

# Becoming a meaning maker

Talk and interaction  
in the dialogic  
classroom

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# Preamble

The findings of the study ‘Researching dialogic pedagogies for literacy learning across the primary years’ (Edwards-Groves & Davidson, 2016) are presented herein. In presenting our results through the chapters of this book, we observe Gordon Wells’ remarks in his memorable 2009 book, *The meaning makers: Learning to talk and talking to learn*, to offer our words and our interpretations as ones that may inspire teachers and pre-service teachers to make meaning of their own talk and interaction practices. Throughout each chapter, our words form interpretations and stories of teachers and teacher learning and meaning making, of students and student learning and meaning making; and as Wells (2009, pp. xx–xi) states:

These stories are a way of making sense – of giving meaning to observable events by making connections between them.

However, as Wells stated:

for any set of events there is almost always more than one possible interpretation. This evidence is never so complete or so unambiguous as to rule out alternative interpretations. The important criteria in judging the worth of a story are: does it fit the facts as I have observed them and does it provide a helpful basis for future action?

Guided by this, our words do not sit loosely connected with classroom practice or learning and teaching. They are crafted through not only our analysis and interpretations of classroom talk and interaction, but many of them are crafted through the voices and interpretations of our participants – both students and teachers. It is our hope that these words – ours and theirs – offer both insights and challenges.

We do not want to re-bundle known theories, teaching and learning activities or techniques for promoting classroom talk, but want to offer insights into actual practices – practices of teachers’ talk and interaction in classroom lessons and practices of teachers’ learning about classroom interaction. But more importantly for us are insights about the practices of students’ talk and interaction, as these relate to their meaning making. Our belief is that teachers who study their own talk and interaction practices come to make teaching decisions defensible by being strongly self-aware – this directly connects to the learning and teaching practices demonstrated by the teachers and students involved in this study.

We also pay tribute to the seminal Australian study on classroom talk and interaction conducted by Peter Freebody and his colleagues in 1995, ‘Everyday literacy practices in and out of schools in low socio-economic urban communities’. This work raised important matters for Australian education about the role of talk and interaction for meaning making in classrooms; but its findings have enduring resonances with contemporary understandings and practices about talk and interaction, meaning making in classrooms and pedagogical practice; for us, this is unfinished business.

*Christine Edwards-Groves and Christina Davidson*

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## Dedication

We dedicate this book to Peter Freebody who has relentlessly pursued the matter of classroom talk and literacy in Australian classrooms. We thank you, and your colleagues, for the following record of classroom talk which continues to inspire us to understand how classroom talk accomplishes literacy lessons and might be changed to achieve literacy learning.

- 1 T You ready? MUM WENT SHOPPING AND  
GOT A PEPPER POT
- 2 S Yummy.
- 3 T Is he still looking greedy?
- 4 Ss Yeh.
- 5 S Look at the lady, she knows now.
- 6 T He's thinking, 'I wonder what's in that  
little pot there?'. Do you think that  
greedy cat can read?
- 7 Ss No. ((one: yes))
- 8 T If you were a clever cat you could read.  
What clues would you find, on the jar,  
the pot of pepper? What clues would  
you have to look for?
- 9 S Pepper pot.

*(Freiberg & Freebody, 1998, p. 39)*

# Becoming a meaning maker: An introduction

Well, you listen, you add on to other people's questions, suggestions and you say what you think, so you add on to other people's ideas. When people don't talk that means that there's no use doing the conversation, because they're not learning anything.

*(Erin, Year 1 student)*

The book aims to provide core understandings that allow educators to say definitive things about talk and interaction in classrooms and to bring about changes to their practices. We introduce here the key elements of the approach that underpins our thinking and guides the ways we address talk and interaction in this book. This chapter provides a brief introduction to our reasons for focusing on talk and interaction, meaning making and the dialogic (literacy) classroom. We particularly want the book to speak to pre-service teachers and teacher educators; literacy educators who seek to go beyond recipes for literacy learning; experienced teachers who question their classroom literacy practices; and to those particularly interested in the forgotten oral language aspect of literacy. Finally, we speak to researchers who might find our work in action research cutting edge and consider the results important for moving literacy education forward.

