't provided opportunities to use words. They are hearing words but are not using them. We are reminded of Bakhtin's (1981) realization: "The world in language is half someone else's. It becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention". In other words, if students aren't using the words, they aren't developing academic discourse. As a result, we often think we've done a remarkable job teaching students and then wonder why they aren't learning. The key is for students to talk with one another, in purposeful ways, using academic language.

Classroom talk is frequently limited and is used to check comprehension rather than develop thinking. Researchers have found that teachers dominate classroom talk. For example, Lingard, Hayes, and Mills (2003) noted that in classrooms with higher numbers of students living in poverty, teachers talk more and students talk less. We also know that English language learners in many classrooms are asked easier questions or no questions at all and thus rarely have to talk in the classroom. Several decades ago, Flanders (1970) reported that teachers of high-achieving students spent about 55 percent of the class time talking, compared with 80 percent for teachers of low-achieving students.

In addition to the sheer volume of teacher talk in the classroom, researchers have identified the types of talk that are more and less helpful. For example, Durkin's (1978/1979) seminal research on comprehension instruction confirmed that teachers rely primarily on questioning to check for understanding. Questioning is an important tool that teachers have, but students also need opportunities for dialogue if they are to learn. And, unfortunately, most questioning uses an initiate-respond-evaluate cycle (Cazden, 1988) in which teachers initiate a question, a student responds, and then the teacher evaluates the answer.

The problems inherent in this type of approach are multiple. First, in a classroom where we want students to talk—to practice and apply their developing knowledge of English—only one student has an opportunity to talk, and that talk does not require the use of even one complete sentence, let alone extended discourse. In a classroom where we want students to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate, neither does this type of interchange require them to engage in critical thinking. Instead, they may become frustrated as they struggle to "guess what's in the teacher's head" or become disengaged as they listen to the "popcorn" pattern of teacher question, student response, teacher question, student response, and so on. Last, in a classroom where assessment guides instruction, with each question the teacher learns that one student knows the answer but can make no determination regarding the understanding of the other 29 students in the classroom.

In sum, talk is used in most classrooms but could be more effectively used to develop students' thinking.

As we analyze why many students are not learning what we are teaching, we must evaluate our own practice for evidence of student talk throughout the day. Oral language is the foundation of literacy, and as such, it requires focused attention in planning. Altering the ratio of teacher to student talk doesn't just happen. Rather, it occurs through both believing in the importance of student talk and planning with a clear purpose and expectations.

Question:

With the ever increasing pressures to maintain and improve academic standards, and the fear that if we don't continuously feed the children with knowledge their achievement will be adversely affected, why should we provide opportunities for discussion?

<http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/108035/chapters/Why-Talk-Is-Important-in-Classrooms.aspx>