We begin with a brief section about the English curriculum, not because the book is about the English curriculum, but because this is the document that guides teachers in their thinking and decision making about the development of talk and interaction and the direction of pedagogies that support their students' learning across the grades.

## Listening and speaking in the English curriculum

Listening and speaking are acknowledged as being central for the development of language and literacy. Under the broader umbrella of oral language, listening and speaking are held as core elements or strands of the key subject area English. Listening and speaking are considered necessary for supporting reading and writing development (and the teaching and learning of it) in schools. We draw out a more specific, but brief, focus on speaking and listening from the Australian Curriculum here, and ask readers to consider what the detailed elaborations mean for them and their students.

In the current *Australian Curriculum: English* (2017) for example, listening and speaking appear as *modes* in two main areas: **Language for interaction** (positioned in the Language strand) and **Interacting with others** (positioned in the Literacy strand). The *Content Descriptions* and subsequent *Elaborations* at each level identify the purposes and the expectations of students' listening and speaking across the school grades. For example, at a Foundation Level (generally 5- or 6-year-old children in the first year of formal schooling in Australia), students are expected to: 'Listen to and respond orally to texts and to the communication of others in informal and structured classroom situations' (ACELY1646). According to the curriculum, students are required to demonstrate this by:

- listening to, remembering and following simple instructions
- sequencing ideas in spoken texts and retelling
- listening for specific things
- participating in class, group and pair discussions
- asking and answering questions to clarify understanding (ACARA, 2017).

Young students at a Foundation level are also required to: 'Use interaction skills including listening while others speak, using appropriate voice levels, articulation and body language, gestures and eye contact' (ACELY1784). They demonstrate this, for example, by:

- learning how to use different voice levels appropriate to a situation, for example learning about 'inside voices' and 'outside voices'
- learning to ask questions and provide answers that are more than one or two words
- participating in speaking and listening situations, exchanging ideas with peers in pairs and small groups and engaging in class discussions, listening to others and contributing ideas
- showing understanding of appropriate listening behaviour, such as listening without interrupting, and looking at the speaker if culturally appropriate
- asking and answering questions using appropriate intonation
- speaking so that the student can be heard and understood (ACARA, 2017).

When students progress to Year 1, the content shifts only slightly, requiring students to: 'Engage in conversations and discussions, using active listening behaviours, showing interest, and contributing ideas, information and questions' (ACELY1656). At this level students show their achievement by:

- listening for details in spoken informative texts
- speaking clearly and with appropriate volume
- learning to value listening, questioning and positive body language and understanding that different cultures may approach these differently
- formulating different types of questions to ask a speaker, such as open and closed questions and 'when', 'why' and 'how' questions (ACARA, 2017).

Year 1 students are also required to: 'Use interaction skills including turn-taking, recognising the contributions of others, speaking clearly and using appropriate volume and pace' (ACELY1788). The *Elaborations* for this *Content Description* expects students to demonstrate achievement by:

- identifying turn-taking patterns in group and pair work (for example initiating a topic, changing a topic when appropriate, staying on task, supporting other speakers, eliciting responses, being supportive and attentive listeners, asking relevant questions, providing useful feedback, prompting, checking understanding, 'sharing the talking space')

- taking turns, asking and answering questions and attempting to involve others in discussions
- demonstrating active listening behaviour and responding to what others say in pair, group and class discussions
- attempting correct pronunciation of new vocabulary (ACARA, 2017).

These elaborations are useful guides, but raise quite specific questions for teachers and Year 1 students because it seems unclear as to how students demonstrate, for instance, ‘sharing the talking space’, ‘providing useful feedback’, ‘being a supportive and attentive listener’ or ‘eliciting responses’ in interactions and developed across the grades. What do these mean *in practice*? More specifically, how do Year 1 students elicit responses? Provide useful feedback? Be supportive listeners?

By the end of primary school, Year 6 students are required to use **Language for interaction** to: ‘Understand how to move beyond making bare assertions and take account of differing perspectives and points of view’ (ACELA1502); by:

- recognising that a bare assertion (for example ‘It’s the best film this year’) often needs to be tempered (ACARA, 2017).

These Year 6 students when **Interacting with others** also need to be able to: ‘Clarify understanding of content as it unfolds in formal and informal situations, connecting ideas to students’ own experiences and present and justify a point of view’ (ACELY1699). They are required to demonstrate this by:

- asking specific questions to clarify a speaker’s meaning, making constructive comments that keep conversation moving, reviewing ideas expressed and conveying tentative conclusions (ACARA, 2017).

They are also required to: ‘Use interaction skills, for example paraphrasing, questioning and interpreting non-verbal cues and choose vocabulary and vocal effects appropriate for different audiences and purposes’ (ACELY1796); and to, ‘Participate in and contribute to discussions, clarifying and interrogating ideas, developing and supporting arguments, sharing and evaluating information, experiences and opinions’ (ACELY1709) by:

- using effective strategies for dialogue and discussion including speaking clearly and to the point, pausing in appropriate places for others to respond, asking pertinent questions and linking students’ own responses to the contributions of others
- using strategies, for example pausing, questioning, rephrasing, repeating, summarising, reviewing and asking clarifying questions
- exploring personal reasons for acceptance or rejection of opinions offered and linking the reasons to the way our cultural experiences can affect our responses
- recognising that closed questions ask for precise responses while open questions prompt a speaker to provide more information (ACARA, 2017)

Examining the Elaborations set down for each Content Description listed across the year levels in the curriculum, it is evident that some are repeated or overlap, sometimes with little differentiation between the stages of learning. For example, each year level expects students to demonstrate active listening; participate in class, group or paired discussions in a range of formal and informal situations; demonstrate turn-taking; and ask questions and clarify contributions. Again, this suggests the importance of teachers understanding how these aspects of listening and speaking occur *in practice* across the primary years.

The details proffered in the curriculum are useful for teachers designing and enacting the curriculum. However, many teachers remain unaware that an extensive body of research shows that in classrooms it is still the teacher who does most of the talking;

and that even experienced teachers have limited knowledge about this dimension of pedagogical and curriculum work (Edwards-Groves, 2003; Edwards-Groves & Davidson, 2016). This is important given that it is through talk in classroom lessons that students are expected to develop oral language, learn to interact and learn content through interacting with others.

According to Nystrand (2006, p. 394), classroom discourse practices have remained remarkably unchanged over the last century and a half. This observation seems also to be an astonishing truth for the Australian context, where even within a climate of constant curriculum renewal, development and change, the extent to which long standing research on classroom talk (for example research by Anstey 1993, Freiberg and Freebody 1995, and Edwards-Groves 1998, 2003) has influenced pedagogical knowledge and teaching practices is debatable. Added to this, while it seems that listening and speaking appear to be apportioned equal status with reading and writing in the English curriculum itself, their place and purpose for pedagogy and meaning making remains largely neutral, or at best not as well understood. This raises unsettling questions about interactional practices in classrooms. This book seeks to address these questions with its focus on talk and interaction for meaning making across the primary classroom. Significantly, it leads us into considering the dialogic classroom and how such an approach might actively move students into sense making through their talk and interactions with others in classroom lessons.

## Shifting focus from listening and speaking to talk and interaction

The focus on talk and interaction is intended to shift the gaze of educators away from the development of listening and speaking skills of their students to encompass the ways that talk and interaction of all classroom participants produces meaning making. This shift requires substantial knowledge of classroom talk and ongoing critiques of it. In 1970, Britton first proclaimed that 'talk is the sea upon which all else floats'. Consequently, clichés such as 'learning floats on a sea of talk' and 'reading and writing float on a sea of talk' (Barnes, 1976; Britton, 1984) have been used to express seminal understandings that students' learning and literacy are heavily influenced by the nature of classroom dialogues. This earlier work established the foundation for decades of influential research across the globe investigating the nature and role of talk for learning and for learning literacy (for example, Alexander, 2008; Baker, 1991; Barnes, Britton & Torbe, 1986; Cazden, 1988; Edwards-Groves, 2003; Edwards & Westgate, 1987; Freiberg & Freebody, 1995; Heap, 1991; Wells, 1981, 2009).

Much of the substantial body of research since Britton addresses the predominance of teacher talk in classrooms. While teacher talk serves important and necessary functions in instructional settings, it is by no means the 'whole story'. It has been argued from numerous perspectives that students' talk – their opportunities for meaning making – is severely constrained in practice, particularly during whole-class interaction. This has been shown to be the case during literacy lessons such as shared reading and writing and in many other whole-class lessons in primary classrooms

In Australian literacy education, our understandings of the limits of classroom talk for literacy learning were informed by the study by Peter Freebody and colleagues (1995) that examined talk about literacy in classrooms in Years 3 and 5 in Queensland primary

classrooms. As with previous studies, their findings established the predominance of teacher talk and, perhaps more importantly, an absence of talk that could be described as enabling children to develop the capacity to engage critically with texts and with each other during literacy lessons. Their description of the relentless questioning of students, and the absence of explicit instruction, stand out for us as hallmarks of the need for changes to talk and interaction in classrooms. Subsequent work that followed Freebody's lead by Edwards-Groves (1998, 2003) has shown the relatively limited shift in classroom talk and interaction practices.

A recent perspective on changing classroom talk has emerged in the field of dialogic approaches to instruction. Dialogic approaches to teaching and learning have been defined as *dialogic instruction* (Nystrand, 1997), *dialogic inquiry* (Pappas & Varelas, 2006; Wells, 2009), *dialogic teaching* (Alexander, 2006; Fisher, 2007), *dialogic pedagogies* or *dialogic pedagogy* (Edwards-Groves, Anstey & Bull, 2014; Skidmore & Murakami, 2016), *dialogical pedagogy* (Jones & Chen, 2016; Skidmore, 2006), *dialogic learning* (van der Linden & Renshaw, 2004) and *dialogic teaching pedagogy* (Brown, 2016). Skidmore (2006, p. 503) outlined dialogic approaches to pedagogical practice; and this is briefly presented next.

- 1** Dialogic instruction, is characterised by the teacher's uptake of student ideas, authentic questions and the opportunity for students to modify the topic (Nystrand, 1997).
- 2** Dialogic inquiry, stresses the potential of collaborative group work and peer assistance to promote mutually responsive learning in the zone of proximal development (Wells, 1999).
- 3** Dialogical pedagogy, whereby students are invited to retell stories in their own words, using paraphrase, speculation and counter-fictional utterances (Skidmore, 2000).
- 4** Dialogic teaching, which is collective, reciprocal, supportive, cumulative and purposeful (Alexander, 2004).

Although these portrayals of dialogic talk bring to the surface nuanced understandings and focuses, they have been regarded as being very similar (Muhonen et al., 2016) in that their fundamental interest lies in the strategic interactive moves the teacher makes to more overtly bring students into classroom learning conversations. In this, their goals are participation, clarity and engagement in academically and intellectually productive learning conversations.

## Changing talk and interaction for dialogic pedagogies

In this book, we have drawn on our 2016 study 'Researching dialogic pedagogies for literacy learning across the primary years' funded by PETAA. The study examined the practice of dialogic pedagogies as developed and enacted in classroom literacy lessons across the primary school grades. Through Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) (Kemmis, McTaggart & Nixon, 2014), participating teachers were supported to investigate the 'taken-for-grantedness' and intricacies of classroom talk and interaction

and to change their patterns of interaction in their classroom settings in response to the students and circumstances in their school communities. Teacher participants examined their own talk and interaction practices as a foundation from which to build their individual action research projects that focused on developing more dialogic approaches to literacy instruction.

The chapters in the book draw on findings from our study of teachers and students working to bring about changes to classroom interaction, over the first half of a school year. The study investigated changing talk and interaction practices among teachers and their students from 12 classrooms in 10 primary schools in the Riverina and South West (SW) Sydney regions of NSW, Australia. These distinct sites are geographically and demographically diverse. Schools in the Riverina area vary from small rural to medium-sized regional city schools; some of these schools are identified as low socio-economic status (SES), others as mid-SES, with one school reported as mid-high SES. The Sydney schools had high populations of students who were learning English as an additional language and are situated in areas of low SES. Participating teachers ranged in age (from 23 to 45) and teaching experience (from 1 to 25 years), and classes spanned the primary school spectrum (from Kindergarten to Year 6) making for a comprehensive coverage of primary education stages of learning. Permission to conduct the research was granted from the relevant university and school sectors jurisdictions as well as the principals from each school. Additionally, informed consent was sought and obtained from participating teachers, parents and students. Permission to use images and teacher-gathered data was granted.

CPAR assisted teachers to design their localised projects which responded to the particularity of their interests and experiences, and to their students, school circumstances and communities. These projects broadly aimed to develop participatory and more dialogic approaches to pedagogy that, in practice, supported student engagement, and assisted students to communicate with clarity and with a higher degree of academic focus. To build their projects, teachers participated in a range of research seminars and collaborative activities including an introductory seminar, dialogue conferences, researcher visits and local support meetings.

Independently, teachers engaged in professional reading, written reflections, presenting ongoing findings to peers, and recording, transcribing and analysing their lessons. Classroom lessons from each of the teacher research projects were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. A final lesson and interview were video- or audio-recorded at the end of the data-gathering phase. Detailed thematic analysis was conducted, and selected transcript excerpts were developed into more detailed transcripts for conversation analysis.

By the end of the data collection phase, each of the 12 participating teachers had changed their classroom talk and interaction practices in considerable ways. Consequently, their students had variously experienced and changed their talk and interaction practices as they participated in lessons. Nine overall findings related to two broad but interrelated areas were delineated using thematic analysis:

- 1** teacher learning through action research, and
- 2** classroom talk and interaction practices.

These findings, presented in Table 1.1, inform how we have framed this book to focus on meaning making by students and teachers in dialogic classrooms.

<b>1</b>	Teachers' learning about classroom talk and their articulation of it showed how critical participatory action research, and its methods, made the 'taken-for-grantedness' of classroom talk visible to them.
<b>2</b>	Teacher-designed projects were central to developing deep knowledge and changed practices.
<b>3</b>	Teacher-produced recordings and transcriptions were integral to individuals identifying and changing particular features of their classroom talk and interaction.
<b>4</b>	Through systematic practice, teachers can develop a flexible repertoire of talk moves responsive to their local classroom conditions.
<b>5</b>	The sequential co-production of classroom talk moves disrupts the predominance of the initiation-response-feedback (IRF) structure in literacy lessons.
<b>6</b>	Students across the primary years can accomplish more complex interactions and assume greater responsibility for the interactional conduct of lessons when not restricted by the more typical enactment of the IRF.
<b>7</b>	The recognition of, and teacher responsivity to, students' existing interactional competencies undergirds the development of highly productive interactions in classroom literacy lessons.
<b>8</b>	Metatalk is a necessary resource in the development of dialogic pedagogies and literacy learning.
<b>9</b>	Dialogic pedagogies in literacy lessons emphasise the sociality of students' meaning making (in and through talk and interaction), not just the oral language development of individuals.

Taken together, our broad findings respond to Wells' (2009) re-conceptualisation of meaning making in learning and teaching as being 'a dialogue for collaborative knowledge building' (p. 269); arguing too, that teaching is 'a dialogic partnership in learning' (p. 311). Overall the results showed that even after a brief period of systematic practice teachers can, over time, develop greater knowledge of talk and interaction in their own contexts. The recognition of, and teacher responsivity to, students' existing interactional competencies was central to the development of highly productive interactions in lessons. We wish to acknowledge here that at the completion of the data-gathering period of this study (June, 2016), each teacher in their final interview had already identified specific aspects of classroom interaction that they wanted to study and develop next. All recognised attention to talk and interaction as necessary in their ongoing work.

We take a sociological stand arguing that meaning making is a social practice, not simply a cognitive process. Therefore, making meaning – comprehending, construing, interpreting or understanding one another and the world around – involves real, in-practice actions and interactions that enable students to come to know (about this

or that) and to accomplish (this or that). The findings, as presented in the chapters of this book, establish that coming to know in classrooms requires talk and interaction to be understood as a mutually-produced, reciprocally-accomplished pedagogical practice. Furthermore, it requires explicitness in the pedagogies teachers use to support students meaning making through talk and interaction.

## Using this book

We intend that this book be used by a range of educators interested in studying talk and interaction practices for meaning making in classroom lessons. This means we acknowledge from the outset that this is a book to be studied; thus, there are multiple entry points for the reader.

Taking the lead from the teachers' learning in this research project, other classroom teachers will find the book useful for assisting them to consider talk and interaction in their own classrooms. The specific chapter emphases will equip teachers with tools for helping them examine, more closely, how different kinds of interactive talk moves supports meaning making (the term talk moves will be explained in more detail in Chapter 1). Pre-service teachers will find the book useful as a platform for understanding the role and influence of classroom talk as they begin their careers; this will be helpful for assisting the development of more dialogic approaches to teaching and learning. Educators who support the professional development of teachers interested in building understandings about dialogic teaching may find the book useful for assisting teachers to design their own long-term projects and analyse their practices (and data) in systematic ways.

To support the reader's learning, each chapter features:

- *Lesson transcripts extracts* that are provided as explanatory technologies; we recommend readers refer to and use the detailed transcription chapter (Chapter 2) as a resource and guide for reading and understanding the transcripts provided. It will be more difficult to understand analytical points about classroom talk without understanding how these are recorded in transcripts.
- *Key word boxes* that identify some central terms introduced in the chapter
- *Key points sections* which summarise the main points made in each section
- *Learning activities* which engage the reader in a range of relevant tasks designed to further develop understanding of the specific chapter focus.

In addition, we have provided an Appendix that presents classroom strategies for making talk explicit and a Glossary of terms for describing talk and interaction (available on the PETAA website).

## Chapter overview

### Chapter 1 Children's talk and interaction for meaning making

This chapter addresses established understandings about children's talk and interaction at home and their talk and interaction in school contexts. The chapter draws on social

perspectives and studies that have made important contributions to the ways that interaction promotes (and constrains) meaning making for students in classrooms. In a final section, we present findings from studies of dialogic approaches that also draw on these same social perspectives.

## **Chapter 2** Transcribing to explore talk and interaction

Transcription is core to examining talk and interaction in classrooms. The chapter introduces the reader to some useful transcription symbols and ways to approach transcription of classroom recordings. Examples are provided from a classroom recording of a teacher and his Kindergarten students. The chapter will enable the reader to make sense of the transcripts used in this book and to develop transcripts for closely exploring classroom talk and interaction.

## **Chapter 3** Moving toward student-student talk and interaction

This chapter introduces the shift to student-student interaction for meaning making in whole-class literacy lessons. It examines how students interact for making meaning in a Year 2 class and in a Kindergarten/Year 1 class. The chapter draws out specific ways that student talk varies from talk produced during sequences dominated by a teacher-student pattern of interaction.

## **Chapter 4** Listening for responding

This chapter presents a focus on how listening is inextricably bound to responding and participating in classroom discussions. It considers the multidimensionality and complexities of listening in classroom lessons. It particularly provides insight into the in-practice requirement for students to demonstrate active listening – an element of the English curriculum. Drawing on examples from whole-class and group discussions, the chapter examines five turn or response structures for listening actively.

## **Chapter 5** Questioning moves for student engagement

Asking and answering questions in classrooms is the dominant interactive routine that pervades classroom discussions. It is recognisably and fundamentally the province of the teacher to ask questions and provide feedback on the responses. This chapter aims to examine student questioning in classrooms where the teacher has worked to create different interactive talk moves to enable this to happen. It argues too that student-generated questions indicate meaning making.

## **Chapter 6** Agreeing and disagreeing in class discussions

The chapter examines how discussions about texts may enable meaning making by students. Talk in a Year 5/6 classroom demonstrates powerful ways that students agreeing and disagreeing with the perspectives of others was promoted. Younger students are also shown to engage in discussion when a variety of strategies are employed over time in their classrooms. Strategies for supporting discussions are drawn out.

## **Chapter 7 Talking about talk and interaction: Metatalk in literacy lessons**

The importance of *metatalk*, or talk about talk, is addressed in this chapter establishing its relevance to students in classrooms and to the professional practice of teachers. The chapter encompasses examples of metatalk to establish that students can engage in it competently. Ways of being explicit about talk with younger and older students is explored.

## **Chapter 8 Making meaning in the dialogic classroom**

This final chapter focuses on the dialogic turn for classroom meaning making. It draws together our position on students' talk and interaction for meaning making in the dialogic literacy classroom. Then, we identify important areas for future work in changing classrooms for meaning making.

## **Appendix**

In the appendix, we draw together useful activities and strategies that teachers in our study employed, or developed, as part of their action research projects.